Virtual Catholicism

Andrew Bills

*University of New Hampshire, Durham*

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Virtual Catholicism

Abstract
The Catholic Church is the largest Christian Church and arguably the largest and oldest organized religious institution in the world. Christians have been building, restructuring and growing their religious faith for two millennia, passing their traditions down from generation to generation. The Roman Catholic tradition can be viewed as the original centrally organized Christian church. Catholicism survived the fall of the Roman Empire, centuries of bloody religious wars, and the age of Enlightenment, which ushered in a steep rise of scientific progress and awareness. Despite this, the Catholic Church has managed to remain a spiritual leader among the various major global religions. The Church currently finds itself navigating a complex social landscape that relies heavily on digitally interactive computer networks to connect people all over the world. When most people think of the Catholic Church, they don’t think of technological innovation. However, the last decade has shown the world a seemingly different face of the Catholic Church.

The unorthodox election of Pope Francis and the rise of his media celebrity in recent years has been covered extensively by the global media, often portraying him as a revolutionary figure standing out amongst the backdrop of a much more conservative and outdated Church. This is more evident considering the rise of his media celebrity, amplified by his popularity on digital social media platforms such as Twitter and Instagram.

Is Francis responsible for this updated (and digital) makeover? His enthusiasm and proficiency with new forms of social media are often at the heart of his coverage, helping drive the narrative that Francis’ leadership and technical prowess have been the impetus for the Church’s digital technological progress. This is true to an extent. Francis’ popularity with Catholics and non-Catholics alike gives the Church more legitimacy as it attempts to establish a more credible digital presence.

However, it can be argued that the Catholic Church has had a long history with new media adoption and utilization, long before the rise of the Internet. A re-examination of the Church’s historical views, negotiations and inevitable use of new forms of media technology is essential in forming a well-rounded understanding of the Church’s present-day relationship with secular digital and social communication technology. By building on the work of scholars who have studied the intersection between religion and new media technology, as well as the history of the Catholic Church, I aim to shed light on the Church’s “theory of communication,” which has been carefully cultivated since the days of the printing press. Specifically, I focus on the work of associate professor of Communication at Texas A&M University, Heidi Campbell, whose scholarship provides a framework for understanding how religious communities make sense of new forms of media.

In this thesis, I apply Campbell’s critical framework to the Catholic Church’s longstanding and complex relationship with new forms of media. In doing so, I use Campbell’s model to allow for a more thorough look into the Catholic Church’s willingness and apprehension regarding the adoption of new media technologies. I argue that, despite Francis’ seemingly radical adoption of and prowess on popular social media platforms, his actions and words regarding new media technology are closely aligned with past decisions made by even the most conservative of Popes, dating back to the days of the Gutenberg press. Further, I argue that the Church will eventually allow for the adoption of digitally immersive technologies (like virtual and mixed reality) for people to participate in important aspects of Church life, like the Holy Mass and observation of the Sacraments.

This thesis is available at University of New Hampshire Scholars’ Repository: https://scholars.unh.edu/thesis/933
Keywords
Artificial Intelligence, Catholic Church, Catholicism, Internet, Pope Francis, Virtual Reality, Technical communication, Religion, Communication

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VIRTUAL CATHOLICISM

BY

ANDY BILLS

Communication BA, University of New Hampshire, 2009

THESIS

Submitted to the University of New Hampshire

in Partial Fulfillment of

the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in

Liberal Studies

December 2017
This thesis has been examined and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master in Liberals Studies by:

Thesis Director, Kevin Healey, Assistant Professor in Communication

Joseph Terry, Lecturer in Communication

Catherine Peebles, Principal Lecturer and Director of the MALS Graduate Program

On 12/5/17

Original approval signatures are on file with the University of New Hampshire Graduate School
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First, I want to kindly thank the members of my thesis committee: Kevin Healey, Joseph Terry and Catherine Peebles. I specifically thank Kevin Healey for taking on the role of my thesis advisor, for reading my countless revisions, and for continuing to challenge me with helpful and constructive criticism. I thank Joseph Terry for his excellent insight into digital and global media and ensuring my work is line with scholarship on the subject. I thank Catherine Peebles for believing in this project and pushing me to the finish line even with my many stops and starts. I also wanted to thank Tama Andrews for remaining flexible during my year of research and writing. Without the assistance of these individuals, this project would have not been possible.

In addition to my thesis committee, I’d like to thank Heidi Campbell for introducing me to the concept of “Digital Religion” through her many books and scholarly journals. Her work set the stage and tone for my curiosity into the subject and helped me navigate the complex and interdisciplinary fields of where religion and technology meet. I thank my good friend Steve Messa for always offering an ear and sound advice throughout my research and writing process. I thank my beautiful fiancé Kerry McOsker for putting up with and encouraging my long research and writing sessions over the course of the last year. I thank my father for always being a great soundboard for my ideas and a champion of my academic goals. Lastly, I’d like to thank my mother and grandmother for encouraging me to have the confidence to be the first member of my family to pursue a Master’s degree.
ABSTRACT

VIRTUAL CATHOLICISM

by

Andy Bills

University of New Hampshire, December 2017

The Catholic Church is the largest Christian Church and arguably the largest and oldest organized religious institution in the world. Christians have been building, restructuring and growing their religious faith for two millennia, passing their traditions down from generation to generation. The Roman Catholic tradition can be viewed as the original centrally organized Christian church. Catholicism survived the fall of the Roman Empire, centuries of bloody religious wars, and the age of Enlightenment, which ushered in a steep rise of scientific progress and awareness. Despite this, the Catholic Church has managed to remain a spiritual leader among the various major global religions. The Church currently finds itself navigating a complex social landscape that relies heavily on digitally interactive computer networks to connect people all over the world. When most people think of the Catholic Church, they don’t think of technological innovation. However, the last decade has shown the world a seemingly different face of the Catholic Church.

The unorthodox election of Pope Francis and the rise of his media celebrity in recent years has been covered extensively by the global media, often portraying him as a revolutionary figure standing out amongst the backdrop of a much more conservative and outdated Church. This is more evident considering the rise of his media celebrity, amplified by his popularity on digital social media platforms such as Twitter and Instagram.

Francis ‘enthusiasm and proficiency with new forms of social media are often at the
heart of his coverage, helping drive the narrative that Francis’ leadership and technical prowess have been the impetus for the Church’s digital technological progress. This is true to an extent. Francis’ popularity with Catholics and non-Catholics alike gives the Church more legitimacy as it attempts to establish a more credible digital presence.

However, it can be argued that the Catholic Church has had a long history with new media adoption and utilization, long before the rise of the Internet. A re-examination of the Church’s historical views, negotiations and inevitable use of new forms of media technology is essential in forming a well-rounded understanding of the Church’s present-day relationship with digital and social communication technology. By building on the work of scholars who have studied the intersection between religion and new media technology, as well as the history of the Catholic Church, I shed light on the Church’s “theory of communication,” which has been carefully cultivated since the days of the printing press. Specifically, I focus on the work of associate professor of Communication at Texas A&M University, Heidi Campbell, whose scholarship provides a framework for understanding how religious communities make sense of new forms of media.

In this thesis, I apply Campbell’s critical framework to the Catholic Church’s longstanding and complex relationship with new forms of media. In doing so, I use Campbell’s model to allow for a more thorough look into the Catholic Church’s willingness and apprehension regarding the adoption of new media technologies. I argue that, despite Francis’ seemingly radical adoption of and prowess on popular social media platforms, his actions and words regarding new media technology are closely aligned with past decisions made by even the most conservative of Popes, dating back to the days of the Gutenberg press. Further, I argue that the Church will eventually allow for the adoption of digitally immersive technologies (like virtual and mixed reality) for people to participate in important aspects of Church life, like the
Holy Mass and observation of the Sacraments.
INTRODUCTION

As a former Catholic, a scholar of the Protestant Reformation and an avid science fiction enthusiast, my interest in how religious communities respond to new media and digital technologies was unavoidable. As I witnessed the dramatic evolution of technology’s role in modern society, I often wondered about the impact on the world’s biggest organized religions. Following my curiosity, I started down a path of research which led me to the interdisciplinary field of study known as “digital religion,” the intersection between new media, digital culture and religion.

Throughout this journey, my Catholic roots influenced the way I digested the research, acting as an anchor and guiding my thinking back to the religious community in which I grew up. It fascinated me to imagine how one of the oldest and largest organized world religions was making sense of its place in society during an age of rapid technological evolution. The Internet, social media and mobile technology have uprooted the social and business landscapes of the day. How then will a two-thousand-year-old religious tradition respond to such relentless social change? In my uninformed mind, the logical outcome was the Church’s painful and slow journey into obsolescence, rendered immobile by its own traditions and inability to keep up.

However, what I initially failed to recognize was the degree to which religious organizations, especially the Catholic Church, work to understand their unique place in society, regardless of how unfamiliar that society has become. I remember watching Pope Benedict XVI fumble with his iPad as he awkwardly sent out his first tweet to the world. I remember his unprecedented resignation, leading to the election of Pope Francis (a slightly younger and seemingly more technologically adept leader). Moreover, I remember struggling to make sense of this major transition and what it meant for the Church.
Media headlines about the new Pope filled newsstands, TV news channels and social media feeds alike. Years later, Pope Francis is still making headlines. His enthusiasm and ostensible proficiency with social media along with his fresh interpretations of social issues have greatly contributed to the rise of his media celebrity. This highly publicized figure stands out among the backdrop of how the media has historically portrayed the outwardly conservative Catholic Church. However, amidst all the hype, I was determined to find a framework that would help me understand the complex relationship between the Church and new forms of media technology that are drastically altering the global and social landscape. I needed a model that would help me identify key insights into how the Catholic Church has historically understood new forms of communication technology. Further, I wanted to take those insights and use them to craft a vision of the future state of the Catholic Church, based off my own independent research and the scholarship of much more seasoned academics.

Within the unique academic landscape that makes up the sphere of “digital religion,” the scholarship of Heidi Campbell has proven to be a guiding light in the evolution of my own comprehension of the Church’s responses to advances in new media technology. Campbell’s compelling work provides a framework for researchers who are attempting to understand how religious communities make sense of new forms of media. By borrowing interpretive frameworks across various disciplines of study, Campbell offers a theoretical approach she calls the religious-social shaping of technology (RSST). This approach borrows key components from the previously existing social shaping of technology (SST) model, which was born from the intersection of science, technology and sociology of technology studies. ¹ The SST model frames technological change and user innovation as a mutual process where both technology and society influence each other. ² What is lacking in Campbell’s research and the

study of digital religion at large is a dedicated analysis of the Catholic Church’s response to
contemporary digital media and how it will respond to the most cutting-edge forms of
technology, specifically artificial intelligence (AI) and virtual reality (VR). Using Campbell’s
RSST model, I will highlight how the Catholic Church’s past and present negotiations and
decisions about technology position the Church to be a future leader in innovation regarding
the religious technological landscape. Further, I argue that because of the Catholic Church’s
inherent faith in human reasoning, coupled with its long-standing history of complex and
organized new media negotiations, it has strategically positioned itself to survive future
technological advances. Finally, I argue that because past negotiations with society and
technology have motivated the Church to update official doctrine, that present day and future
negotiations will inevitably lead to the Church changing its stance that virtual spaces will never
be an adequate substitute for the physical.

In Chapter 1, I highlight key elements of the “digital religion” field and explore
Campbell further to position her work against what other scholars have written about in the
space. I highlight the reasons why her work stands out amongst her peers as more
approachable and well-grounded in the study of a religious organization’s potential responses
to new forms of media. In Chapter 2, I test Campbell’s framework by overlaying her RSST
model against the Catholic Church’s historic and present-day actions and official stances about
new media technology. In Chapter 3, I expand upon Campbell’s model to offer a unique
Catholic-social shaping of technology (CSST) perspective that looks to the future state of the
Catholic Church as an innovator in the digital religious landscape.

In my estimation, the integration of physical and virtual spaces will represent the
biggest technological and philosophical challenge to the Church since the dawning of the age
of the Internet. Though the Church may tread cautiously at first with immersive technologies,
it will pay close attention to the impact they have on society and how society at large decides to integrate them into everyday life. I believe that the Catholic Church will officially recognize both the dangers and benefits of these cutting-edge technologies, acknowledge their flaws, but ultimately proclaim them as gifts from God to be used for the greater good of humanity.

Further, as digital and interactive media continue to influence the way people (especially young people) perceive the world, the Church will seek to insert itself into the conversation. I believe the Catholic Church will (cautiously) adopt certain aspects of these immersive technologies, like VR and AI, to expand the conversation around Catholicism in the digital era and to attract new parishioners. I argue that the Church will ultimately evolve its stance that virtual spaces will never be an adequate substitute for the physical, to a more open and flexible interpretation; one that includes exploring the different ways immersive technologies could enrich the Catholic experience. One way to allow for a more inclusive and flexible Catholic worldview would be to sanction participation in the Holy Mass and observation of the Sacraments through virtual channels.
CHAPTER 1

ANCIENT CHURCH/ DIGITAL MAKEOVER

The Roman Catholic Church, headed by the office and authority of the Pope, is the largest centralized religious institution in the world. With roots dating back two millennia, it’s difficult to conceptualize how an ancient tradition could have survived the centuries of social and political upheaval. It’s even harder to grasp the reality that the Church remains the dominant centralized global religious institution in the world to this day. The religious influence of the Church spans six continents (seven if you include the small population of practicing Catholics living and working in Antarctica) and as I already pointed out, survived centuries of change, resistance and evolution.

In 2010, 31% (2.2 billion) of the entire global population identified religiously as Christian, according to a Pew Research Report. The same report estimated that 50% of all Christians globally identified as Roman Catholic. To break it down even further, Catholics consisted of roughly 16% of the global population that year. As Campbell and other scholars note, “The Catholic Church can be described as the original Christian Church, from which all other branches of Christianity have been derived.” The Eastern Orthodox Church makes up only 12% of living Christians. Whereas, Protestant Christianity comprised about 37% of all Christians in 2010.

How is it that an ancient religion dating back to antiquity has maintained such a

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contemporary global presence? It is jarring to think about how a religious offshoot of a first
century Jewish tradition could have survived nearly two thousand years, to the point where its
followers now interact with each other through a vast network of digitally connected devices.
One could argue that religion itself is an outdated institution, a window into a time where there
were few answers to big philosophical questions.

Who are we? How did we come to be? Religious and spiritual traditions filled these
gaps and offered prescriptions for the way human beings should conduct themselves in daily
life. Many governing bodies based their entire system of authority around religious doctrine
throughout history. For much of that history, that doctrine would have stemmed from one of
the three Abrahamic religions; Judaism, Islam and Christianity.

As global society has evolved, more people seek the pages of history and science
textbooks to find answers to the same fundamental questions. However, even with the increase
in scientific literacy, science itself has failed to do away the need for people to identify
religiously. Even with technology providing convenient ways for people meet their many
needs, the appetite for religious and spiritual exploration remains. Though this article does not
intend to visit the psychological and sociological need for people to identify religiously, it does
aim to point out the complex relationship between technology and religion, specifically the
Catholic Church. As I previously mentioned, 32% of the global population identified as
Christian in 2010, the same years Apple sold 40 million iPhones, outselling any of its other
https://www.macworld.com/article/1156506/applefin.html/}

Fast forward to March 13th, 2013. Jorge Mario Bergoglio appears to the public for the
first time at the balcony of St. Peter's Basilica as Pope Francis I. As the crowd of pilgrims
began to etch this moment into their memories, one man with a camera captured what would

later become an iconic image; one that would circulate across the globe instantaneously by way of Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, Vine, WhatsApp, etc. “Neatly as one, they raised their smartphones and tablets. The man looking from the balcony (Pope Francis) saw the entire crowd brightly lit with the flashes of their smartphones. And at that moment, the photographer Michael Sohn realized that the most profound transformation taking place was not on the balcony, but in the eyes and hands of the crowd.”  

As the Pope stepped onto the balcony, he was greeted by a sea of mobile devices attempting to capture the historic moment in a way that could be shared and revisited time and time again. This was certainly a historic moment as Francis is the first Pope in 600 years to be elected following the resignation of a predecessor. The crowd was engaging in what Schadler, Bernoff and Ask call the “Mobile Mind Shift”: the expectation that someone can get what they want in their immediate context and moments of need through mobile technology.

Jumping ahead to 2015, Pope Francis, the 266th Pope of the Roman Catholic Church, remained the second most followed world leader (1st most followed religious leader) on Twitter for two years in a row (2015 - 2016). In 2017, the Pope takes third place behind Donald Trump and Barack Obama; a stunning achievement in its own right. It's even more impressive considering the number one and two spots represent the current and most recent Presidents of the United States, arguably to the most famous people alive today.

Presently, there are hundreds of Catholic mobile apps available to download and just as many Catholic websites, including the official Vatican website and YouTube channel. The functions of these apps and websites range from giving the user the ability to store and save their confessions, access to different varieties of Catholic news and the ability for the user to engage with their faith and the Church at the user’s convenience.

10 Ask, Bernoff, and, Schadler, *The Mobile Mind Shift*.  

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In the last three decades, people have experienced an increased adoption of and
dependence on modern communication technology. The last decade of which can be
characterized by the dependence on new forms of social communication facilitated through a
vast web of online connections and digital channels. While Pope Francis’ Papacy has certainly
shown a proficiency for understanding and utilizing these new channels, Catholicism isn’t the
only religious tradition taking advantage of contemporary technology’s ability to raise
awareness and influence the public.

In 2004, the Christian website Ship of Fools, sponsored by the Methodist Church,
designed an immersive virtual church experience called the Church of Fools. The quality of the
graphics was similar to any modern computer game. In this environment, users could design a
digital avatar and move their character around the inside of the church, engage with other
congregants virtually or simply take their seats and wait for the service to begin. Eventually,
the preacher’s avatar would arrive (a real preacher) and begin to conduct the service.
Participants noted that even though it had the look and feel of a game, once the service began,
people actively engaged in prayer and noted that it felt as if they were attending an actual brick
and mortar church.¹¹ Eventually, the site was taken down because the original software wasn’t
suitable for continued development. This highlights the fact that religious communities will not
only utilize technology for its intended purpose, but will experiment and find ways to innovate
the originally intended experience.

Like the Church of Fools virtual experiment (but still very much active), the virtual PC
based “game” Second Life is an online virtual world which lets users creates a digital avatar.
The user’s avatar can then explore the expansive virtual world of Second Life, interact with

¹¹ Giles Wilson, “In Cyberspace, Can Anyone Hear You Pray?” BBC, last modified May 12, 2014,
http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/magazine/3706897.stm
other users, form groups, spend(real) money on items for their avatar and essentially live a completely unique virtual life outside of their normal everyday physical experiences. As Kerstin Radde-Antweiler points out, *Second Life* isn’t a game where the user’s character chases a high score. The whole point of this experience is to interact with other avatars, join events and build communities. *Second Life* is essentially an avatar based social media platform where the user can either create an avatar based off themselves or create a completely new online identity. One of the most fascinating elements of this simulated reality are the number of virtual churches that a user can choose for their avatar to belong to and attend. According the *Second Life* website, there are twenty-one religious organizations or churches to choose from.

In 2009, a panel of experts came together to examine online Hinduism. Since India has come to be a technical and global powerhouse, it’s no surprise that there is academic interest in the convergence of Hindu traditions and the Internet. This group, the American Academy of Religion, was the first group to develop and promote virtual pilgrimages.

Chabad, an Orthodox Jewish, Hasidic movement known for their “embrace of technologies” to attract secular Jews, has been operating a series of online Jewish centers looking to attract others toward a more traditionally religious lifestyle. This is one of many examples of religious communities using contemporary technology to enrich their capacity to evangelize and attract prospective members to the faith.

Conversely, Ultra-Orthodox Jewish communities who view the Internet as a threat to their more religiously conservative way of life have taken measures to protect their communities from a technology they see as subversive to their way of life. Failing to distance

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the greater community from access to the Internet, but still very concerned about the threat is
posed, leaders of the community created a “Kosher” Internet; a stripped-down version of the
Internet in which certain words, images or pages within a site are blocked. While this is in
extreme contrast to the Chabad group, this still provides a detailed look into how religious
communities alter previously existing technologies to fit their unique cultural characteristics. 16
The leaders of the community recognized that it was not possible to shelter their people from
the far reaches of Internet availability. In turn, they adapted the technology to fit the
community’s needs while simultaneously exploring techniques to protect the people from
aspects of the Internet that conflicted with their specific Jewish tradition.

The Muslim website islamonline.net offers a centralized resource for both Muslims and
non-Muslims alike. It serves as a reference for Islamic thinking and ideals and promotes lively
dialogue through open discussion forums. The Muslim site al-islam.faithweb.com allows for
the possibility for users to watch live prayer from sacred religious sites, like Makka.17

There are a variety of online Buddhist websites, including buddhanet.net, which claims
to be the original online Buddhist education and information network. To make the teachings
of Buddha more widely available, the site offers electronic books, audio, photos and other
forms of multimedia education. 18 Through his blog hosted on Scientificamerican.com, David
Barash suggests that Buddhism is the most science-friendly religion based on its “insistence
that knowledge must be gained through experience rather than reliance on the authority of
sacred texts or the teachings of avowed masters.”19

Scientology, a relatively new religion when compared to the more ancient traditions
I’ve previously mentioned, utilizes a form of proprietary technology known as an E-meter. The

16 Mordechai Goldman, “Ultra-Orthodox Turns to Kosher Internet,” last modified March, 2014, http://www.al-
17 George, Religion and Technology in the 21st Century, 100.
18 George, Religion and Technology in the 21st Century, 99.
19 David Barash, “Is Buddhism the Most Science-Friendly Religion?” Last modified February 2014,
E-meter is a device used by an official church “auditor” on a member of the faith that over time supposedly helps eradicate sources of stress and discomfort. Though, the function of this device has been hotly contested since it began to be used as early as the 1950’s. A more contemporary example of the Church of Scientology’s ability to make use of modern technology is the Church’s impressive website. It gives the user the ability to read about the founding of the religion, a look inside the inner workings of the church and even offers an interactive live video channel.20

Evangelical megachurches have been making headlines as far back as the 1950s.21 Joel Osteen, senior pastor at Lakewood Church in Houston, Texas, has enjoyed crowd sizes upwards of 16,800 people. A sermon designed for a crowd of just under 1,700 people is a media spectacle in its own right, which becomes amplified by the fact that Osteen’s performances are televised and viewed by more than seven million viewers a week in more than one hundred countries.22 However, in terms of social media clout, Osteen retains roughly half the amount of Twitter followers as Pope Francis (10.5 million). The competition for media control between the Catholic Church and Evangelical Protestant traditions can be traced back to the 16th century when the printing press was revolutionizing the way information was collected and spread, altering the very face of European society. 23

Presently, we are once again living out an information revolution with implications spanning across every aspect of our lives. People now live in a world where digital connectivity makes the transfer of information instantaneous. Participation in a connected global society requires the constant use of computers and mobile devices throughout our various daily activities; for work, finance, entertainment, political engagement and yes, even

religion.

The Internet, a relatively contemporary form of media, has proven revolutionary in terms of rapid information circulation. The impact the Internet has had on global communications can be easily compared to the impact the printing press had on early modern European society, albeit on a much larger scale. The advent of the press paved the way for widespread communication and opened doors for brilliant minds who would find novel ways to improve upon its basic function. It also presented new challenges and opportunities for the controlling powers of that time.24 For the first time in centuries, the Catholic Church’s authority over the interpretation of Biblical scripture was being seriously challenged. This ultimately lead to a major fracture within the Christian faith more commonly referred to as the Protestant Reformation. The centuries of advancements in science and technology since the printing press have produced mediums that give people the ability to transfer information instantly from one side of the globe to the other, even from space.

In 2016, NASA astronaut Scott Kelly was able to document his “Year in Space” mission aboard the International Space Station by uploading pictures of Earth to his Instagram account.25 As technological progress continues, it also seems to be speeding up. For example, there is almost a 200-year buffer between the invention of the Gutenberg press and the rise of the first weekly newspapers in Germany.26 By contrast, your iPhone has 100,000 times more memory than the Voyager I spacecraft that was launched by NASA in 1977. The purpose of launching the Voyager craft was for exploring the outer reaches of our solar system.27 These technological advances have profound consequences for society at large. As this progress

27 Amanda Willis, “Voyager 1 Got to Deep Space on Less Memory Than Your iPhone 5,” last modified September 2013, http://mashable.com/2013/09/12/voyager-1-iphone-5/#BWekyRlIpOqI/
continues, how will these changes affect religious institutions and their billions of members?

The intellectual giant Marshall McLuhan, a Catholic, observed that radio and television not only changed the way people communicated with each other; they ultimately altered the societies that adopted the technology.28 One must only look around to witness how deeply embedded digital technology has been laid into modern global culture. As instant access to online connections becomes commonplace, people utilize the Internet for everything from grocery delivery to running some of the biggest corporate entities on the planet. Breakthroughs in mobile technology have allowed users access to Internet connection the moment they need it and in almost any location.29 The social consequences of this shift in rapid information flow spill over into virtually every aspect of contemporary life.

Not only can people use these technologies to speed up their daily routines and everyday activities, they now have access to information on a level unprecedented in human history. Internet use is no longer confined to one’s living room or academic institution. Today’s world involves online connectivity while stuck in traffic, exercising, or searching for a romantic partner. Despite all of this, religious traditions find unique and novel ways to not only make sense of these new technologies, but to take advantage of them.

The Catholic Church remains the single largest cohesive religious institution on the planet. As technology continues to play a major role in human progress, Catholics everywhere will look to the Church and the Pope for guidance on how they should view and participate with aatechnology. Anecdotally, the dichotomy between the ancient and digital world is not lost to the Catholic Church, as the background of their website remains an image of brown parchment, symbolizing the Church’s ancient history.30

29 Ask, Bernoff, and, Schadler, The Mobile Mind Shift.
30 Todd Frobish, “The Virtual Vatican: A Case Study Regarding Online Ethos,” Journal of Communication and
MAKING SENSE OF RELIGION AND TECHNOLOGY

Religion and spirituality have come to be defining forces of human society since the first civilizations, especially in the spheres of philosophy and politics. Like many other facets of everyday life, religion has also found itself negotiating with the elements of the digitally connected world. This negotiation gives way to novel forms of religious expression, participation, and inquiry. Online services, chat rooms, virtual churches and scholarship about the various religious traditions can be accessed online through the same devices we find ourselves inextricably glued to. Another important thing to note is that almost every major religious tradition has a digital footprint.

To fully appreciate the impact of religiosity online and how religious institutions are catching up, it’s important to examine the thirty years of scholarship on the subject of “religion on the Internet,” better known presently as “digital religion.” The breadth of scholarship that encompasses this field of study can help offer helpful context into the history of religion and technology. Navigated wisely, one can begin to understand how religious communities may respond to new forms of technology, the likes of which we can’t yet comprehend.

There are many questions that press scholars interested in studying the intersection of religion and technology. Luckily, we have the opportunity to hoist ourselves onto the shoulders of scholars who have dedicated decades of their lives to contribute to this unique academic landscape. The questions they originally started asking have ignited curiosity and given way to new scholarship on the subject that spans multiple umbrellas of research and has grown exponentially in recent years. For as long as the Internet as we know it has existed, people have asked what role, if any, religion would play within this new, connected world.31

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Out of the many scholars who have contributed to this field, the work of Heidi Campbell stands out as a beacon to those seeking to understand the complex relationship between religious communities and technology. Heidi Campbell is an associate professor at the Department of Communication at Texas A&M University. Her ongoing work in the field has not only provided much needed context, but also inspired me to embark on this journey in the study of the Catholic Church’s history, present and future with technology. Her work has added color to my own original research on the subject. In the next section of this chapter, I outline a brief history of the field of digital religion using Campbell’s observations and insights as a contextual springboard.

DIGITAL RELIGION: A BRIEF INTRODUCTION

Expanding on the works of Hojsgaard and Warburg, Campbell offers their categorization of three distinct waves of scholarship on religion and the Internet. She points out that the first wave focused on new aspects of cyberspace in which religion could and most likely would do “almost anything.” This wave can be viewed as more of a broad general survey of religious engagement with the Internet where scholars weighed in on their opinions on the religious and cultural implications of the Internet, often trading Utopian and Dystopian predictions. In the late 90s, Cobb and Wertheim offer “positive reflections on how the Internet may reconnect people with spirituality in a postmodern society.” Conversely, Houston and Wolf offer their critical analysis of the “ethical challenges posed by digital technology.” To offer more popular examples, scholars wondered whether we were headed

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towards McLuhan's “global village” or towards George Orwell’s 1984 surveillance society. Campbell points out that though these early predictions were quickly deemed outdated, they highlight early examples of the rise of different forms of religion online and pointed to important questions regarding the nature of religious rituals and community online.

Brenda Brasher was one of the first scholars to tackle the phenomena of religion online with her book *Give Me That Online Religion* published in 2001. She offers her unique perspective into the potential pros and cons of engaging religiously through the Internet instead of through traditional/physical channels. She notes that the World Wide Web offers online religious seekers access to religious information twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week and in almost any language. Another major benefit Brasher highlights is that the Internet provides a virtual space for religious communities to upload their content to ensure engagement with a younger generation and maximize its future influence. Conversely, Brasher emphasizes a stark contrast between the act of online worship and the act of immersing one’s body and mind together in a physical setting, usually a church or temple. She states, that by removing oneself from the journey to the religious site, bypassing interactions with other pilgrims on the way, along with the absence of the associated sights and smells, has radically altered the sense of simulation in worship. Brasher notes that while technology has very much transformed religion, it is the imagination of the person using the technology that brings this change about, leading to innovative ways to use preexisting technology. She goes on to predict that offline religious practice may itself transform in the future as people attempt to adapt to the online experience. Possibly the most important observation Brasher offers is that technology has transformed the way people think about religion altogether.39 Many of the popular religions people identify with began far before anyone could have imagined the most basic forms communication technology. It makes sense that each big wave of technological

advance would alter the way people in a society would come to view the world, including religious worship and theological thinking.

Campbell identifies the second wave as being more categorical, where academics observed scholar’s attempts to provide categories and typologies to understand common trends within Internet practice. It is within this second wave that Campbell argues that questions about religious identity and authenticity of religious practice begin to surface.\textsuperscript{40} As Dawson and Cowan note, “Life in Cyberspace is in continuity with so called ‘real life’, this holds true for religion as well.”\textsuperscript{41} Essentially, people do online pretty much everything they do offline. The difference is that activity is being mediated electronically rather than physically. They mention that the Internet intensifies changes already present in society and offers entirely new possibilities. This fact has real consequences for religious communities. One interesting statistic Keene offers is that in 1999, websites focused on Christian beliefs and practices were up to roughly 1100. By August of 2002, the amount of Christian based websites increased by over 30%, setting the narrative for the future use of the Internet for religious purposes.\textsuperscript{42}

Dawson and Cowan also asked fundamental questions about the social consequences of the Internet as it relates to religion. Specifically, they drew attention to what they referred to as the “crises of authority” and the “crises of authenticity.”\textsuperscript{43} They were interested in the rise of “popular religion” online, where highly motivated religious individuals could use the Web as an outlet to channel their various forms of religiosity without having to commit to or affiliate with any official organized religious institution. Like the printing press, the Internet opened the doors for people to produce, engage with and interpret religious doctrine in their own way. Dawson and Cowan’s interpretation of popular religion online broaches both the crises of

\textsuperscript{40} Campbell, \textit{Digital Religion}, 8.
\textsuperscript{41} Cowan and Dawson, \textit{Religion Online}, 1.
\textsuperscript{43} Cowan and Dawson, \textit{Religion Online}, 2.
authenticity and authority. They discuss the rise of unofficial religious sites run by people who have no official ties to the central authorities of the religious tradition they identify with, if they identified with one at all.

A 1996 study by Barna Research in California recommended that religious organizations should be quick to learn new technology and establish their identity online so that they can speak to their parishioners through this new language. This also would give central religious authorities the opportunity to establish official websites where people can find official church doctrine. Frobish highlights that the Catholic Church was essentially the first major religious institution to create an online version of itself through the creation of an official Vatican webpage.

It was during this wave that Christopher Hellend presented two distinct defining categories regarding the convergence of religion and the Internet. Hellend defined “religion online” as the empowerment of religious members to re-form rituals and bypass traditional systems and allow opportunities to transcend normal limits of time and space. That is, members of a given religion were provided a new space and new ways of exercising their specific form of religiosity. Hellend defined “online religion” as representing the fluid and flexible nature of the Internet, allowing new forms of religiosity and lived religious practice online.

Like Dawson and Cowan, Helland warned that the democratic characteristic of the Internet would pose a threat to the credibility and authority of established religious organizations. He states that, “Although the Internet is in many ways a blessing to religious institutions that use it to their advantage, it can also be an official religion’s worst

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44 Cowan and Dawson, Religion Online, 26.
nightmare.” He specifically warned that doctrines and official teachings that were once centralized can now be openly challenged, contradicted or ignored by “rogue” religious seekers or misinformed parishioners creating their own personal religious websites. This poses a tangible threat to the likes of the Catholic Church who strive for a top-down flow of religious doctrine and interpretation.48

Helland also helped researchers understand the rich history of online religion by highlighting some of the first examples of religious communities interacting with the early Internet. He notes the significance of the “ORIGINS” online bulletin board, which offered people the ability to share and discuss their views of religion openly. He notes that people eagerly jumped to the opportunity to engage in religious discussion openly and with no central authority to limit discussion. This is another excellent example of religious technological innovation.49

It is during this second wave of scholarship that academics started asking questions about whether the Internet should be considered a wholly separate space from the physical world. As life online began to mirror and intensify life offline, religiosity online began to flourish with no sign of abating.50 The Vatican has been struggling with the question of virtual spaces since the early 2000’s.51

The third wave (mid 2000’s), as Campbell argues, takes a turn toward more theoretical and interpretive research. This is where questions of ritual, community and identity begin to be examined more thoroughly. Scholars were asking questions regarding the pervasiveness of the

50 Campbell, Digital Religion, 8.
Internet in everyday life and how it was influencing religious practice.

Antonio Spadaro, a journalist, media theorist and current director of La Civiltà Cattolica (a popular Catholic Magazine officially recognized by the Vatican), has been so influential in his writing that in 2011 Pope Benedict made him Consultori of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications. This council was an arm of the official Roman Curia which governs the Holy See. His writings have continued to influence Pope Francis and have been recognized by the Secretariat for Social Communications, the governing body of the Holy See with authority over all communications offices. Spadaro introduces the concept of “Cybertheology” to the study of religion and new media. He argues that since the Internet has changed, and is changing the ways in which we think and act, it must also be changing the ways in which we think about Christianity and its theology. This thinking is similar to the questions Brenda Bashur posed in the early 2000’s. Spadaro also highlights the positive and negative aspects of the Internet in relation to Christianity. 52 I will reintroduce Spadaro in a later chapter covering the complex media negotiations between the church and the most cutting-edge forms of technology.

Campbell notes how these three-distinct waves; the descriptive, the categorical, and the theoretical are important for helping scholars understand and describe the progression and development of research of religion and the Internet. 53 These categories help highlight the different branches of research that have contributed academically to religion online and offer present day scholars an inside look into each milestone. It is also interesting to note how some of their most pressing questions would eventually be answered by scholars expanding upon their original work. It is no question that in 2017 the line between the physical and the virtual are blending so neatly, we can hardly tell the difference. As Pompili states, “we no longer

53 Campbell, Digital Religion, 9.
perceive the digital media surrounding us as separate entities—they seem to melt into our environment to the point where we hardly notice them anymore."\(^{54}\)

Understanding the many waves of research within the digital religion field can help researchers understand how scholars have come to think about religion and digital technology and how that thinking has evolved. When studying a specific religious institution or community, it is important to have a critical framework to guide one’s thinking about how a given religious organization makes sense of technology. I have found such a framework in the scholarship of Heidi Campbell.

**RELIGIOUS SOCIAL-SHAPING OF TECHNOLOGY**

Heidi Campbell offers her decades of insights to help scholars explore core issues and trends that influence Christian practices and beliefs in a world dependent on digital media. She thoroughly examines how Christian communities have negotiated with new technologies and media. She attempts to provide a clear overview of different forms of religious use of new media and analyses of key questions raised by scholars studying the phenomena of religion online.

Campbell’s biggest contribution to the field of digital religion is her critical framework she calls the Religious Social-Shaping of Technology, or RSST. This is an expansion on a previously existing framework constructed by MacKenzie and Wajcman\(^{55}\) and furthered by Williams and Edge, called the Social-Shaping of Technology, or SST. According to Williams and Edge, champions of the SST theory view the relationship between society and technology

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One of the main ideas of Campbell’s framework is that religious communities do not typically engage in the total rejection of new forms of technology. Instead, they participate in a sophisticated negotiation process taking their communal backgrounds and beliefs into consideration. Campbell expands the SST framework by positing that religious and technological progress did not happen entirely separately. She promotes the idea that since religious identity is a societal construct, that the social evolution of religion and the evolution of technology are inextricably linked, one having influence over the progress of the other. The most obvious example of this is the invention of Gutenberg’s printing press, invented in the Holy Roman Empire around 1440 and first used to print the Bible.

By using Campbell’s RSST framework as a contextual map, researchers can better understand how specific religious communities have historically engaged in complex negotiations with new forms of technology. More importantly, her framework provides the necessary tools for researchers to make informed decisions about how a specific religious community will respond to the technologies of the future. However, Campbell warns that simply applying the SST approach to a study of a religious community is not enough. She states that, “Religious communities are unique in their negotiations with media.” This is due to their specific moral, historical and cultural settings. “Religious social-shaping of technology” not only draws from the SST approach, but also extends it to consider the special qualities and constraints of a specific religious community.57

Thus, Campbell identifies four key layers of investigation she believes must be considered when researching how religious communities negotiate and shape their responses to

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56 Edge and Williams, Research Policy, 856.

57 Campbell, Digital Religion, 10.
new forms of media technology: (1) history and tradition, (2) core beliefs, (3) negotiation with media and (4) communal framing. Researchers first must understand and highlight the religious community’s history and traditions which inform their responses to media. Past responses to media, framed by the central authorities of the community, can be seen as a form of precedence which will help inform future media negotiations. A religious community’s core beliefs can help researchers understand how members of that community may view a new form of technology based on that community’s central beliefs and interpretations about how its members should interact with modern society. The negotiation process involves a religious community evaluating which factors or uses of the new technology can be accepted and which elements may need to be rejected, or repurposed innovatively to reconstruct the technology to be more in line with community beliefs and practices. Finally, communal framing plays an important role in helping researchers identify how religious communities seek to frame themselves in modern society. By paying attention to not only how religious communities use new technology, but also how they talk about them through official policy statements and religious materials, researchers can get an inside look at how these communities validate technology within the community or create boundaries of acceptable use.\footnote{Campbell, \textit{When Religion Meets New Media}, 1-213}

Campbell provides concrete examples of how the RSST method can be applied to study of a religious community’s negotiation with new technology through case studies of Jewish, Muslim and Christian communities. What is lacking in her research and the digital religion field at large is a dedicated case study and analysis of how the Catholic Church has historically negotiated with new forms of media technology and how it may respond to cutting edge immersive technologies that blend the physical with the virtual.

In the next chapter, I provide a detailed account of the Catholic Church’s past and present uses of new media. I argue that by applying Campbell’s RSST framework to the study
of the Catholic Church’s relationship with technology, answers to vital questions of its longevity and ability to maneuver major societal shifts will begin to be answered. Because of the Church’s ability to appreciate human reason and experience, coupled with its longstanding history of new media negotiation, the Church is in the good position to deal with inevitable and rapid technological change. As society and technology continue to influence each other, how will our perceptions of virtual spaces change? I argue that because past negotiations with society and technology have motivated the Church to update official doctrine, that present day and future negotiations will inevitably lead to the Church changing its current stance that virtual spaces will never be an adequate substitute for the physical, specifically concerning participation in the Holy Mass and Sacraments.
CHAPTER II

RELIGIOUS REFLECTION ON TECHNOLOGY

Over the course of the past fifteen years, a lot of research has been published regarding the ways religious organizations and communities respond to new media technologies. Scholars like Heidi Campbell have spent many of those years documenting and focusing on the roots of the RSST model; the idea that religious communities typically do not reject new forms of technology outright, rather they undergo a sophisticated negotiation process based on their communal background and beliefs. This framework borrows key insights drawn from the SST model, which frames technological advance and user innovation as a mutual social process.

Campbell suggests that the SST framework grew as a response to the “technological determinism” framework; which sees a society’s technology as the main driver of the development of that society’s social structure and cultural values. The SST framework places great emphasis for researchers to focus not only on the technology, but also on the users, designers and the way they make decisions and talk about technology. This model offers the designers and users the power to make decisions about a given technology that is informed by the social processes of their community.

Through years of research and case studies on the ways specific religious communities negotiate with new media, Campbell’s RSST model has proven to be an effective framework for which researchers can better understand the decisions religious communities make towards new technologies. She focuses not on how technology simply changes religious communities, but also how religious communities make sense of and sometimes influence the use of

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59 Campbell, When Religion Meets New Media, 113.
60 Edge and Williams, Research Policy, 843-998
technology. Further, while this framework was initially developed for scholars, Campbell’s model can also be used by religious communities to “reflect on their beliefs about media and move toward developing a theologically informed reflection on new media.” Campbell further argues that the RSST framework offers religious groups a systematic platform for critical self-examination on how their religious values can and should connect with technological choices.\(^{62}\)

Campbell’s model suggests a four-layer analysis which should be applied to the study of a religious group’s choices about technology. To make well-informed decisions about how a religious group may respond to new forms of technology, researchers and religious leaders should pay close attention to:

1.) The history and tradition of the community that shapes who they are and what they stand for.
2.) The core beliefs of the group that relate to their general beliefs and choices related to media.
3.) The negotiation and decision-making processes they undergo, as it relates to a new technology grounded in the first two areas.
4.) The communal framing and discourse created by a group to justify their technological use considering their values and identity.\(^{63}\)

Using the RSST model to guide her case studies of Christian, Muslim and Jewish communities, Campbell states that her work reveals one particularly interesting commonality; religious “tradition” had less impact on the response to a given technology than the religious group’s goals, missions and core values. The evaluation of the benefits and challenges posed by a technology sit at the forefront of the decision-making process.\(^{64}\) This is an important observation because it suggests that while history and tradition play an obvious and important role, if a given technology shows enough potential for benefiting the religious community, its leaders and users will justify ways to incorporate the technology into their belief system. If a technology shows potential, but still offers critical challenges to the religious group’s core

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\(^{63}\) Campbell, *When Religion Meets New Media*, 1-179.

\(^{64}\) Campbell and Gardner, *Networked Theology*, 1-115
beliefs, that group may find innovative ways to modify certain technical aspects or structures of the new technology.

This modification is best exemplified by the Ultra-Orthodox Jews mentioned in the previous chapter. The leaders of this group struggled to protect their community from the perceived threat of the Internet and mobile devices. Thus, they set about a complex media negotiation strategy that led to the creation of kosher Internet and kosher cellphones that supported both the communal need for better communication and set important boundaries to protect the community from external forces.65

While Campbell and her counterparts have done an excellent job outlining various Christian groups by utilizing the RSST framework, there exists no comprehensive study of the Catholic Church within this model. In the rest of this chapter, I use Campbell’s RSST model to uncover specific themes present throughout the history of the Catholic Church, highlight core values and beliefs that have and continue to influence how the Church makes media based decisions, note significant past media negotiations which can inform the use of future technologies, and identify trends in communal framing that justify the Church’s use of specific technologies.

Ultimately, I aim to validate Campbell’s model as a framework from which scholars can make educated predictions about the future behaviors of religious communities and the use of new media technology. I believe the centralized nature of the church, its core beliefs, past and present negotiation strategies and use of positive (yet cautious) communal framing of technology leaves the religion able to make sense of and adapt to digital and virtual technologies. I believe that by propping up Pope Francis, the Vatican is guiding the Church towards future accommodations that will allow its followers to participate in Church activities by means of virtual and digitally immersive technologies.

HISTORY: CENTRALIZATION AND SOCIAL OPPORTUNITY

As briefly noted in the previous chapter, to make educated assumptions on a religious institution's present and future decisions about various forms of new media technology, it is important to build a comprehensive understanding of that community’s history and traditions to uncover common themes. Understanding the beginnings and important historic milestones of a religious community is essential for understanding that community in its present state and making educated predictions about its future state. Thus, to fully appreciate the Papacy of Pope Francis and its relationship with modern media technology, one must understand the Catholic Church’s history with new media technology and how past decisions and negotiations inform present day and even future negotiations. To understand past decisions about media technology, it is important to understand how and why the Church went about making such decisions, as they do not arise in a vacuum. Lastly, and most importantly, it is essential to understand who is ultimately responsible for making such decisions. In the case of the Roman Catholic Church, the highest authority is given to the Bishop of Rome, more commonly referred to as the Pope.

The hierarchical and centralized nature of the Church, which indeed helped the Church rise from obscurity to religious and political prominence, gives the Church the unique ability to synthesize past decisions in an organized fashion to create a narrative around present decisions that will set the Church up for future success. Whether the Papacy perceives a new technology as useful, dangerous or both, will ultimately determine how the Church responds. By looking to the past, Church leaders can make informed decisions about novel technologies rooted in the wisdom or errors of their own traditions.

Another major aspect of the history of the Church is its ability to navigate the social
order and structures of a given time and make decisions that will help keep the Church relevant. As communication is a major part of social navigation, decisions about media technology are often at the core of this navigation. The Church has a knack for learning from past mistakes and using that wisdom to shape future decisions, guided and pushed forward by its organized central structure.

Even as many may regard the Catholic Church as backward and outdated, decisions to resist technology or scientific thinking were based on precedent, scriptural interpretation and framed in a way which protected the authority of the Church to ensure its own future. If a new technology threatened the Church’s ability to control the interpretation of scripture, it would act accordingly to protect itself. The advantage of developing a centralized structure is the ability to trace important historical decisions through one line of succession through the Bishop of Rome. The Papacy of a given time could search through its history for relevant examples and frame those past decisions to influence the future trajectory of the Church, much like the modern judicial system in the United States. If need be, the Church could find precedent to make changes within itself in the interest of self-preservation.

As Horsefield notes, Christian media negotiations started well before the establishment of the Catholic/Orthodox (universal) Christian Church.\textsuperscript{66} However, a comprehensive and detailed account of “pre-Catholic” Christianity falls outside the scope of this project. One important detail to note is that the success of the early Church in forming a single stream of identity and authority was the ability of its bishops and other leaders to create a sophisticated communication network of speech and writing. This network gave Church leaders the opportunity to draw authority from their counterparts and endowed them with enough shared resources to fortify this prevalent Christian identity and allow it to grow. The success of the Catholic/Orthodox narrative eventually solidified the universal Church as the one true Church.

\textsuperscript{66} Peter Horsefield, \textit{From Jesus to the Internet}, (Chichester, John Wiley & Sons, 2015), 11.
from which all deviation would be considered heresy. From the very beginning of the "universal" Christian Church, centralized authority and hierarchy, stemming from the office of the Bishop of Rome, has been one of the most important aspects of Catholic tradition and history. Indeed, the formation of the centralized Church itself owes thanks to early Church leader’s abilities to navigate the oral and written media realms of the day, and make decisions that fit into those social paradigms.  

The centralized Church has been engaged in complex media negotiations since the earliest days of consolidation. The newly formed centralized Church embedded itself into many features of Roman state life as the Church elite understood that to wield any real influence, it would have to gain acceptance at the highest echelons of Roman political society. This consolidation of “Church and State” gave the Catholic Church both an authoritative and unified voice, but also gave it political, social and financial legitimacy. Any major theological decisions would be presided over by regional bishops and ultimately decided upon by the Pope and his inner circle. Given the eventual interconnectedness of religion and the state, the Pope of Rome could conduct spiritual, religious and political matters like a game of chess. Ultimately, decisions were made to keep the Pope, and thus the Church, in a position of power and influence.

For centuries, the Catholic Church used its centralized power to safeguard its right to scriptural interpretation. Since the influence of the Church exploded in the centuries following its organizational consolidation, it did everything it could to keep a stranglehold on the spiritual and political climate of Europe, including the continued practice of mixing Church and State life well into Medieval era. On one hand, the princess and kings (along with their armies) protected and aided the Church in its fight for theological dominance. On the other, the

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67 Horsefield, From Jesus to the Internet, 12.
69 Horsefield, From Jesus to the Internet, 28.
Church protected the political establishment by declaring the “divine right of kings”; the doctrine that kings derive their authority from God.\textsuperscript{70} This level of influence helped ensure that both political and theological authority were served from the top down.

During this time, the Church was keen to pay attention to a new form of mass communication, print technology. Although it is known that presses existed prior to Gutenberg’s model, his introduction to moveable type made it far easier and faster to duplicate and disseminate information. The Church took full advantage of this invention to create both the first mass produced book (the Gutenberg Bible) and political propaganda against the threat of Muslim Turks.\textsuperscript{71}

However, like McLuhan warns, every major technological advance brings about profound changes to the societies and its institutions that adapt to and make use of them. As Campbell notes, often it is the user of a technology that determines how that technology will steer the course of a community or society. An invention may have been created for a specific purpose, but its utility will be determined by how it’s used, and that mode of use can have broad implications for a given society.\textsuperscript{72}

Though the Church enjoyed massive wealth, political and spiritual control, it underestimated the resolve of its political and spiritual enemies, mainly the Protestant Reformers. While the Church was certainly used to defending its right of control over the interpretation of Christian scripture, the printing press gave Reformers the weapon they needed to both discredit the Centralized Medieval Church and bolster their own arguments. Ultimately, this tension led to the biggest political and spiritual schism ever endured by the Catholic Church. In less than twenty years from the time Martin Luther nailed his “Ninety-Five Theses” to the door of the Wittenberg Castle in Germany, the Catholic Church had lost its power in

\textsuperscript{70} Lindberg, \textit{The European Reformations}, 1-472.
\textsuperscript{71} Eisenstein, \textit{The Printing Press as an Agent of Change}, 303.
\textsuperscript{72} Campbell, \textit{Digital Religion}, 225.
England, Denmark, Scotland. Sweden, Switzerland, half of Germany and France, the Netherlands and even parts of Italy.\textsuperscript{73}

Yet, even after the major fracture of the Catholic faith following the Protestant Reformation (which was ultimately achieved using print), the Catholic Church would find itself navigating the quickly changing social landscape to mend itself back into a position of power. The leaders of the Church understood the need for reform, given the success of the Protestant movement which came about due to perceived abuses within the Church hierarchy itself. As a direct result, the Council of Trent was formed and facilitated between the years of 1534 – 1563. The council focused on bringing the essence of the established Church back to its former glory, weeding out abuse and clarifying certain tenets of the Faith that came into question during the Reformation.\textsuperscript{74}

To protect itself from any further damage inflicted by heretical uses of the printing press, the Church enacted printing guidelines to be imposed on territories still under its control. Further, the Church used print technology to aid in the mission of reforming itself in discipline and central administration.\textsuperscript{75} This example of the disruption wrought by print technology highlights the fact that at points the Church has acted upon its suspicions of a given technology to safeguard and protect its authority, while still utilizing the technology for its own purposes considering the current social climate of the time. Prior to the age of the Internet, print technology was the single biggest threat to the Catholic Church. Yet, despite this threat, print technology also afforded the Vatican new opportunities to more easily organize its central control. The Church made the decision to continue using the press to its advantage while simultaneously imposing strict and rigid guidelines for its use within the Catholic tradition.

Following the events of the Reformation, new opportunities arose for the Church and

\textsuperscript{73} Horsefield, \textit{From Jesus to the Internet}, 194.
\textsuperscript{74} Lindberg, \textit{The European Reformations}, 1-472.
\textsuperscript{75} Horsefield, \textit{From Jesus to the Internet}, 208.
the political entities it still held power over. The discovery of new lands and people beyond Europe opened new possibilities for expansion and recruitment. As Horsefield notes, as part of the management of this international expansion, several Papal Bulls were issued in the fifteenth century, allocating specific areas of Africa, the Americas, and Asia. With this political expansion came Catholic missionaries armed with printed Bibles for the sole purpose of converting the native people of these lands to Catholicism.\textsuperscript{76} In addition to utilizing the press to create marketable versions of the Catholicism in the New World, the Church could utilize its social and political prowess to establish a foothold in the New World, especially in what is now Latin America. A 2014 Pew research article states that throughout most the 20th century, 90% of adult Latinos identified as Catholic. Today, that number stands around 69%.\textsuperscript{77} Much of this is due to the success of early Church missionaries in these areas.

Lessons learned from the past have motivated the Catholic Church to pay close attention to new forms of media technology. Hoping to avoid similar disastrous effects like the aftermath of the Reformation, the Vatican has since been known to embrace new forms of media quicker than other religious traditions. Even if there exist certain aspects of the technology that may be troublesome to Catholic culture, the Church understands the need for understanding how new forms of media may influence society.

A more contemporary example is the Catholic Church’s early embrace of radio in the early 1930’s. Not only did the Church establish Vatican Radio in Rome for the purpose of evangelization (one of the first to do so), they also helped local Churches acquire stations in Latin America to offer alternative voices during times of political unrest.\textsuperscript{78} The Vatican understood the need to reach out to its followers in places where social strife was high and to

\textsuperscript{76} Horsefield, \textit{From Jesus to the Internet}, 217.
\textsuperscript{78} Horsefield, \textit{From Jesus to the Internet}, 244.
provide a conduit to their religion’s home base in Rome.

Another example of the Church undergoing a major social change, one which takes precedent specifically from the Council of Trent, was the convening of the Second Vatican Council which opened in 1962 and ran through 1965. One of the major points of contention was whether the Church should allow Mass to be conducted in the regional vernacular of a specific community, which it ultimately ruled in favor of. The Church made this decision to connect scripture back to the everyday life of Church goers, fearing this disconnection would lead many to stray from the true faith.79 The Second Vatican Council represents the Catholic Church’s first real steps into the modern world to make sure the tradition and its values made sense behind the backdrop of the contemporary global society it was part of.

The Church’s history with new media technology has provided its current authorities with centuries worth of reflection based on prior decisions. The Church has learned invaluable lessons from its past technological negotiations which it employs during present deliberations. Not only must the Church rely on past lessons learned, it must also recognize that each new technology encountered comes with its own set of social advantages and consequences, as shown below.

Centralization is key to making the big decisions on how the Church will respond to a new technology. Its leaders must have the presence of mind to recognize when a new technology is capable of revolutionary change and make decisions appropriate for its community. The Pontifical Commission for Cinema, Radio and Television was reorganized as the Pontifical Commission for Social Council for Social Communications in 1964. In 1989, it was reorganized again as the Pontifical Council for Social Council for Social Communications. In March of 2016, Francis reorganized the Council and all work regarding communication and

social technology now falls under the Secretariat for Communication. The Vatican website describes the responsibilities of this administration as such:

The new Dicastery of the Roman Curia has the task of the overall restructuring, reorganization and consolidation of "all of the realities which, in various ways up to the present have dealt with communications" in order to "respond ever better to the needs of the mission of the Church." In this light the Holy See's communications system is being reevaluated.

Through this restructuring the Apostolic See can refer to the Secretariat as the single point of reference for communication, which has become increasingly complex and interdependent, reflecting the current media reality.

The decisions of Pope Francis will not only affect the Church in the short term, but will affect the decisions of every Pope after him. Given that humanity has reached another level of major technological milestones, Francis must take great care and consideration in his decisions. Based on the history of the effectiveness of the centralized Catholic Church and its ability to evolve and grow to reflect the reality of the greater society it is a part of, I believe the Church is due to make some modern reforms to reflect the realities of the modern world. I also believe the contemporary Church fully understands the implications and consequences of misunderstanding social and digital technologies.

Given Francis’ social media prowess, my research shows that the Catholic Church is in the middle of its biggest technological negotiations to date. To make the changes necessary to stay relevant in our quickly evolving world, the Church will need to juggle another major social maneuver while keeping the history of the faith top of mind. Given that the prevalence of social and digitally immersive technology in everyday life, the Church is taking steps to

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80 Campbell, When Religion Meets New Media, 146.
embrace these new mediums in new and innovative ways.

CORE BELIEFS: GOOD WORKS, SOCIAL JUSTICE & FAITH IN HUMAN REASON

While the Catholic Church has a long and informed media history, the realities of contemporary society and technology are much different than anything the Church has dealt with in the past. People are connecting through digital channels more and more every day and these channels have proven to be effective in terms of building personal (even romantic) relationships, conducting business and providing entertainment. The Catholic Church exists in a world today where religious affiliation is a very personal choice and where it is losing a foothold in leading countries like the United States.  

Because there is such a wide array of religious choices available for people to become interested in and ultimately ascribe to, religious organizations need to appeal to perspective believers and work hard to understand how modern society affects the way people think about the world and how that perception affects their religiosity.

The Church understands that it is competing in a global religious marketplace not only with completely different religious traditions, but also with the many other Christian denominations. As former President of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications stated, “For the Church, involvement in media-related activities, including advertising, is today a necessary part of a comprehensive pastoral strategy.”  

This reflects how the Church has had to come to terms with an evolving global society, one that is ever-changing. However, not only must the Church understand its external surroundings, it must understand how its core values and belief systems have evolved over time.

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As I have previously pointed out, the Catholic Church has made many of its media-driven decisions based on tradition and its ability to protect itself and its authority to interpret Biblical scripture. However, the Church must also take into consideration how those decisions reflect the values of its greater community. Campbell notes that often, a religious community’s social values and core beliefs are more important when informing and framing the religious community’s view of a technology than that community’s historic use of it.84

While historic precedent and traditional responses to new media are important, the contemporary core beliefs of the community reflect how that community makes sense of modern world. Campbell states that “a community’s values are derived from historical traditions, policies and accepted interpretations of texts, rituals and experiences. While these values are transferred across time, they also must be reinterpreted, redefined, and clarified by each new generation and the social context in which they find themselves.”85 This communication of social values is intended to inform policy decisions from the leadership to the individual level.

Using Campbell’s model, I have uncovered two common themes which frame the historic and contemporary core beliefs of the Catholic Church; an emphasis on good works and social justice. The first, representing a line of tradition dating back to the 5th century and which has been at the center of Christian debate for over 500 years. The second, representing a renewed vigor in the Church to “understand the world and itself in terms and appropriate ways that made sense in modern times.”86

Emphasis on good works has been a staple of Catholicism since the Council of

84 Campbell, *When Religion Meets New Media*, 89.
85 Campbell, *When Religion Meets New Media*, 89.
Carthage in 418 A.D. and further solidified at the Council of Trent ending in 1563.\(^{87}\) While the exact doctrine of “Justification through good works” has evolved over time, it has played a major role in the evolution of the Church. The Reformers of the sixteenth century used the Catholic doctrine of “justification through works” as a central issue and point of criticism. Luther condemned the Church for allowing men a merit based path to salvation. To him, salvation was granted by the grace of God and faith alone.\(^{88}\)

The Vatican has since updated its position on works to more closely resemble that of Luther’s reformed church. In fact, in 1999 the Pontifical Council for promoting Christian Unity (PCPCU) worked side by side with the Lutheran World Federation to lay to rest the five-hundred-year-old dispute and to share “a common understanding of our justification by God's grace through faith in Christ.” Sanctioned by Pope John Paul II, the document lays out the contemporary Church’s stance on the issue in the following quote: “According to Catholic understanding, good works, made possible by grace and the working of the Holy Spirit, contribute to growth in grace, so that the righteousness that comes from God is preserved and communion with Christ is deepened.”\(^{89}\) Essentially, John Paul wanted Christians to acknowledge their similarities and emphasize that God is the sole proprietor of grace, but that good works are an essential way to enrich one’s life with Christ.

In 2008 Pope Benedict delivered a speech to a general audience in St. Peter’s Square discussing the evolution of Saint Paul’s understanding of justification, which should be liberated from “works of law” (attributed to the Torah). Benedict states that, “the liberation of


\(^{88}\) Lindberg, The European Reformations, 1-472.

which Saint Paul spoke is not liberation from good works.”  

Benedict goes on to emphasize that while God alone can grant the gift of salvation, good works and charity are the “fulfilment of communion with Christ,” a very similar stance form which John Paul II took.

Additionally, in 2014 Pope Francis elaborated by stating that, "You may know all the commandments, all the prophesies, all the truths of the faith, but if this isn't put into practice, is not translated into works, it serves nothing."  

This is an indication that, even though the doctrine has been updated to more closely align with a universal Christian understanding of grace and justification, Francis believes that good works are an integral part to leading a full Christian life. As a global religion competing for the spiritual market share, it is also sound strategy to implore Catholics around the world to get more active and involved in their faith.

The second core belief I observed was a strong emphasis on social justice and mercy, with a specific focus on the poor and marginalized people. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) states that Catholic social teaching is a central and essential element of the Catholic Faith.  

In section two, chapter one of the “Catechism of the Catholic Church,” it is stated that "To receive in truth the Body and Blood of Christ given up for us, we must recognize Christ in the poorest, his brethren.”

The Vatican and Catholics around the world recognize social justice as a staple of their faith that goes back to the days of Jesus Christ. In the Good Samaritan parable, Jesus shows God’s special love for both the poor and the stranger which good Christians are to imitate. In 1891 Pope Leo XIII issued an encyclical to Catholic leadership around the world to address the

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poor conditions of the working class, supporting the rights of unions and the relationship between labor and capital.\textsuperscript{94} Forty years later, Pope Pius XI issued his encyclical about the dangers of unrestricted Capitalism and unfair wages.\textsuperscript{95} One of the more influential documents came in 1961 by Pope John XXIII. This document builds on the messages of “Rights and Duties of Capital and Labor” and “In the 40th Year” and furthers the conversation by highlighting key changes in the modern world. A major piece of this work was focused on the lack of economic balance, improving education, breaking down class barriers and promoting good social principles. The document states, “Charity, not self-interest, should be the supreme criterion in economic matters.”\textsuperscript{96}

All three of these documents represent a major shift in the Church’s focus on social justice and mercy. In fact, one year after “Mother and Teacher” was published, the Second Vatican Council was convened, which paid special attention to the Church’s position in the modern world.\textsuperscript{97} Since 1931, there have been twenty-two Vatican encyclicals published all with a specific focus on social justice and mercy. Gerard Mannion notes that, “In every region where Catholicism was found, the social vision of Vatican II was applied to contextual circumstances and, in turn, new insights offered on justice, equality, and peace to the wider world alike.”\textsuperscript{98}

Mannion highlights the continued tradition of social justice even under the Papacy of Pope Benedict, who ultimately placed less emphasis on social justice than other aspects of Catholic theology. While Benedict himself was less devoted to emphasizing charity, he still

released three encyclicals which promoted the virtue of charity and even stated that it lies at the heart of the Church’s social doctrine. However, Mannion states that from the very beginning of Pope Francis’ election he has placed social justice and charity at the forefront of his priorities.99

Highlighting the importance of doing “works” shows the consistent requirement for Catholics to actively engage with their faith by Church attendance and various activities. However, not everybody can be physically present at a brick and mortar Church or have the ability to participate in other religious activities. The emphasis and focus on social justice, in the age of the Internet, highlights the importance of the Church to help bridge the digital divide and seek out those may be less fortunate than most. Digital channels could serve to reach the unfortunate and help them become active members of their faith, which they may be currently alienated from. If the Church does not find proactive ways to bridge the gap between the technology haves and have-nots, this chasm of alienation could potentially deepen.

NEGOTIATION & COMMUNAL FRAMING: PATTERNS OF RECONFIGURATION & CONDITIONAL ACCEPTANCE

The long and complex history of the Catholic Church and new media technology offers scholars a view into how the Church has historically made sense and use of new forms of technology. Understanding the Church’s core beliefs helps make sense of how the Church is currently negotiating and may respond to future technologies. Further, the official responses from the Church regarding new media allows scholars to pair those negotiation tactics with how Church leaders frame the dangers and benefits of a given technology to its wider community. Using Campbell’s model to study this history, a pattern of conditional acceptance

and reconfiguration emerges; conditional acceptance as a matter of communal framing and reconfiguration as a negotiation tactic. The Catholic Church shows a great propensity for understanding both the benefits and dangers of new technologies. Campbell defines “reconfiguration” as the process of condemning or changing certain aspects of a given technology to make its use acceptable within the backdrop of its core values and in context of modern society.100

As previously noted, the first major media negotiation the Catholic Church had to endure was its relationship with the printing press. The crises of authority and authenticity in early modern European Christianity started with the widespread use of the press. Luther himself is credited with being the “Father of the Protestant Reformation” and Lutheranism the “child of print” (Lutherans currently make up 3.6% of the entire US population). However, as more and more voices began to exercise the use of the printing press, even Luther’s revolution began to fracture, making room for new reformers who challenged both the Italian Papacy and Luther’s interpretation of scripture. The original use case for the press as a tool for the Church had been openly challenged and religious users from the various reformed sects begin to use the press as a tool to dismantle the Catholic Church’s dominance and vie for their own interpretation of biblical scripture.

Even if the Church saw the advent of Gutenberg’s printing press as a gift from God, it understood that this gift would have far reaching consequences outside of what the Church had intended its use to be. Martin Luther and his predecessors would come to fulfill this promise. On one hand, they knew they needed print technology to help keep up with the Reformer’s progress. On the other hand, they could no longer allow the unbridled use of the press by anyone in Catholic territories without permission by the Vatican.

Yet, even before Luther’s “95 theses,” the Church struggled with its ability to maintain

100 Campbell, When Religion Meets New Media, 112-161.
control of biblical authority at the hands of printers. Thus, leading to centuries of censorship and technological reconfiguration. In 1515, Pope Leo X issued the bull *Inter Solicitudines*, which expanded on measures already set by Pope Innocent VIII in 1487 and Pope Alexander VI in 1501 which discussed the prohibition of printed works that did not gain permission by ecclesiastical authorities. Leo X praised the art of print as a gift from God while simultaneously condemning its use outside of the scope the Church had intended. As Putnam notes, “The bull of Leo X served as a model for a long series of future similar ecclesiastical orders. The fatherly care for the true faith and for the preservation of the morality Christendom are, in the wording of the papal utterance, placed in the background, while the main contention is devoted to the assertion of the authority of the Pope and of the special responsibility of the pope, as the immediate representative of God, for the maintenance of censorship throughout the world.”

As more and more vernacular and translated editions of the Bible spread throughout Europe, the Church attempted to counteract these perceived heresies by introducing a series of measures prohibiting Bible-reading and Bible printing. Starting with the first Papal Index of 1559 by Pope Paul IV and continued with the 1564 Index by Pius IV (and included in later indexes), the Church stopped all serious Bible translation by Catholics in Italy for almost two hundred years.

The Church’s vehement stance against the unbridled use of print was its first major struggle with a revolutionary media. We see the Church embrace the technology as a divine gift while simultaneously condemning it for the many threats it presented to the authority the Papacy in Rome. The rampant publishing of vernacular Bibles undermined this authority and

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ended the omnipotent stranglehold the Church held over how to communicate the scriptures to the masses. And while the church did what it could to hold the seemingly disastrous effects of print at bay, new Christian traditions flourished in the Old World and New World alike.

However, a major lesson is to be learned by the Church through this tumultuous time. The resistance of the Church to unbridled use of the printing press was a direct reaction to the threat of the Protestant Reformers and their Anti-Catholic movement. Though the movement did not completely dismantle the Church, it broke loose spiritual and political ties that had been set in stone since antiquity. Seeing how effective a weapon the press was when used against the Church, Papal leaders began a Counter Reformation of their own using the press to their own advantage in organizing regional dioceses and creating a universal vernacular to help regain the strength it had lost.

Another example is the Catholic use of radio. As early as the 1930’s Catholic radio stations began popping up with an initial positive reaction from the Church who viewed the new medium as a means of evangelization. Catholic broadcasters as well as Church leaders recognized the vast potential radio afforded to influence millions of people and connect them with Christian values.105 While the Church’s communal framing of radio has largely remained the same; overall positive with special attention to the dangers it could potentially pose. For example, in Pope Pius XII’s 1957 document “Mirana Prorsus” he states that “Everyone knows what a great contribution good radio programs can make to sound education; yet from the use of this instrument there arises an obligation in conscience as in the other technical arts, since it can be employed to achieve good or evil.”106

In 1963 Pope Paul VI lauded the coming age of “social communications” (the press, cinema, radio and television) while simultaneously warning against the use of these media in a

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contrary way to how God would deem wholesome. Specific to radio, Paul recommended that
decent radio programs should be effectively supported and established wherever it was
financially possible to do so.107 This is another example of conditional acceptance on behalf of
the Church which led to a reconfiguration of a distinct Catholic brand of radio broadcasting.
And while the Church was cautious in its encouragement for members to purchase broadcast
ownership (lest they be viewed fiscally irresponsible), where it was not possible to obtain air
time through existing state or commercial stations, the Church would sometimes advocate for
ownership rights.108

Another major example is the Church’s shaky relationship with the world of cinema.
As early as 1933, the Catholic Church in America had formed the National Legion of Decency
to combat “objectionable” content in American cinema. The Legion had such an influence at
that time that Hollywood’s Production Code would submit films to the Legion for official
review. Here we see a more aggressive attempt at reconfiguration, not just in the use of
Catholic Cinema, but in the most popular factions of the motion picture industry. Walsh is
sensitive to the fact that many at the time viewed the National League of Decency as an affront
to free speech and a form of censorship.”109

Two years later, Pope Pius XI issued his “Vigilanti Cura” which he warns heavily of
the great influence of motion picture and the broken promises of the motion picture industry.
Seeing Cinema as one of the most influential forms of media, Pius pleads with Catholics,
Protestants, Jews and secular forces to be ever mindful of the corruption that can breed in the
motion picture industry. In the same vein as the Church’s response to the press and radio, Pius

107 Paul VI, “Inter Mirifica,” Vatican.va, accessed April 27, 2017,
http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19631204_inter-
mirifica_en.html/
108 Paul Soukup, “Formal and Informal Catholic Church Policies in Regards to Owning Broadcast Properties”
(presentation, Annual Meeting of the Speech Communication Association, November 3-6, 1988).
109 Frank Walsh, Sin and Censorship: The Catholic Church and the Motion Picture Industry, (New Haven: Yale
decrees that cinema may afford great advantages to learning and education if properly directed by healthy principles. However, he follows up by stating that the medium often and unfortunately “serves as an incentive to evil passions and are subordinate to sordid gain.”  

While television was taking popular culture by storm, many mainline religious traditions, including the Catholic Church, were wary of the media and made many public proclamations expounding on their concern for social responsibility and a just distribution of media access in society. Pope John XXII released his “Boni Pastoris” exhortation which reinforced the Vatican’s good wishes towards those with the means of production of Cinema, TV and Radio. However, again we see a warning coming from the Pope stating that, “Nevertheless, with very real sorrow we must point out the dangers and moral damage which have frequently been provoked through television programs by which Christian morals and the dignity of man itself may be ruined.”

However, despite the Church’s apprehension to television, Catholic Bishop Fulton Sheen transposed his radio broadcast *The Catholic Hour* to TV from 1952 – 1957 with much success. His authoritative personality, facial expressions and relevant content allowed his show to maintain a competitive market share of the evening TV audience. Horsefield states that “no other religious program has ever gained such commercial sponsorships or the consistently high audience numbers that Sheen did.” Horsefield also attributes Sheen to being the first successful televangelist. Here we see the Catholic Church navigating its skepticism for television while simultaneously using it for a largely successful evangelization campaign on international level.

The most contemporary and obvious example is the Church’s policy statements and

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111 Horsefield, *From Jesus to the Internet*, 1-292.
113 Horsefield, *From Jesus to the Internet*, 246.
uses of modern day social media via the Internet. The Church has been quick to adopt, modify and reject certain social media platforms depending on their specific forms of functionality. Official Vatican statements about the Internet and social media platforms largely reflect past statements about communication technology. The pattern of conditional acceptance is very present in all official statements of these communication platforms since the early 2000’s. “Ethics in Communications” (2000), “Ethics in Internet” (2002), “The Church and Internet” (2002) and various speech’s aligning with World Communication Day all espouse the idea that the Internet is a gift from God which can and should be used for the benefit of mankind. In each work there also exists the same familiar warnings over specific areas of concern. In “Ethics in Internet,” Benedict writes about the “sheer overwhelming quantity of information on the Internet” which is largely unevaluated which can create a problem for many. We’ve seen this recently with the phenomena of the spread of fake news over social media sites. In “The Church and Internet” Benedict lauds these technologies as “gifts of God which, in accordance with his providential design, unite men in brotherhood and so help them to cooperate with his plan for their salvation.”

Though Benedict was the first Pope to engage in online social media, it is really Pope Francis who has become a major champion of social media and has also showed extreme proficiency and thoughtfulness with its use (as shown below). As I mentioned in a previous chapter, Pope Francis is currently the third most followed world leader on the Twitter platform. This platform offers Francis the opportunity to send out short daily communications to the world where his “followers” can like Francis’ updates, “retweet” and share them on a personal Twitter account and send messages to friends or family. Francis has not only adopted this

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social media platform, but is a major player on the network in which he can communicate
directly with tens of millions of people. Secular companies around the globe spend millions of
advertising dollars each year to gain the social media exposure Pope Francis currently enjoys.

Francis has also adopted the Instagram social media platform. This platform is mostly
image and video based, as compared to Twitter which is almost wholly text based. Francis
enjoys almost four million followers on Instagram who can view images or videos of him
delivering portions of symbolic speeches or meeting with young people of all races and creeds.
Again, four million followers on Instagram is no small number considering there are four
hundred million users on the platform.

Two excellent examples of Francis engaging in both conditional acceptance in his
communal framing and technical reconfiguration are the Vatican YouTube page and the
Church’s decision not to create an official Facebook page. Campbell notes that while the
Vatican had seriously expanded its communication practice through digital mediums, the
Church still had apprehensions. She notes that the official Vatican YouTube page had disabled
its comment function. Removing this feature allows the Vatican to promote itself from a top
down view without allowing anybody to add positive or negative commentary below the video.
This decision may have stemmed from the lack of personnel to handle the sheer volume of
comments the page would no doubt receive.116

In 2014 Archbishop Claudio Maria Celli, the then head of the Pontifical Council for
Social Communications, said that when Pope Benedict had set up the first Vatican Twitter
account that the offensive replies toward the account were creating a crisis in the Vatican. Celli
made these remarks during a speech in New York when describing that Vatican cardinals were
too concerned about negative comments to allow an official Facebook page. Since Facebook is
the world’s largest social media platform, they were afraid of the negative implications

116 Campbell, Digital Religion, 79.
Creating a page may have.117

Using Heidi Campbell’s RSST framework, I have identified that the Church’s history with new media technology is much more complex than previously thought. It’s centralized nature and ability of recognize opportunities to advance its authority have aided the Church’s ability to make smart technology decisions that have helped it maneuver itself into a lasting position of power. By learning from past negotiations, such as the Church’s experience with the printing press, it can make even better-informed decisions about future media negotiations. My research shows that in the face of budding new communication technology, the Church takes a proactive role in its understanding and utilization.

Though the Church remains cautious at times in its media negotiations, it looks to its core beliefs to make informed decisions about how a specific technology may harm or benefit the Church. By recognizing both the positive and negative attributes of a given technology, it can adopt those attributes that will benefit the Church and alter the attributes that pose a threat. This reconfiguration reinforces the Catholic Church’s ability to innovate with new technology when specific attributes pose a threat to the Church’s core beliefs. This practice gives the Church the flexibility it needs to engage positively with immersive digital technologies.

Lastly, my work shows that even when the Church feels strongly towards the threats a form of media may pose (such as Cinema), it openly lauds these technological advances as gifts from God for the betterment of humanity. This narrative put the responsibility into the hands of the Catholic authority to take steps to understands every new form of technology and seek out those attributes that will help keep the faith alive in the modern world. In the next chapter I validate Heidi Campbell’s model to argue that the Catholic Church is currently working towards understanding even the most complex aspects of digitally immersive

technology to find new ways to innovate within the Church and explore what everyday use of these technologies mean for the future of the Church. Ultimately, I argue that Francis recognizes the need to embrace these new technologies to expand the Catholic global footprint and ensure the Church’s status as a forward thinking religious tradition. I further argue that as virtual spaces become more normalized in everyday life, the Vatican will allow participation in the Holy Mass and Sacraments through virtual channels.
CHAPTER III

VIRTUAL CATHOLICISM

In my first chapter, I explored the diverse field of study known as “digital religion” and outlined some of the more influential scholars and their contributions to the study of religion and new media technology. My review of relevant documents was quite extensive. As such, the quotes I cited and examples I gave are representative of a broad pattern that I observed in my research. To differentiate her research from her predecessors and contemporaries, I explained how Heidi Campbell’s RSST framework has helped scholars understand how religious leaders make informed decisions about how to make sense of and interact with new technologies. Her model contends with the “technological determinism” view of technology that sees communities and societies change due to the gravitational influence of the technology itself. \(^{118}\) Instead, Campbell’s specific contribution to the field is her emphasis on how religion and technology undergo a mutual negotiation process, influencing each other. While Campbell’s work documents in great detail how Jewish, Muslim and various Christian denominations approach media technology, what was missing was detailed scholarship covering the complex relationship between the Catholic Church and new media using Campbell’s RSST model. \(^{119}\)

In Chapter two I validated Campbell’s model by using the Catholic Church as a case study. For my contribution to the field, I enhance her model by applying the RSST framework specifically to the Roman Catholic Church. By using Campbell’s four-layer analysis to study the Catholic Church, I offer the reader a peek behind the curtain of the largest and most ancient centralized religious traditions. Focusing my attention on the impact religious communities can have on technological innovation, I uncovered four important themes about the Church’s

\(^{118}\) Edge and Williams, *Research Policy*, 856.

\(^{119}\) Campbell, *When Religion Meets New Media*, 17- 195.
historic and current use of new media technology:

1.) The centralized nature of the Church aids its ability to navigate the social orders of its host society. Centralization also helps keep the Church organized and uniform. This ultimately allows the Church to maneuver itself strategically into positions of power and influence.

2.) The theme of “good works” has permeated Catholic media for centuries while the contemporary Church has placed a renewed focus on mercy and social justice.

3.) The Church has displayed patterns of technological “reconfiguration” throughout its historic and current media negotiations. While it may condemn certain aspects of a given technology, it may also accept or alter other aspects in order to make its use more acceptable within the moral confines of the faith.

4.) Lastly, I illustrated a pattern of conditional acceptance regarding the Church’s overall attitude toward new technology and as expressed in official policy statements. While consistently hailing new technologies as “gifts from God,” the Church is also wary and vocal about the potential unforeseen dangers new technologies pose.\(^{120}\)

In this chapter, I focus on the Pope’s efforts to further centralize the Church’s communications organizations, his proactive and successful engagement with popular social technologies, and the complex relationship between physical and virtual spaces. I also discuss the dwindling number of global Catholics, revisit the Church’s emphasis on social justice and good works, and offer my prediction of the future state of the Catholic Church as it relates to the blending of virtual spaces and adoption of new technologies.

Given the Church’s responsibility to its greater community to make sure their worldview reflects and is relevant within the backdrop of contemporary society, it is imperative that Church leaders understand how digital media is presently affecting society. More importantly, it’s imperative the Church show its ability to exert a level of influence through these new channels of communication. In a world where virtual and digital spaces can be used for unspeakable evils, it is pivotal for the Church to step up and take a leading role in how we use these technologies. This will give Catholics across the globe the confidence in the Church’s ability to weather the unending storm of technological advance.

The Catholic Church has a long history of maneuvering itself into tactical positions of

\(^{120}\) Campbell, *When Religion Meets New Media*, 64-134.
influence by understanding and negotiating with contemporary channels of power, including communication technologies. It is important to note how the Church has historically negotiated with new media, how it framed these negotiations to its greater community and how it ultimately either accepted, rejected or reconfigured the relationship. Understanding both the history of the Church’s use of technology as well as how Church leaders are responding to new technologies helps us make educated guesses on how the Church will contend with future and more disruptive technologies.

Virtual spaces and cutting-edge technology like artificial intelligence are changing the ways humans interact and see the world. These technologies make communication and everyday tasks simpler. However, technologies these advanced can cause major changes within society, both good and bad. Just recently, the man in charge of both Tesla and SpaceX, Elon Musk, had a publicly displayed argument with Facebook founder, Mark Zuckerberg, over the dangers posed by unregulated artificial intelligence. While Zuckerberg maintains an optimistic view of AI (potentially for business and branding purposes), Musk has been sounding the alarm over the imminent threat of AI surpassing human capabilities.¹²¹

To protect its congregants and society at large from the dangers these new hi-tech media pose, the Church must become an active participant in the understanding and use of these revolutionary technologies. By becoming an active participant in education and innovation, the Church can model itself as example for how positive technological advancement could and should be done; to make people and the world better. I believe the Vatican must and will ultimately devote Church resources to tackle the challenges of virtual reality and artificial intelligence. Given the competitive and dwindling religious market place

in addition to Francis’ emphasis on mercy, good works and positive technological advance, I argue that the Catholic Church will expand its use of virtual and digital spaces and address the complexities (both positive and negative) of artificial intelligence. Further, I argue that the Church will ultimately update its view that virtual spaces cannot be sanctioned as legitimate spaces for Catholic worship.

COMMUNICATIONS REFORM

The early Church’s ability to embed itself into Roman state life, navigating and dominating the political sphere of Medieval Europe, embracing the printing press (even after it helped dismantle the Church’s authority) and the commencement of Vatican II in the early 60’s are all examples of the Church’s desire and tactical ability to remain a relevant institution within its host society.

The instinct for social survival has been aided by the centralized nature of the Church, which serves to expedite decisions by funneling the authority to make them to a smaller group of individuals, streamlining the process. Pope Francis not only holds to these traditions, but can be said to be amplifying them. In the case of Vatican communications and media departments, Francis has instituted a complete restructuring.

With the Catholic Church looking to reinforce its position as the dominant global Christian tradition, Francis stands on the precipice of an information technology renaissance that will have profound consequence and offer major opportunities to all aspects of humanity, especially religion. To fully comprehend this immense challenge, Francis has committed himself to reforming, restructuring and further centralizing all communications offices and media departments. According to the official Vatican website, Pope Francis suspended the Pontifical Council of Social Communication and merged all communications offices into the
newly erected Secretariat of Communications in 2015. The site states that “through this restructuring the Apostolic See can refer to the Secretariat as the single point of reference for communication, which has become increasingly complex and interdependent, reflecting the current media reality.”\(^{122}\) The offices included in this new centralized organization are the Vatican Television Center, Vatican Publishing House, L'Osservatore Romano, Pontifical Council for Social Communications, Vatican Radio, Holy See Press Office, Photographic Service, Vatican Internet Service and the Vatican Printing Press.

In a 2017 interview with *America Magazine*, the Head of the Secretariat for Communication, Msgr. Dario Edoardo Viganò discusses his vision for consolidating the various communications offices under one central hub. Msgr. Viganò stated that the new Secretariat will be built after Disney’s business model which “can be shared by different communications outlets and delivered across multiple platforms.” \(^{123}\) This will help the Vatican stay organized with its messaging.

Francis and Viganò envision a future state of this central hub as the public face of the Vatican, “responsible for the shared production of general news and media content, editing operations, the integrated management of the platforms and the technological services necessary for its communication activities, research and development of emerging technologies and live productions of all Papal events.”\(^{124}\)

To sum up the reasons for the creation of a central media hub, Viganò states that Christianity “…is an experience within a people in a given land and must relate to the

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cultural, social and communicative context in which it finds itself. And since today the system of communication is strongly digital, it must connect to that.”

Francis’ Papacy recognizes the continued need to position the Catholic Church as a leader, not only in the religious space, but in the larger context as a socially progressive institutional innovator. While Francis is careful with his praise for technology, his enthusiasm for it has set a new tone for the Catholic Church, steering itself away from the label of being technically, socially and scientifically stagnant. The full merger of all media operations to be centralized under the Secretariat of Communications is slated to be completed by 2018.

The decision to centralize all media operations is both a defensive and offensive move by the Church. Defensively, the Church is ensuring that all authentic Catholic messaging is either coming from or sanctioned by the Secretariat of Communications. This will help the Church continue to safeguard its authority by more strictly regulating authentic Catholic messages to the world. Offensively, the Church is using this centralized structure to craft unified messaging that is being used to help rebrand the Church’s image to a more technologically and socially sophisticated institution. A major part of that messaging, as explained in the previous chapter, is a renewed focus and emphasis on mercy and dignity, which can be extended to its greater media philosophy. I will revisit this theme in a following section.

The complex nature of digital communication and virtual spaces certainly requires discipline and organization on the part of all Church leaders. By centralizing all media and communications offices, Francis can entrust and funnel all Public Relations responsibilities through a small select group of people and departments. While this will speed up decision making processes, this further centralization places serious concentrated power into the hands

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of the Pope and the select few who are responsible for the governance of the Secretariat for Communications.

This has profound consequences for the internal structure of the Church. Francis must lead this change with a clear conscience and the wisdom to guide the Church’s first steps into the digital arena. His decisions today will have a lasting effect on the Catholic Church of tomorrow. Francis is making these changes with the goal of attaining a stronger comprehension on the future of technology and how it will impact the Church and society at large. By tightening up the Vatican’s communication mechanisms, Francis gives himself the ability to experiment with new technologies and the freedom to make important decisions about them.

BEST IN CLASS DIGITAL ENGAGEMENT

Francis’ use and understanding of digital social media sets him apart technologically from most of his predecessors. It is evident by his social media prowess that Francis has a deep understanding of this new language and realizes both the dangers and opportunities they afford. By embracing the benefits of digital communication and skillfully employing their use, Francis is attempting to rebrand the Catholic Church as a forward thinking and socially conscious institution; one that is keen to promote popular social issues and to speak the language of the new generation. By positioning the Church as a socially relevant institution, Francis has a much better chance of reaching and influencing young Catholics and prospective religious youths.

In addition to restructuring all media departments, Francis has placed a strong emphasis on digital education for all Catholics, clergy and the greater digital society alike. His intent is to encourage a healthier relationship between the individual, society and technology. He warns of the dangers of people (especially young people) “becoming consumed by screen time and
failing to relate to others and to the world around them.” Since Francis took office, his carefully balanced messaging about new media technologies offers both praise to the human ingenuity it takes to create them and a warning about recognizing the potential threats. Each statement alludes to a balanced use of technology, one rooted in discipline and good will.

In his first message for World Communications Day in 2014, Francis states that

A culture of encounter demands that we be ready not only to give, but also to receive. Media can help us greatly in this, especially nowadays, when the networks of human communication have made unprecedented advances. The internet, in particular, offers immense possibilities for encounter and solidarity. This is something truly good, a gift from God. This is not to say that certain problems do not exist. The speed with which information is communicated exceeds our capacity for reflection and judgement, and this does not make for more balanced and proper forms of self-expression.

Here we see some of the first hints that Francis is taking the challenge of understanding new communication technologies seriously. He is keen to point out the marvel of the human mind and how technology can help humanity move forward in the right direction. In the same breath, Francis levels out his audience by offering a sobering warning about the dangers of misuse.

In his most recent message for World Communications Day in 2017, He states that

Access to the media – thanks to technological progress – makes it possible for countless people to share news instantly and spread it widely. That news may be good or bad, true or false. The early Christians compared the human mind to a constantly grinding millstone; it is up to the miller to determine what it will grind: good wheat or worthless weeds. Our minds are always ‘grinding’, but it is up to us to choose what to feed them. I wish to address this message to all those who, whether in their professional work or personal relationships, are like that mill, daily “grinding out” information with the aim of providing rich fare for those with whom they communicate. I would like to encourage everyone to engage in constructive forms of communication that reject prejudice towards others and foster a culture of encounter, helping all of us to view the world around us with realism and trust.

127 Francis, “Communication at the Service of an Authentic Culture of Encounter” (Speech, 48th World Communication Day, Vatican City, January 24, 2014).
128 Francis, “Communicating Hope and Trust in our Time” (Speech, 51st World Communication Day, Vatican City, January 24, 2017).
By emphasizing both the import and dangers these new mediums offer, Francis is attempting to educate the Catholic masses on the proper (Catholic) way to engage with these new technologies. However, what good is an education without a proper role model for which to set the bar and use as an example for how Catholics should engage with digital and social communications. Such is the genius of Francis’ media celebrity.

In the previous chapter I discussed the Church’s ability to navigate the social order of a given time-period and use its centralized structure to grab for positions of power and endure big societal changes. For the early Church, it was adopting certain facets of Roman State life. For the Medieval Church, this was maintaining crucial relationships with European state authorities. In both instances the Church relied on the state authorities for their power. In modern society, however (at least the modern society of the free world), the state does not have the explicit power to elevate the status of a given religion over another. It is up to the individual to make decisions about which religious tradition to pursue. And it is up to the leaders of religious organizations to choose how they will compete in the religious marketplace.

Therefore, the Vatican can no longer play the powers that be like a game of chess. Ultimately, the power is in the hands of the consumer, in this case, the religious consumer. If Francis wants to rebrand and grow the Catholic Church, he’ll need the support of both religious and secular individuals. As I highlighted in the first chapter, the Vatican understands the necessity and utility of advertising to earn new converts. Presently, the most effective way to earn a younger generation of converts and keep the already faithful interested in more developed parts of the world is to engage with them via digital social media platforms. In the United States, 86% of adults aged 18-29 use at least one social media platform.129

129 “Social Media Fact Sheet,” Pew Research Center, last modified January 12, 2017,
In both chapters one and two, I briefly discussed Pope Francis’ social media prowess and success. Currently, he is the third most followed world leader on Twitter and enjoys over four million Instagram followers.\(^{130}\) In fact, in 2016, an annual study conducted by Burston Marsteller shows that even though Barack Obama had more followers on Twitter, Pope Francis’ average “favorite” and “retweet” rates were eight times higher than Obama’s.\(^{131}\)

Francis’ Instagram page was so successful so quickly that in 2011 Instagram conducted a case study to find out why. In its first twelve hours of operation, he broke the record for being Instagram’s fastest growing account, replacing David Beckham’s account for the top slot. In March 2016, CNN reported that, “According to Instagram, his visit to the U.S in the fall of 2015 generated twenty million posts, likes and comments from nine million people.”\(^{132}\)

It should be noted that while Francis gets most of the praise for his modern view and use of social mediums, it is the aptitude and resources of the Catholic institution that give Francis the means to outwardly perfect the craft. Francis’ masterful use of social media has been the Church’s vehicle for rebranding and maneuvering itself once again into a position of real power and influence. Francis has even gained widespread support from secular people. A 2017 Pew Research report shows that 70% of U.S. adults view Francis is a favorable light. This is up from 57% when he took office in 2013. For non-religious U.S. adults, 71% view Francis in a positive way. According to the report, “Continued positive views of Pope Francis among Catholics approach Pope John Paul II’s highest ratings from Catholics in the 1980s and 1990s. At the same time, Francis’ favorability ratings tend to be somewhat higher than


\(^{132}\) “Pope Breaks Record on Instagram,” Crux, last modified on April 1s, 2016, https://cruxnow.com/church/2016/04/01/social-engagement-pope-breaks-record-on-instagram/
Benedict’s were during most of his time as pope.”¹³³

In April of 2017, Francis further cemented himself as a pioneer for science and technology by submitting a seventeen-minute video to the 2017 TED (Technology, Education and Design) Conference held in Vancouver, British Columbia. In this video, Francis once again praises technology, this time with his hope that it will lead to equality for all people. Using the popular TED Conference (accompanied by its 2 million Instagram and 10 million Twitter followers) as a springboard, Pope Francis called for a “revolution of tenderness” and added that “Science points to an understanding of reality as a place where every element connects and interacts with everything else.”¹³⁴ In this video message, Francis uses his burgeoning media empire to broadcast a simplistic, yet profound message to the greater technology community. The message is that the Church is hopeful that by embracing technology as an innovator for good, Jesus’ message can be translated into this new digital language.

A great example of the Church’s focus on the future and technological innovation is the Vatican’s own tech accelerator, which is focused on creating startup companies that will tackle the problem of global warming and climate change. Inspired by one of Pope Francis’ recent encyclicals, in which the Pope writes against the degradation of the environment and global warming, the Vatican is working with private funders to encourage and incubate innovation in the technology sector to fight these threats.¹³⁵ While the Church does not fund the startup initiatives directly, it has close ties to the private donors that do. Each project is monitored remotely for a few months which ends with a traditional demo day where each company

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demonstrates their project. Participants do not need to be Catholic and the challenge is open to innovators of all creeds and religious backgrounds. This type of partnership is wholly unique to the Catholic Church. By taking this step, Francis is allowing the Church to participate and engage with secular culture in a way that can better the environment and make the world a better place.

By engaging with secular culture, utilizing his social media presence and engaging in sophisticated marketing techniques to reach the masses, Francis has become one of the largest online purveyors of Christianity and Jesus’ Good News. His enthusiasm for science and technology opens the doors for the Catholic Church to both innovate in the digital space and dominate in the religious. By blending the technical and religious spheres together, and by clearly being the most adept and skilled, Francis’ Papacy is paving the way for a new Catholic Church; a Church that not only understands and utilizes the complex world of digital and virtual communication, but also helps innovate from within. Further, by focusing much of his digital content around the concepts of mercy, empathy and social justice, Francis is repositioning the Catholic Church to the center of global popular culture that informs much of the contemporary progressive zeitgeist.

This repositioning gives the pope the power of popular opinion to reshape the legacy and somewhat tarnished reputation of the Church. Not only must the Church combat negative (and incorrect) stereotypes regarding its relationship with science and technology, the Church has recently been plagued by sexual abuse scandals, seriously damaging its credibility. I believe Pope Francis’ focus and emphasis on mercy and human dignity will ultimately allow the world to view the Catholic Church as a benevolent and generally good organization.

Further, I believe if the Church can demonstrate its ability to effectively facilitate the

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creation of authentically “good” technology (or technology that has a direct positive impact for humanity), business technology leaders will recognize the benefit in partnering with the Church to market their products to the growing number of socially conscious and progressively minded consumers.

MESSAGES OF MERCY & GOOD WORKS

As briefly mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, since Francis’ rise to power and fame in 2013, he has not only placed a strong emphasis on science and media technology, but also on the Church’s need to refocus its attention on spreading the message of mercy, good works and social responsibility. He believes technology should be used to encourage cooperation and foster community while avoiding uses of technology that could lead to alienation and polarization.137

He suggests that while science and technology are a natural and positive aspect of humanity, they are not uniquely positive or even neutral. In Francis’ “Laudato Si,” he states, “Science and technology are not neutral; from beginning to end of a process, various intentions and possibilities are in play.”138 Here, Francis is echoing Campbell’s assertion that humans and society have an equal influence on technology as technology has on the former. Francis views human intention as one of the most important aspects of technological innovation and advancement. Since technology is neither inherently good or evil, how people intend to use them is the most important factor in technological progress. Since, as Campbell realizes, technology can be used in ways differently than originally intended by its creator, the Church must be ever cognizant of the technical endeavors it participates in. It must be able to

137 Francis, “Communication and Mercy: A Fruitful Encounter” (Speech, 50th World Communication Day, Vatican City, January 24, 2016).
rationalize the need for a given technology while thinking about how that technology could be used for malicious and unintended purposes. More importantly, it’s important for the Vatican to understand how to exploit new technologies for the good they can provide while simultaneously keeping the negative aspects at bay. This can only be done through extensive research investments and experimentation. This is critical because even if the Church does everything it can to try to understand the implications of new technologies on society, those implications can be quite unpredictable.

Francis notes that our all-pervasive technologies can break down the walls of communication and understanding, but that mercy must also be present when engaging with them. To become a leader in the technological space, the Church must first focus on which current technologies are best suited to be utilized by the Church itself. As we’ve seen in the past and present, the Vatican is no stranger to adopting new technologies. The question now is, to what extend will the Church adopt and utilize the most cutting-edge technologies like virtual reality and artificial intelligence? Further, what significant internal mechanisms will change internally within the Church to broaden the scope of how these technologies can be used?

As I’ve shown, Francis has already invested significant time and resources into not only attempting to understand cutting edge digital technologies, but he’s also made significant changes within the structure of the Vatican itself. He’s shown proficiency in his understanding and use of social and digital technologies as well as shown a strong commitment to learning how to use these technologies for the greater good of society. Through informed and cautious action, Francis is giving the Church the forward momentum it needs to keep up with technological and societal change.

Being the leader of the Catholic Church, Francis understands how powerful these tools

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139 Francis, “Communication at the Service of an Authentic Culture of Encounter” (Speech, 48th World Communication Day, Vatican City, January 24, 2014).
can be. If used properly, not only can new technologies make the world at large a better place, but they can also help Francis bring the Church into the modern era and expose Catholicism to parts of the world where it previously had limited impact. Further, the lightning fast speed and limitless potential new technology provides for evangelization is an extremely effective tool. Given the overall decrease in Catholic membership, the Vatican will look to use these tools to make engaging with the Church easier for people. Allowing members and prospects the opportunity to engage with the Church in their time of need and when it is convenient for them will have a major impact on the future state of the Church.

While Francis embodies the need to for change and is considered a progressive force within the Church, I do not believe that the current direction the Church is moving can be solely attributed to his efforts. I believe Francis’ very appointment after the unorthodox resignation of Benedict shows there are forces at work within the Vatican walls that understand the implications of technological progress and are working to ensure the future of the Church. Therefore, while Francis is certainly a desirable figurehead for a more progressive Catholic Church, I believe the seeds of change had been sowed long before his appointment. As such, I believe that once Francis either passes away in office or resigns that the Vatican will stay the course it is on to ensure its own survival.

DECLINING NUMBERS OF CATHOLICS

The global trend of secularization and “seeker” religiosity poses a threat to the longevity of the Church. For example, a 2015 Pew Research study indicated that while the Christian population in America was declining, the number of “spiritual or religious” people who do not identify with an organized religion is increasing.140 The survey estimates that between 2007 and 2014 that the number of Christian adults in the Unites States has decreased

by somewhere between 2.8 and 7.8 million. On top of that, in the past decade Catholicism has suffered the greatest loss of members due to people changing religious affiliations according to a 2013 Pew Research study.¹⁴¹

Francis has an uphill battle in the fight for religious dominance, especially in the face of decreased interest in organized religion and an increase in religious switching. Francis needs to continue to find new ways to attract young religious and spiritual people and to give them a reason to want to engage and participate with his Church. In addition to the falling numbers of global Catholics, there are many who wish to attend and participate physically in Church life who are not able to do so. Whether they are incapacitated and physically unable to attend, from regions that are too dangerous to worship or from somewhere without the presence of the Church, there are many unfortunate Catholics living without the ability to practice and retain the benefits of their faith.

Given Francis’ passion for comprehending new technology and his renewed focus on mercy and utilizing new media positively, it makes sense that he would see modern technology as a tool to combat decreasing numbers of Catholics and help reach audiences who would be otherwise sheltered from or unable to engage with the Church.

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PHYSICAL & VIRTUAL SPACES

With dwindling numbers of Catholics globally, the Vatican cannot solely rely on clever PR and good intentions to save Catholicism. Bigger changes need to take place within the Church itself if it is going to survive well into the digital age. As society evolves and the walls between the physical and digital spaces erode, so too must Catholicism evolve its understanding of the relationship between humans and virtual and digital spaces. Where the Church had previously denoted a defined demarcation between where the physical ended and

the virtual began, today the Vatican is coming to terms with the fact that the barriers between
the physical and the virtual are beginning to blur indefinitely.

Francis understands that digital and virtual technologies have been seamlessly
integrated into daily life. He also understands that, unlike older forms of communication, (like
writing, which was communicated solely through newspapers or books), the Internet has the
capacity to instantly transmit all forms of media and communication using code that exploits
the binary system.142 Since digital channels provide such rapid paced communication speeds, it
makes sense that humans would learn to exploit this function. Over time, this behavior results
in increased use of and reliance on technology. A 2017 Pew research study suggests that 77% of US adults own a smartphone.143 Another 2017 study by Pew Research states that half of the
American public owns a tablet computer.144

Francis knows the consequences of this integration and must work hard to understand
what aspects of this blurring are good for society and which are potentially harmful. Acting as
an agent of innovation and education, the Church can help guide both Catholics and non-
Catholics into the future with responsible and morally informed technological advancement.
By taking on the challenges of virtual spaces and smart computers, Francis is laying the
groundwork for how the future Church will engage with them.

Andrew Labenek notes in a conversation with Cardinal Thomas Collins, the person
responsible for producing the seminal document, “The Church and the Internet” in 2002, that
the Vatican is committed to helping the Church evolve along with technology. Collins goes on
to state the long history the Church has with adopting new technologies and makes clear that

142 Francis, “Address of His Holy Father to the Participants at the Plenary of the Secretariat for Communication”
(Speech, First Plenary Assembly of the Secretariat of Communication, Vatican City, May 4, 2017).
143 Andrew Perrin and Lee Rainie, “10 Facts About Smartphones as the iPhone Turns 10,” last modified June 28,
144 Aaron Smith, “Record Shares of Americans Now Own Smartphones, Have Home Broadband,” last modified
the trend will continue in the future.\textsuperscript{145} The fact that Collins helped pen “The Church and the Internet” fifteen years ago shows the Church’s dedication to understanding new technology even when it’s in its infant stages. When Francis took office in 2013, these sentiments of progress would continue and ultimately expand.

Luckily for Francis, his enthusiasm and encouragement to explore new technologies and discover new ways to connect people and tell the story of humanity has spread far beyond the Vatican walls. For example, the Arch Diocese of Los Angeles, California Jose Gomez, is taking Francis’ message of technological exploration and run with it. Not only has Gomez hired out a local digital media agency to help bring the regional Churches into the future, he made the leader of the agency team, Matt Meeks, his Chief Digital Officer.\textsuperscript{146} Meek’s team gave the archdiocese’s website the sleek upgrade it needed to grab the attention of today’s up and coming generation. Their intention was to update the Church’s digital presence to get young people more involved with a more culturally relevant Catholicism.

The success of this partnership can be seen in the number of people the Church in Los Angeles is now exposed to. Prior to Meeks and his agency team’s contract with the archdiocese, the Church’s primary means of communication was newspaper, with a circulation total around sixty thousand people. By going digital, the archdiocese has expanded that reach to anywhere from three to seven million people per week. So long as the Vatican encourages its churches to explore the benefits of digitization and virtual spaces, and so long as these churches see positive results, I believe the example of the Arch Diocese of Los Angeles will be a lasting legacy.

As I’ve shown, the Vatican is already engaging in morally informed technological


innovation by participating with startup funders and capital investors to combat the negative
effects of climate change. Francis has also encouraged Church leaders and lay people alike to
do their part to participate and engage well with new technologies. I believe this is just the
beginning of the Church’s plunge into the future. As it learns to navigate the complex worlds
of the technology and business sectors, it must also evolve its media theory to reflect the
complex advancements in virtual and digital spaces.

As more progressive members of the Church follow the trail Francis is blazing, is it
enough to simply have a contemporary digital or virtual web network presence? In a time
where business, entertainment and relationships can all be found and cultivated through digital
spaces, the Church needs to do its part to understand these complex spaces, their relationships
to the human condition and ultimately make sound, albeit difficult, decisions about which
aspects of these technologies should be adopted, fostered and utilized by the Church (and
society at large).

Francis has the obligation to not only ensure the Church is doing its due diligence to
study the benefits and adverse effects of new technologies, but he also has the obligation of
pointing out the potential adverse effects to the creators and companies utilizing these new
technologies for capital gain. While this study does not intend to dive into the complicated
intersection between new technology and Capitalism, it is important to point out that the two
are very much intertwined. Pope Francis has not been shy with his critiques of unfettered
Capitalism. His concern for the working and poorer classes is front and center in many of his
writings and speeches.147 Since cutting-edge technology and the free market go hand in hand,
it is in Francis’ and the Church’s best interest to encourage cooperation with corporate
enterprises to help guide the progress of technological evolution in business to benefit all of

https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2017/05/30/capitalism-gives-moral-cloak-inequality-pope-francis-says-
italian-steel-plant/
mankind, not just for the wealthiest.

Ultimately, the Church needs to make accessibility to the faith and Church life easier for existing congregants and prospective converts alike. However, complex media negotiations take time and careful consideration. While Francis has done much positive work changing the image of the Church to be more socially accepted by popular and secular culture, he must still contend with the dwindling numbers of institutional Catholics and the rising number of secular and non-institutional religious individuals. To create a future Catholic Church that is effective in evangelization and conversion through digital and virtual channels, the Vatican must first learn how to utilize these channels to serve its current one billion members.

So, how are Church leaders tackling revolutionary forms of media like VR and AI? One example, from the Archdiocese of Westminster, Fr Stephen Wang, senior university chaplain, believes VR will allow new ways for people to come together for prayer, faith sharing and education. Wang says that VR offers Catholics and religious seekers alike the opportunity to engage with the Church and experience its rich life even if they can’t be physically present. He also mentions the potential for opportunity VR affords but that there is a lot of work that must be done at the highest levels of the Church to make sure it doesn’t fall behind in its understanding of these technologies.148

Wang states that,

What virtual reality could do for the Church in a powerful way is open the doors of some of the world’s greatest repositories of art, such as the Vatican Museums and the Sistine Chapel. Where people who are unable to travel to those places in person could still experience beauty and creativity and artistry inspired by the ultimate Creator himself, and perhaps through that encounter with art and history in a virtual way, could be brought more fully into the in-person communion and relationship to which Jesus Christ calls each of us.149

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Wang also makes a point to mention that the possibility to transmit sacramental grace through the VR Realm, like Confession, is probably very unlikely given that the Church has remained firm in its stance that sacraments involve real interaction. While it is true that the Church has issued official policy statements concerning the extent to which virtual engagement should or not replace physical engagement of the Church, their still remains a glimmer of optimism in the messaging. In the 2002 document, “Church and the Internet” by Pope Benedict, the Vatican lays out its stance on the issue by stating:

Although the virtual reality of cyberspace cannot substitute for real interpersonal community, the incarnational reality of the sacraments and the liturgy, or the immediate and direct proclamation of the gospel, it can complement them, attract people to a fuller experience of the life of faith, and enrich the religious lives of users. It also provides the Church with a means for communicating with particular groups—young people and young adults, the elderly and home-bound, persons living in remote areas, the members of other religious bodies—who otherwise may be difficult to reach.150

This document provides Catholics and non-Catholics a glimpse into the minds of Church leaders as they tackle the complex questions surrounding virtual media at the beginning of the new millennium. Benedict recognized the benefits of virtual spaces for evangelizing while simultaneously reminding his audience that these spaces should serve only as compliments, and never replacements to physical interpersonal relationships. Presently, Francis has taken this same sentiment and amplified the role of the pope in the involvement with new technologies. I believe Francis is pushing the boundaries of the Church’s relationship with digital technologies and embarking on a mission bringing the faithful to virtual territories only explored by the hi-tech industries responsible for creating them. By opening channels of cooperation and communication with corporate technology companies, the Church can both continue its education into how technology is being presently marketed to and used by the

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masses and allows the Pope to exert a small level of influence on the leaders of these companies.

**FUTURE CHURCH/ VIRTUAL CHURCH**

The Catholic Church has made official policy statements expressing that the use of the virtual to worship is by itself insufficient and must be used as a compliment to traditional Church practice. However, the evolving role of digital communication in contemporary society has forced Catholic scholars to consider the possibility of extending (and possibly blending) the traditional brick and mortar experience to the digital sphere.

Noted in chapter one of this paper, Jesuit journalist, media theorist and current director of La Civiltà Cattolica, Antonio Spadaro, has used his unique Catholic perspective to write extensively on the intersection between religiosity and virtual spaces. In his 2014 book, “Cybertheology,” Spadaro offers forward thinking Catholics and secular readers alike the opportunity to reflect on their own reliance on technology and what that means for the future of religiosity. His work helps both scholars and clergyman think theologically and philosophically about how the future of technology will affect the way people communicate with each other and how we understand reality.

Spadaro takes the Vatican’s hardline stance against performing and experiencing the eucharist through virtual mediums to complex and theoretical levels not seen in any official papal documents concerning the subject. He explores both the positive and the negatives of virtual environments and asks whether participation in sacramental worship is even a viable option for people of the Catholic faith. Though his conclusion is that a wholesale shift of performing and experiencing the eucharist through virtual channels will most likely never happen, he leaves open the possibility of limited or “remote” engagement as a complimentary
gesture to authentic Catholic worship (although never in place of it).

Spadaro highlights some examples that frame the conversation around the evolution of the liturgical experience. The Church’s conditional acceptance of the printing press and the impact it had on the liturgy is a huge example. By ultimately accepting print for the great tool that it was, the Church could organize and create a uniform liturgical experience based on reproductions of the written Bible.151 This was major change in the way the liturgy had historically performed and experienced.

In researching the different historical forms of liturgical experience, Andrew Labenek points out that experiencing the liturgy in Roman times was much different than the centuries following. Before Christianity was widely accepted in Rome, the liturgy was shorter and more simplistic in order to avoid attention from non-Christians.152 The introduction of vernacular language into the Mass after the Vatican II was also a major evolution into the liturgical experience. As described in chapter 2, the introduction of the vernacular allowed people to engage with the Church in a way that was more familiar and closer to home. These examples bring to light the many changes the Mass has gone through to adapt to the times and to make participation easier for Catholics.

Spadaro highlights McLuhan’s work on the introduction of the microphone into the Mass. McLuhan argues that,

The amplified voice created a direct relationship between the celebrant and the individual, between the center and a point in the congregation, where previously the voice was not amplified and was also, in fact, in Latin, creating a ‘corporate distance’.153

Spadaro makes the connection that virtual spaces are simply an exaggerated example of the introduction of the microphone into the Catholic Mass. However, he also points out that the

151 Spadaro, Cybertheology, 82.
153 Spadaro, Cybertheology, 72.
realities of virtual channels are much more complex and require much more research and consideration on the part of theologians and media theorists. What is important to keep in mind, is the Church’s reasoning for having reservations against Catholics engaging and receiving Mass through virtual channels.

As Spadaro notes, Reverend Tim Ross, an English Methodist minister (while not a Catholic priest) introduces the concept of “remote communion”: “when those who receive the Eucharistic species take them at the same moment, but not in the same physical space as the celebrant.” Ultimately, Spadaro asserts that Ross’ idea of a remote communion is not in line with Catholic doctrine. That the individual would not have the physical experience of receiving the eucharist is a major hurdle that the Church cannot presently look past. Spadaro offers the metaphor of the difference between an air conditioning unit and a stone hearth to heat one’s home. While the air conditioning unit is ultimately easier and more convenient, the stone hearth brings the family together into a shared experience of warmth and bonding. Spadaro also explains how even if a priest had the ability to perform communion to a group of people through video, he would really be extending God’s grace to the technical apparatus that allows the people on the other side of the screen to be virtually present.

Cardinal Thomas Collins embodies the Church’s (and Spadaro’s) view of a virtual mass in his interview with Andrew Labenek by stating:

The Mass requires the physical presence of a person, face to face with others joined together around the table of the Lord to hear the word of God to be united with one another and with Christ and to experience the presence of Christ as he speaks to us in the scriptures and as we are present at the Eucharistic prayer which is the making present to us now of the sacrifice of Christ on Calvary.

154 Spadaro, Cybertheology. 74.
Collins (and the Church) insist that authentic participation of the Mass requires a person to be physically present. The receiver must be present to accept the Mass which must be performed by a priest who is also physically present. The emphasis on physical presence stems from Christian beliefs that are as old as the scriptures themselves. Many early Church writers agreed the soul should be held in higher regard than the body. However, contemporary Catholic thought on the matter (much of which stems from Thomas Aquinas) perceives the human body to be made by and in the image of God and therefore should be perceived as sacred. Pope Benedict echoes this philosophy in his speech during the 40th anniversary to Paul VI’s “Humanae Vitae” (Of Human Life) where he states that “The fullness of a person is achieved by a unity of soul and body, but neither spirit nor body alone can love, only the two together.”

Very much linked to the Church’s focus on the body is its emphasis on community and interpersonal relationships. Stephen Clark asserts that the Catholic Church perceives the human’s natural environment is in communion with other people and not in isolation. That is, humans rely on each other and can only reach the highest stages of prosperity with the cooperation and support of their community. Building authentic relationships is at the core of the receiving the sacramental eucharist.

Cardinal Thomas Collins believes that while an individual could participate in receiving the gospel (where a priest clarifies scripture during Mass), reception of the eucharist could be not replicated through virtual channels. He states that the “second part of the Mass involves incarnate encounter with Christ and that is a different world from what is accessible or possible

through technology.”  Here Collins asserts that virtual spaces, created by technology, are not a suitable environment for the reception of the eucharistic sacrament.

The Church’s doctrine concerning the reception of the eucharist is also very much informed by the belief in transubstantiation; the idea that upon receiving bread and wine during Mass, the substance of the bread and wine is converted into the body and blood of Christ. A virtually experienced Mass celebration could not facilitate the presence of Christ in the host (bread and wine) because it requires community participation and an ordained priest.  Spadaro weighs in on this debate by concluding that the real essence of this challenge is rooted in the fact that, “A liturgical event’s reality is never reducible to the information that we have.” He expands on this notion by explaining that when baptisms occurs for example, it happens to and from the entire body, not just in the processing components of the brain.

However, I believe as time goes on and as virtual spaces become ever more blended into our physical lives that we will see the Church make a few amendments like that of the Council of Trent and Vatican II. I don’t think we will see any major doctrinal or dogmatic changes. It is much more likely that the Church will allow small incremental adjustments as their comprehension of these new technologies evolve.

Though Spadaro ultimately admits that within the Church’s present frame of thinking about virtual spaces, there exists no possibility of extending sacramental grace to any digital or virtual sphere. However, he plays with some ideas that could potentially lead the Church down the road of revisiting and evolving its understanding of virtual spaces and their relationship with human life. Spadaro understands that the Church is in its infant stages when it comes to

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161 Spadaro, Cybertheology, 75.
understanding the consequences virtual spaces will have on society and ultimately religious life.

Spadaro notes that one of the Church’s main problems with experience sacraments online is the element of alienation and a watered-down sense of participation. He does however theorize about the potential for a deeper participation on the part of the receiver and deeper understanding on the part of the Church. As technology evolves and virtual technologies progress and become even more deeply imbedded into our daily lives, there will follow the need for religious express within these new forms of media. What is needed is more work on the part of the Church to better understand and explore these coming changes.

He states that, “At this point, the correct attitude would be not only that of defending the richness of the liturgy itself, so that we can still understand it, but in the understanding how the desire for God, overpowering in this new plane of existence and also in search of forms of expression, emerged.”162 Restated, Spadaro is saying that it is not enough to simply defend liturgical practice along the current lines of understanding. In order to truly keep up with the times, the Church needs to deepen its understanding of the virtual realm and its relationship with God and the material world. Spadaro expands this notion by offering a technical and philosophical question: “if sacramental logic implies matter, understood as a susceptible element, in cyberspace is it possible to develop dynamic equivalent to matter?”163 He goes on to state that while the sacraments require physical matter, the web requires electricity, which is a form of energy. He wonders whether scientific and theoretical understanding can bridge the gap between how matter works in the physical and virtual worlds.

Spadaro’s question has roots in real science. In physics, the word electricity is rarely used. Instead, “electric current” is more common and defined as a flow of charges, where those

162 Spadaro, Cybertheology, 75.
163 Spadaro, Cybertheology, 91.
charges are held by electron particles. Since electrons have mass, they are made of matter. Spadaro is not the only person investigating this crisis of digital authenticity.

In a 2016 paper featured in Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet, Sasha Scott explores Catholic confession practiced using mobile apps. Scott asks the question of whether an algorithm (coded for the purpose of a confession) could take the place of a priest in administering absolution. Scott points out that there are hundreds upon hundreds of "Catholic" apps permeating the Internet, any of which are sanctioned by the Church at some level. Scott’s article emphasizes two main themes, the first questioning whether the intention of the priest in coding an algorithm for a confessional app could viably transfer grace through the binary system. The second theme as to with authenticity and authority. As Scott points out, thousands of people have engaged in these confession apps. Through researching thousands of online user reviews, Scott determined that while the Church deemed confession apps an interesting compliment to the real thing, users felt the transactions were as authentic as an in-person confession.

Scott asks, at what level does the Church recognize the authentic experience users are receiving and ultimately make steps toward accommodation? Like Spadaro, Scott is ultimately alluding to a future where, with much work, it could be possible to “sanctify” virtual spaces and deem them as satisfactory conduits for sacramental grace. In a time where virtual and digital spaces are becoming ever more prominent, the Church and its leaders must reflect on the nature of virtual spaces and how they change the person engaging with them.

As humanity adapts to rapid technological evolution, the Church must also adapt to survive. By taking small incremental steps towards adopting new technologies, the Church can

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promote the benefits while condemning the dangers. And because technology evolves so rapidly, it is in the Church’s best interest to build up a steady momentum with its engagement with new technologies.

Mostly used for video games, VR headsets have been available to the public since the early nineties. Sega released its Sega VR headset for arcade games and their Mega Drive console. It utilized LCD screens in the visor, headphones, and inertial sensors that led the system track the movement of the user’s head.\footnote{Ken Horowitz, “Sega VR: Great Idea or Wishful Thinking,” last modified December 28, 2004, \url{https://web.archive.org/web/20100114191355/http://sega-16.com/feature_page.php?id=5&title=Sega%20VR:%20Great%20Idea%20or%20Wishful%20Thinking/}} Almost thirty years later, companies in the VR space are competing to release the best virtual reality headsets capable of offering premium virtual and immersive experiences. In 2016, HTC had over seven thousand developers working on a VR headset called Vive, which is currently available to consumers for about eight hundred dollars.\footnote{Nick Pino, “HTC Vive Review,” last modified October 23, 2017, \url{http://www.techradar.com/reviews/wearables/htc-vive-1286775/review/}}

Virtual reality research and practice are both still in their infant stages. The combination technological breakthroughs and fierce competition push the boundaries of virtual spaces along at alarming rates. Because keeping up with society is so important, I believe the Church has no choice but to reexamine the relationship between the physical and virtual. As virtual reality continues to progress there may one day come a time where virtual experiences are sophisticated enough to be indistinguishable from real life. The Manus VR Development kit, a tracking glove that connects to a VR headset, allows the user to reach out and experience a virtual version of touch. Even tech industry mogul Elon Musk believes that one-day human made virtual worlds will be so believable, you wouldn’t be able to tell the difference. In fact, Elon Musk believes that humans most likely are living in a base reality made up of virtual
components.\textsuperscript{168} However, that is a matter for another study altogether.

In the final chapter of Spadaro’s “Cybertheology” he introduces the reader to Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (Jesuit priest, philosopher, paleontologist and geologist), who in his career helped in the discovery of Peking man. Teilhard de Chardin, writing in the first half of the twentieth century, discusses his theory on human evolution. Keeping in mind that his writing occurred half a century before computer technology, it is eye opening to read his prophetic statements about the nature of collective human intelligence.

In his view, a convergent intelligence was brought about by the process of evolution, which is ultimately brought about through the pressures exerted onto reality through the kingdom of God. As humans continue to develop complex social structures, we will eventually develop a type of convergent or collective consciousness. The impetus behind this drive comes from God and the human desire to reach a state of perfection. Teilhard de Chardin predicts that eventually, this divine external pressure from God will evolve this convergent intelligence to a point he calls the Omega Point, or the end of history, where Jesus is omnipresent.\textsuperscript{169}

That Teilhard de Chardin wrote these predictions between 1930 and 1960 is interesting enough in and of itself. However, Spadaro wanted to guide the reader to think about where prominent Catholics have theorized technology could be bring humanity. Teilhard de Chardin believes the drive to create more inclusive technologies stems from the human desire to connect and to know God. Thinking about how immersive virtual technologies will one day be helps frame the discussion about how the Catholic Church thinks about virtual spaces and their relationship to how humans practice religiosity and how they perceive reality. As Spadaro points out, the Church itself recognizes that it has the responsibility in helping form a collective human culture.


\textsuperscript{169} Spadaro, Cybertheology, 97-106.
As the number of people who identify as Catholic begins to decline globally, the Church needs to find effective ways to retain existing members as well as prospect for new ones. In order to retain the global influence the Church has enjoyed for almost two thousand years, it must find ways to justify making participation more convenient without losing the authentic experience. To those who wish to but are not able to physically participate in celebrating the Mass, a virtual alternative would help immerse them back into the Catholic fold and help the Church expand its presence and influence.

By continuing to explore the theological implications and technical aspects of virtual immersive technologies, the Church can use its best judgment when engaging with new mediums. In a future where a virtual experience of a Catholic Mass could be indistinguishable from the real experience, will the Church be prepared to deal with the technological and theological consequences? Or, will the Church stand by its current position that the virtual, no matter how sophisticated, can never replace the physical and community based Mass experience?

I believe the Church needs to and will be prepared to evolve its current thinking. I believe the Church will eventually commit to making small changes in doctrine concerning the possibilities of receiving the eucharist through virtual channels. As technology allows for more immersive virtual experiences, the Church must remain vigilant in its understanding of religiosity in virtual environments.

CONCLUSION

As my research shows, the Catholic Church is much nimbler with their engagement with technology than many understand. While official documents revealing the current thinking of the Church place strict restrictions on the participation of the sacraments, I believe that as technology evolves, so too must the Church’s stance on virtual spaces. Ultimately, I
believe that even though there exist many restrictions and debates on how the Church can utilize virtual spaces, the Vatican recognizes that this is a pivotal stage for the aging Church. I argue that Francis’s Papacy, in the fight for relevance against the rise of secularism and religious “seeking” will open the doors for “remote” experiences, including participation in the eucharist and other sacraments, to those individuals who want to but are physically unable to attend a brick and mortar Church ceremony.

While the Church does not shy away from its opinion that virtual spaces will never be a suitable replacement for the physical, it has however shown interest in what the evolution of virtual spaces means for humanity and for religiosity. The question isn’t whether older forms of prayer, worship and engagement are possible through virtual channels, the real question is what new forms of religious expression are possible through these mediums. If the grace of God is all permeating, then the virtual realm for which human beings are responsible for creating must also be subject to the same grace. As Teilhard de Chardin postulated, the very impetus behind the creation of technology is a driving force for humans to come closer to each other and ultimately towards the Omega Point, or oneness with God.  

In conclusion, I believe the Church (particularly Francis) is trying to engage digital media technology and emerging technology in a way that cautiously and prudently, but with enough hope, can help cultivate our highest virtues as human beings. However, as optimistic as Francis may outwardly seem, he knows the Church cannot be naive and assume that technology alone can guide humans towards a more enriched and fulfilled life. Echoing Heidi Campbell’s views on the relationship between technology and society, Francis believes that human intention has as much an effect on technology that technology has on the evolution of society. While technology pushes in one direction, society must exert its own force back onto

\[^{170}\text{Spadaro, Cybertheology, 97-106.}\]
technology to ensure that it develops and evolves in the appropriate direction.

Through official Papal documents, Francis promotes an ethics of virtue when engaging with new technology. He understands that society cannot simply let technology unfold of its own accord. Instead he believes people need to exercise moral judgement and good intentions when engaging with technology in order to avoid the alienating characteristics of virtual spaces. He believes that Catholics and secular people around the world should think about technology as a way to cultivate the human condition to its highest form. He calls for a renewed focus on the virtues of technology and avoidance of the vices. As the Catholic Church continues its journey into the digital era and beyond, it needs to remain vigilant in both safeguarding authentic Catholic experiences and making smart decisions regarding new forms of technology and social mediums. It has a responsibility, not only to its faithful members, but to society at large, to look at the world through kind and thoughtful eyes and make those difficult decisions based on what can help make the world a more prosperous and understanding place for all people.


---.” U.S. Catholics, Non-Catholics Continue to View Pope Francis Favorably.” *Pew Research


