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COVID-19 PANDEMIC AS AN IMPULSE FOR COMMUNICATION ACTIVITIES OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN POLAND: THE EXAMPLE OF THE DIOCESE OF RZESZÓW

The epidemic of the SARS-CoV-2 virus announced in Poland was connected with huge restrictions and limitations for individual citizens, society as a whole, and many industries. The restrictions also affected the faithful and members of religious communities, who were unable to directly participate in religious services due to the limits for participants. The situation also posed a challenge for Catholic priests, who had to take measures to reach the faithful with religious services in cases of limitations placed on direct contact. The paper analyses the communication activities undertaken by priests of the Diocese of Rzeszów, implemented as a consequence of the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. The research work assumes that the pandemic provided the impetus for greater use of tools from the field of new technologies in relation to the faithful.

Keywords: Catholic Church, Diocese of Rzeszów, communication in the church, COVID-19, new media.

1. INTRODUCTION

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in Poland in early 2020 caused many changes in the functioning of the state and citizens. Fear of contracting the virus, the lockdown introduced by the state, restrictions in the number of citizens gathering in one place, had serious consequences not only on the economy, but also affected various spheres of life. The consequences of COVID-19 also impacted churches and the communities of faithful, which had to look for other tools for maintaining relations with the faithful due to restrictions on gatherings of the faithful in religious buildings, during masses and services. The subject of the paper analyses communication activities of parishes in the Diocese of Rzeszów, which were addressed to the faithful as a consequence of the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. The research was predominantly quantitative and concerns a diocese that ranks among the top in Poland in terms of the level of religious involvement of the

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faithful. The authors focused on priests' use of IT tools since the pandemic caused fundamental difficulties in face-to-face contacts. The aim of the study was to observe how IT technologies were used in parishes to maintain ongoing relations with the faithful, with the general research assumption that the COVID-19 pandemic provided the impulse to expand the catalogue of communication tools used by parishes. It is worth noting that the topic of the communication activities of the Catholic Church in Poland in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic has been the subject of academic research. However, the study focused on the analysis of cross-sectional data with a nationwide dimension (Przywara, Adamski, Kicinski, Jupowicz-Ginalska, Szewczyk, 2021) or paid attention to other aspects concerning communication in this area, such as the analysis of media discourse, the public perception of Church communication during the pandemic (Chmielewski, Nowak, Stanis, Szulich-Kałuza, Wadowski, 2022) it also touched upon a topic of religious communication (Pastwa, 2020). There were also studies, which topic of concern were cases of parishes online activities in the COVID-19 pandemic (Kloch, 2021).

2. THE IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON THE CHURCH'S COMMUNICATION WITH THE FAITHFUL

The importance and necessity of the Church's use of new technologies, social media and the Internet for communicating with the public, contact with the faithful, evangelization activities, and image-building was the subject of scholarly reflection well before the COVID-19 pandemic (Marcynski, 2011; Przybysz, Kloch, 2012; Kloch, 2013; Przybysz, 2014; Przybysz 2018). However, the outbreak of the pandemic in 2020 and the restrictions on interactions imposed as a result have faced the Church in Poland with new challenges.

The state of epidemic in Poland due to SARS-CoV-2 virus infections was declared by the Minister of Health as of March 20, 2020. Based on the minister's decree, numerous restrictions and limitations were imposed on the functioning of citizens, various industries, the cultural sector, etc. These included the temporary closure of restaurants, cinemas, museums, libraries, archives, spas, prohibition of fairs, exhibitions, congresses. Significant restrictions also applied to the operation of commerce (Decree of the Minister of Health, 2020). Restrictions related to the epidemic condition also significantly affected the operation of churches, parishes and impacted the way religious practices were carried out. The decree of the Minister of Health stipulated that in connection with the epidemic of the SARS CoV-2 virus, restrictions are imposed on the performance of religious worship in public places, and they also apply to buildings and other religious facilities. In practice, the restrictions consisted of a limit on worshippers during religious services and a limit of 50 on the number of people who could participate in religious worship. This number applied to people who were indoors and outdoors, and included not only participants in worship services, but also the priests leading them (Decree of the Minister of Health, 2020).

In subsequent periods of the pandemic, the scope of the restrictions changed, however they were maintained as such. As late as March 2020, due to the increasing number of the infected and fatalities, a rule was introduced that only 5 people could be in a church during mass. As of April 2020, the limit of worshippers in churches was increased, there had to be 15 square metres of space per person, and in May the limit was reduced to 10 square metres. During the summer, the restrictions were reduced, but they returned to a lesser extent from October 2020, with the second wave of the pandemic. At the end of December 2020, the limit of 15 sqm of space per person in a church was reintroduced (Mikołajczak,

2021). The faithful present in churches during the service, had to use masks covering their faces.

It should be noted that the church authorities, on their part, also responded to the situation by issuing appropriate canonical orders. These interventions were mainly of a local nature, i.e., orders issued by episcopal conferences or their bodies, as well as orders issued by the governments of individual dioceses. The Board of the Polish Bishops' Conference, issued Guidelines for Bishops on the Conduct of Liturgical Activities in the Coming Weeks (Acts of the Polish Bishops' Conference, 2020) on March 21, 2020, while the Bishop of Rzeszow on March 26, 2020 issued Ordinance on the conduct of pastoral activities during the epidemic period (Bishop of Rzeszow, 2020). On more serious matters referring to the essence of the liturgy or Catholic morals, ordinances were also issued by the Holy See. A number of these regulations addressed, at least indirectly, the issue of intra-church communication. Thus, in the above-mentioned Ordinance of the Bishop of Rzeszow, priests were obliged to „make available the contact with the church and parish to the faithful via the Internet wherever possible, conducting online broadcasts of services and providing information on an ongoing basis through websites or appropriate applications” (Bishop of Rzeszow, 2020). In turn, the Presidium of the Board of the Polish Bishops' Conference, in its document, concluded that „it is not possible to hear confessions through electronic means of communication” (Acts of the Polish Bishops' Conference, 2020). At the same time, the document indicated that the faithful, who are spiritually connected with the community of the Church during the celebration of the Eucharist via radio, television or the Internet, can receive Holy Communion in church at the appropriate time (Acts of the Polish Bishops' Conference, 2020). Such canonical regulations were intended, on the one hand, to enable pastors to take the necessary measures to maintain parish ties, and, on the other hand, to protect the Church community from possible serious abuses in the use of media that could result in misleading the faithful about the canonically valid and morally decent celebration and enjoyment of the sacraments.

As noted, the degree of restrictions on the faithful varied in intensity, but all the rules introduced during the pandemic amounted to a situation in which a significant portion of the faithful could not directly practise religious worship, attend mass or other services, or directly participate in meetings of religious groups that functioned at parishes. This pandemic reality had two dimensions. For believers, participation in religious services and rituals has a spiritual dimension, but it is also a part of maintaining internal balance. As Lucjan Świto notes, in a situation of pandemic, forced quarantine, restriction of various activities, lack of access to religious practices for believers also meant lack of access to methods that reduce stress and anxiety (Świto, 2021).

This situation also had a very significant impact on the functioning of parishes and other church institutions. Large restrictions on the number of faithful during services forced priests to look for other ways to communicate with the faithful and reach them with religious services. IT and social media tools were applied here. The small number of the faithful at masses and services, and restrictions on face-to-face contacts also affected the day-to-day operation of the parish, including the amounts of offerings. This issue was also focused during the activities carried out in parishes. Detailed data for the Diocese of Rzeszow are presented in the subsequent sections.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study concerns the parishes of the Diocese of Rzeszow which was created in 1992 from parts of Przemyśl and Tarnów dioceses. At the time of its creation, the diocese was divided into 201 parishes and 19 deaneries. At the time of the study, there were 245 parishes in the diocese. As compared to Poland, the Rzeszow diocese is one of those with a high level of religious involvement of the faithful. Research by the Institute of Catholic Church Statistics shows that in 2021, when the COVID-19 pandemic prevailed, 49.7 percent of the faithful in the Rzeszow diocese attended Sunday Mass. This was the second highest score in Poland, after the Diocese of Tarnow (59.1 percent) (*Annuario Statisticum Ecclesiae in Polonia*, 2022).

The survey was conducted in 2021 by means of anonymous survey interviews. Questionnaires through the Diocesan Curia in Rzeszow were distributed to all parishes in the diocese. Responses were received from 62 parishes, representing 25.3 percent of all parishes in the diocese. The response rate obtained was considered sufficient for analysis, but due to the number of respondents who took part in the survey (less than 100), the authors based the analysis of the results on numerical indications rather than percentages.

Representatives of rural parishes predominated in the study group (43 respondents). The study also included 18 priests working in urban parishes (8 of them worked in Rzeszow parishes). Looking in terms of parish functions, 47 pastors and 14 vicars participated in the survey. One survey did not record respondent data. The respondents' age ranged from 28 to 70.

The research questionnaire included 7 questions. These were single-choice and multiple-choice questions in which respondents indicated i.e. IT tools that were used in parishes before and after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic to maintain relations with the faithful. The survey also included one open-ended question. Several questions used a Likert scale from „very often” to „never”, as well as from „definitely yes” to „definitely no”.

4. RESULTS

The background for the research conducted in 2021 were two previous research projects that dealt with information policy in the parishes of the Diocese of Rzeszow. The first was conducted in late 2012 and early 2013 (Chmielewski, Kuca, 2013), and the second based on similar methodological assumptions was repeated in 2018 (Kuca, Chmielewski, 2019). The studies that are analyzed within the framework of the presented study partially used the questionnaire used in those projects. They analyzed i.e. the catalogue of information policy tools that were used by priests for communication activities addressed to parishioners.

Both surveys showed that the catalogue of information tools was dominated by those that can be described as traditional. In both 2013 and 2018, the most popular tools that priests counted among the components of a parish's information policy were parish announcements at Mass and the bulletin board at the church. In 2013, in third place was pastoral visitation, also considered an information tool. In the catalogue of communication tools, there were few instruments based on new technologies. The most popular of these was the parish website. In 2013, it was in fourth place in terms of popularity (59 responses out of 81 respondents) as a component of the parish's information policy, five years later it moved up to third place (72 responses out of 85 respondents). Thus, it can be concluded that parish websites were among the popular and standard tools of the parish's information

policy in its relations with the faithful. The importance of social media could be assessed quite differently. In 2013, the parish social media profile as a component of its information policy was indicated by only 13 surveyed priests (ranking 12th out of 13 tools surveyed). In 2018, the importance of this tool increased. It was indicated by 32 priests (increase to 8th place out of 13 tools). Private profiles of priests on social media were of marginal importance in the opinion of respondents (in 2013 – 4 responses as a component of parish information policy, in 2018 – 7 indications) (Chmielewski, Kuca, 2013; Kuca, Chmielewski, 2019).

Table 1. Components of parish information policy in the opinion of priests of the Diocese of Rzeszow in 2012/2013 and in 2018

No.	Components of a parish's information policy	Number of responses	
		2012/2013 (N=81)	2018 (N=85)
1	Parish announcements at Mass	80	84
2	Bulletin board at the church	75	81
3	Pastoral visitation	64	69
4	Parish website	59	72
5	Parish magazine	46	39
6	Meetings organized by the parish	44	42
7	Individual meetings with parishioners	41	40
8	Preaching	37	27
9	Pilgrimages and excursions organized by the parish	37	28
10	Informing the media about events in the parish	36	28
11	Letters to parishioners	17	12
12	Parish social media profile	13	32
13	Private profiles of priests on social media	4	7

Source: (Chmielewski, Kuca, 2013; Kuca, Chmielewski, 2019).

The 2021 survey offers a slightly different picture of the situation when it comes to the communication activities of parishes in the Diocese of Rzeszow and the use of modern technologies. The research questionnaire included a question about which tools related to new technologies were used in parishes to maintain relations with the faithful before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, and which were launched after the outbreak. The answers make it possible to see an increase in the importance of tools based on new technologies. Once again, the importance of parish websites in communicating with parishioners was confirmed (a tool present before the pandemic in 58 parishes). In the catalogue of tools, one can also note some importance of parish profiles in social networks (25 responses before the pandemic). But importantly, priests declared that even before the outbreak of the pandemic in some parishes, the faithful were able to handle various matters at the parish office online (18 responses), to make a donation to the church online (21 responses). In a few cases, parishioners were also able to attend Masses broadcast

online – on Youtube (7 responses) or on the parish's profile on a social networking site (6 responses).

In this context, it seems interesting to answer the question of what tools from the area of new technologies, priests of the Diocese of Rzeszow launched in their parishes after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Detailed information is provided in Table 2. However, it is worth noting that the most common initiatives in this area concerned three spheres. First, it was about enabling parishioners to attend Mass and other services. In 17 parishes, the possibility of broadcasting Mass on Youtube was created, and in 13 parishes on the parish's social networking account. The second area had to do with the functioning of parish groups and the possibility of online meetings (15 indications). The third referred to organising parish retreats in an online format (8 indications). It is also worth noting that there was an increase in the number of parishes in which administrative matters at the chancery could be handled online (8 responses), as well as those in which parishioners could deposit offerings online (6 responses).

Table 2. Tools related to new technologies that were used by surveyed priests to maintain relationships with the faithful before and after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic

No.	Tool	Before the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic	After the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic
1	Parish website	58	1
2	Parish social media profile	25	4
3	Private profiles of priests on social media	13	3
4	Broadcasting Mass on the parish's Youtube channel	7	17
5	Broadcasting masses on the parish's social media profile	6	13
6	Administrative matters at the chancery could be handled online	18	8
7	Deposit offerings online (ordering masses)	21	6
8	Possibility for the faithful to deposit their offerings into the deposit machine located in the church	1	2
9	Online meetings of the priest with the parish group	1	15
10	Organising parish retreats in an online form	4	8
11	Broadcasts of masses on neighbourhood cable TV	-	1

Source: own research.

The survey also included a question on the likelihood of parishes retaining modern tools for maintaining relations with the faithful after the COVID-19 pandemic. Priests most often indicated in this area the parish website (56 responses „definitely yes”), which shows that

this tool can be counted among the standards for communication with the faithful. In second place, but with significantly lower response rate was the parish's profile on the social networking site (23 responses „definitely yes”, 4 indications „rather yes”). Among the tools which maintenance in post-pandemic parishes can be assessed as relatively high were also the possibility to make online donations both for masses and for the maintenance of the parish (a total of 22 responses „definitely yes” and „rather yes”), as well as the possibility to deal online with various types of issues at the parish office (a total of 19 responses „definitely yes” and „rather yes”). Interestingly, priests were relatively cautious about maintaining online broadcasts of Mass. On the one hand, there were few responses to the question about such possibilities. On the other hand, among the 15 priests who commented on the possibility of maintaining Mass broadcasts in the parish social network profile, 7 indicated that such a probability was rather or definitely low. As for broadcasts of Mass on Youtube, out of 22 responses, 14 priests assessed that „rather” or „definitely” such an option could be maintained.

Table 3. Likelihood of parishes retaining specific tools for maintaining relationships with the faithful after the COVID-19 pandemic

Tool	Likelihood of retaining specific tools for maintaining relationships with the faithful after the COVID-19 pandemic					Total
	definitely yes	rather yes	hard to say	rather no	definitely no	
Parish website	56	2	0	0	0	58
Parish social media profile	23	4	1	1	0	29
Private profiles of priests on social media	9	5	0	2	0	16
Broadcasting Mass on the parish's Youtube channel	8	6	3	3	2	22
Broadcasting masses on the parish's social media profile	4	4	0	5	2	15
Administrative matters at the chancery could be handled online	8	11	1	3	1	24

Table 3 (cont.). Likelihood of parishes retaining specific tools for maintaining relationships with the faithful after the COVID-19 pandemic

Tool	Likelihood of retaining specific tools for maintaining relationships with the faithful after the COVID-19 pandemic					Total
	definitely yes	rather yes	hard to say	rather no	definitely no	
Deposit offerings online (ordering masses)	10	12	3	1	0	26
Possibility for the faithful to deposit their offerings into the deposit machine located in the church	0	1	1	0	1	3
Online meetings of the priest with the parish group	1	2	3	3	4	13
Organizing parish retreats in an online form	2	4	1	3	1	11

Source: own research.

Participating priests in the survey were also asked whether there were any tools for maintaining relationships with the faithful during the COVID-19 pandemic that parishes wanted to activate, but for some reason were unable to do so. Only some of the respondents answered this question. However, the responses show that the range of communication tools used during the pandemic was considered sufficient by priests. The largest group of respondents (24 responses) felt that there were no tools that were desired, but it was not possible to put them into operation. In the rest of the responses, there were such situations, but not many. In several parishes (3 responses each), despite the desire, it was not possible to launch what was generally referred to as online broadcasting of Mass and other services, or what was explicitly called online broadcasting of Mass on Youtube. In two cases, such a situation involved the broadcast of Mass on the parish's profile on a social networking site. Also in two parishes, the desired tool for maintaining relations with the faithful was local radio. In individual cases, there were indications of various tools that could have had an impact on relations with the faithful, but these did not come to fruition. On the one hand was the possibility of organising retreats in an online format, as well as handling administrative matters at the parish office in an online version. On the other hand, it was

about solutions that would affect the practical functioning of the parish: the placement of a deposit machine in the church that would allow the faithful to make donations, as well as the ability to make offerings or order Masses via the Internet. In one case, the idea was to create a parish profile on a social networking site.

Table 4. Tools for maintaining relationships with the faithful, which during the COVID-19 pandemic the surveyed priests would have liked to launch in their parishes, but for some reason this was not possible

No.	Tool	Number of responses
1	No	24
2	Broadcasting of masses, services	3
3	Broadcasting Mass on the parish's Youtube channel	3
4	Broadcasting masses on the parish's social media profile	2
5	Radio (internet/traditional)	2
6	Possibility for the faithful to deposit their offerings into the deposit machine located in the church	1
7	Deposit offerings online (ordering masses)	1
8	Parish social media profile	1
9	Organising parish retreats in an online form	1
10	Administrative matters at the chancery could be handled online	1

Source: own research.

Table 5. Barriers that cause priests to be unable to launch the indicated tools in the parish

Barriers that cause priests to be unable to launch the indicated tools in the parish	Presence of barrier:					Total
	definitely yes	rather yes	hard to say	rather no	definitely no	
Lack of money	10	5	8	8	1	32
Lack of qualified people to handle	10	11	3	3	3	30
Insufficient equipment and technology	10	11	3	4	3	31
Lack of interest from parishioners	4	9	9	7	0	29
Inability to make an independent decision on the use of a particular tool	1	0	0	0	0	1
Legal regulations	1	0	0	0	0	1

Source: own research.

If the study indicated that during the COVID-19 pandemic there was, admittedly, a small group of tools for maintaining relationships with the faithful that priests would have liked to activate, but for some reason did not, it seems important to know the obstacles that hindered such actions. Priests participating in the survey identified three main obstacles. At the same level, it was both the lack of qualified people to operate the new tools, as well as insufficient parish equipment and technology (10 responses „definitely yes” and 11

responses „rather yes” each). Such results indicate the importance and need for training in some parishes to professionalise activities in the communications area. The third main barrier to the development of new information policy tools was the lack of money. Economic aspects were indicated as a barrier by 15 priests (10 „definitely yes”, 5 „rather yes”).

5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, several points are worth noting. When evaluating the results, it is important to take into account the number of respondents who took part in the survey. Despite the limited number of respondents, it can be said that the survey provided a basis for confirming the general research assumption that the COVID-19 pandemic provided the impetus for expanding the catalogue of communication tools used by parishes. The research showed that parishes are increasingly using tools from the area of new technologies in their communication activities. Restrictions on direct contact with the faithful, which was one of the consequences of the pandemic, led to the development of various tools to maintain relations with parishioners. These involved two areas. The first involved activating tools that gave the faithful a chance to attend Mass, other services, and meetings of a religious nature. The second area, of lesser importance, concerned the development of tools that allowed parishioners to handle online matters at parish offices during the pandemics, or allowed online donations for parish needs, which had an impact on parish operations.

Finally, it should be noted that the study was conducted in a diocese with some of the highest rates of religious commitment among the faithful in Poland. The Catholic Church plays an important role there. It would be worthwhile to confront the results from the Rzeszow diocese with dioceses that are more strongly secularised and residents' ties to the Church more loose. This would provide an answer to the question of whether the level of religious commitment of the faithful had an impact on the inventiveness and involvement of priests in communication activities and nurturing relationships with the faithful. This opens the field for further research in this area.

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