

## Religious practices for social networking: A reading of Catholicism "Version 2.0 in Cameroon

### (Les pratiques religieuses à l'épreuve des réseaux sociaux : une lecture du catholicisme « version 2.0 au Cameroun)

\*MOUTHE Gildas

Enseignant-Chercheur, Université de Dschang – Cameroun

\*Author Email: [mouthdas@yahoo.fr](mailto:mouthdas@yahoo.fr)



\*Author

MOUTHE Gildas

Enseignant-Chercheur, Université de  
Dschang – Cameroun

\*Author Email: [mouthdas@yahoo.fr](mailto:mouthdas@yahoo.fr)

#### Abstract

The internet is gaining strength in Christian circles in Cameroon, and is tending to reconfigure the relationship to faith and to the Christian community. The Cameroonian religious cyber space is characterized by the emergence of new religious practices such as online prayer, online catechesis, and the creation of virtual communities. This computer religiosity has favored the rise of an individualism of believing to be marked by disengaged practices which modify the structure of classical Christian communities. Based on the Catholic community, in this article we want to report on how the virtual practice of religion is a source of individualism and how this practice reconfigures traditional communities. From the sociology of uses we want to analyze how these virtual communities can contribute to an exacerbation of the fragmentation of classical churches. By relying on the technique of reasoned choice sampling, we administered a questionnaire to 100 also consulted for a period of 3 months (January- February- March 2021) the Facebook pages of the parishes, the associations of people (20 priests, 60 practicing Catholic faithful, 20 non-practicing) in order to collect their perceptions on the place occupied by the Internet within the Catholic Church and its impact on the liturgical rites of the Mass. We have and Catholic priests from the Archdiocese of Douala. This enabled us to assess the number of visitors, to identify and analyze the nature of the content, to list the sections most visited by Internet users, to analyze the speeches of the actors. At the end of this empirical research, it appears that digital technology seems to contribute to the reconfiguration of religious practices within the Catholic Church in Cameroon, insofar as the ritual observance and the organization of liturgical rites are modified or abandoned by the interaction with digital.

Keywords: religious practices, social networks, Catholicism 2.0, cyberspace.

## Introduction

Since the beginning of 2000, the Catholic Church in Cameroon has been weaving its web through its insertion into the digital world. Many of its dioceses are setting up websites or blogs to be seen and heard, thanks in particular to the circulation of Diocesan news, pastoral notes from bishops, homilies, pastoral plans, liturgical texts, papal texts, fundraising.

Communication being inseparable with evangelization, the Catholic Church in Cameroon has always relied on technological innovations to proclaim the gospel. After being equipped with the written press in 1935 (with the creation of the Catholic Cameroon newspaper), then with the radio in 2000 (with the birth of radio veritas of the Archdiocese of Douala), it has been investing since 2008 in the digital world. Today it is the Internet which is at the heart of the various changes that are observed both in the modes of communication and in the rituals of the Catholic liturgy. This religious institution indeed considers digital technology as an essential component of the new evangelization. In this regard, Pope Benedict XVI affirmed that "the Catholic Church sees in the Internet a communication tool that can offer it the possibility of communicating with particular groups, young people, adults, the elderly or those forced to keep the house, people living in remote areas, member of other religious organizations that would otherwise be difficult to reach" (Benedict XVI, 2011).

In order to make concrete the Pope's invitation to the religious use of the Internet, dioceses and parishes have acquired digital social media as part of the virtual pastoral which consists of evangelizing through the web. Catholic digital platforms are spaces for listening to and receiving the gospel and constitute Christian bookstores (Raphael Ntambue-Tsimbulu, 2003) for both Christian faithful and people distant from the church.

With the onset of the Coronavirus pandemic in December 2019, the Cameroonian Catholic cyber space has gained momentum. Following the suspension of spiritual and pastoral activities in churches in application of barrier measures and respect for social distancing decreed by the Cameroonian government, dioceses, parishes, associations and Catholic movements which were not yet linked to the digital have invested in the acquisition of digital social media for dissemination (You tube) or interaction (Facebook) to ensure the continuity of their pastoral and spiritual activities. This computer religiosity has led to the emergence of new religious practices (online prayer, online catechesis, online Masses) which has led to the emergence of disengaged practices (Jonveaux 2013) which modify the structure of the Church.

In this study, we want to report on how the virtual practice of religion can be a source of individualism and how this online religiosity is reconfiguring traditional communities and changing sacramental practices. By anchoring itself in the sociology of uses, this work aims to

analyze how connected religiosity can contribute to an exacerbation of the fragmentation of classical Churches and how it can alter the practice of certain liturgical rites.

The study of digital uses therefore leads us to question the place occupied by the internet within the Catholic Church in Cameroon, its scope and the way in which it is present in social life through the appropriations of which it is the subject (Soudoplatoff, 2004). If the internet builds our uses, it is itself built through the actions of its users. The social construction of use is naturally not limited to only the forms of use prescribed by the technique but extends to the multiple intermediation processes that come into play to give it its quality of social use (Jouët, 2000).

The definition of use is therefore semantically versatile, since it is very often confused with use, practice, use or even appropriation, we will base our developments on the conception given to it by Bernard Miège. The author presents uses / practices as experiences, "a direct and reciprocal hold between intentionalities involved here and now" (Miège, 2007). This perspective directs us more towards grasping individual and collective behaviors manifested in the form of patterns, ways of doing and acting that stabilize.

Conducted in an empirical approach, this study is essentially qualitative (Mucchielli, 1994). It was carried out during the period from January to March 2021 in the form of a research based on the observation of the website of the Diocese of Obala, the Facebook page of the sanctuary Mary Mediatrix of Etoudi in the Archdiocese of Yaoundé, that of the association of priests and laity of the Archdiocese of Douala; as well as the Facebook page of Father Etienne Bakaba of the Archdiocese of Douala. The choice of these digital platforms is justified by the fact that they are the best updated and the most visited by internet users. Their observation enabled us to assess the number of visitors, to identify and analyze the nature of the content, to list the sections most visited by Internet users, to analyze the speeches of the actors.

Comprehensive interviews were carried out with key players in the Catholic digital sector, in particular those in charge of diocesan communication services, members of the clergy, practicing and non-practicing Catholics. Using the technique known as reasoned choice sampling, we administered a questionnaire to 100 people (20 priests, 60 practicing Catholic faithful, 20 non-practicing), representative of different social strata and making use of the Internet. These people were interviewed in the cities of Douala and Yaoundé, respectively the economic and political capital of Cameroon and the seat of the two important archdioceses of the Catholic Church in the country.

## Catholic digital players

This research highlights four categories of users of the Cameroonian Catholic web. These are the institution itself

(dioceses and parishes), members of the clergy, associations and the faithful.

### ***A changing diocesan and parish web sphere***

The Catholic digital sphere has undergone significant development since 2000, the year of creation of the first websites and blogs in the dioceses (Bafoussam, Yaoundé, Kribi). In 2021, 20 of the 26 dioceses of the Catholic Church in Cameroon have a Facebook page, if not a website. This insertion of the structures of the Catholic Church into the digital world has increased with the onset of the coronavirus pandemic, which has forced parishes and associations to set up Facebook pages to ensure the continuity of their activities. In the opinion of the parish responsible for communication, the choice of this social network is justified by its flexibility and its interactivity, which allows the parishes to stay in contact with the faithful and to consolidate the links with the members of the community.

### ***An android clergy***

Catholic priests constitute a large community of Internet users. A good part of the priests (20) who were interviewed within the framework of this study recognize themselves as being active Internet users. All priests met during the data collection phase have an android phone and an email address. They are also very visible and active on digital social media including Facebook and Whatsapp. The age of these surfers in cassocks varies between 25 and 60 years and the most present on the web are those who live in urban areas (15/20), while those who live in rural areas are the least active, at cause of unstable connection and untimely power cuts.

Several members of the clergy (16/20) have an approximate knowledge of the techniques of dissemination and uploading of content because they have been trained on the job, while 4/20 have received professional training in journalism or communication. The digital practices of these users revolve around viewing and sending e-mail, online discussions, broadcasting of prayers and meditations, broadcasting of masses online.

### ***Associations 2.0***

Many associations of the Catholic faithful are very active on social networks. They have Facebook or Whatsapp pages in which they publish press releases and information, prayers, meditations, daily readings. They regularly organize online prayer sessions that bring all members of the association together on the Facebook page to recite the Rosary. These platforms also serve as a place for discussion and exchange between group members. "When a quick decision has to be made for the smooth running of the association and the time to get the board members together is very short, we consult through

the association's Facebook page at a specific time. We proceed in the same way for the recitation of the daily rosary ", tells us a faithful Catholic, member of an association in the archdiocese of Douala in interview.

### ***Christian faithful in digital mode***

This study highlights a significant presence of Catholic Christians in the Catholic web sphere. They constitute in fact an important category of consumers of the contents of diocesan and parish digital interfaces. They visit these digital platforms to gather information, search for prayers and meditations, listen to catecheses, and follow Masses online.

This research highlights two categories of Internet users among the Catholic faithful. It is on the one hand the faithful close to the church that is to say who participate in the activities of the community but consult the digital platforms, and on the other hand the faithful distant from the Church c ' that is to say those who have stopped all attendance at places of worship, but who draw their spiritual resources from attendance at digital interfaces of dioceses or parishes job. And so it's through the internet that I find the prayers and meditations that allow me to keep my faith intact. I visit the diocese's Facebook page every day and even some parishes that have Facebook pages,"said a Catholic Christian interviewed in Douala.

### ***A Catholic cyberspace with plural practices***

The Cameroonian Catholic web sphere has experienced an explosion in digital communication in recent years. Indeed, the use of the internet is increasing significantly within the various components of this religious institution. Faced with this observation, it seems wise to us to question the uses of digital social networks within the Catholic Church.

### ***Online preaching***

Within the framework of the new evangelization, the Catholic Church abundantly mobilizes digital information and communication technologies to effectively fulfill its mission of evangelization which consists in announcing the Good News. Thus, dioceses and parishes publish openly religious content in their socio-digital media (blogs, sites and Facebook pages) (Homilies of bishops and priests, teachings, reading of the Gospel, etc.). "ICTs are very important tools in proclaiming the gospel. They allow us to bring the good news of salvation everywhere in the world and to touch people in their privacy, that is to say in their homes, their places of work, in the hospital and thus bring comfort to all those who suffer wherever they are, "explains a priest from the Archdiocese of Douala in an interview. Thus the internet and digital social media constitute for the Catholic Church a new forum for proclaiming the gospel and mobilizing the faithful in a context of religious

competition with the Pentecostal and Evangelical churches.

**Electronic spirituality**

Within the Cameroonian Catholic community, digital social networks allow the faithful to live their spirituality without going to church. Indeed, 80% of the people questioned within the framework of this research affirm to exercise their spirituality in and through digital platforms. "Every morning, I log onto my ward Facebook page to search for gospel texts. This allows me to meditate on the word of God from my desk. This allows me to pray without going to church," Said a Catholic internet user in Yaoundé.

Also in some associations, members log in at a specific time of the day to recite the rosary. "In our association of altar boys, we sometimes organize prayers. We all log onto our association's Facebook page at a specific time to pray. We also sometimes organize prayer novenas or online recollection sessions. Each member can thus participate in the prayer from the place where he is," said an official responsible for the association of former choir children of the cathedral in Douala. Practices such as online novenas, online confessions as well as online masses have therefore developed within the Cameroonian Catholic community. "For 6 months I have participated in the celebrations of masses from my parish's Facebook page. During the week as on Sunday, masses are broadcast there live or delayed. So I can follow Mass from home without having to go to church," said one Internet user. From this perspective, the Internet appears to be a ritual for some Internet users.

**Sending and receiving mail online**

Catholic digital players use the Internet to send and receive e-mail online. Thus, members of the clergy use this communication tool to obtain magisterial texts, pastoral notes and letters from bishops, and papal documents. All these documents allow them to properly prepare their teachings and their homilies. "Whenever I have to deliver a teaching, I document myself by looking for the documents of the magisterium either on the Vatican suite or that of our

diocese. This allows me to be consistent with the doctrine of the Church," said a priest from the Archdiocese of Douala in an interview.

Those responsible for Catholic associations and movements use the Internet to send documents, information or directives to their members, but also to obtain papal documents which serve as a basis for their work during their meetings. "Before each of our monthly meetings, I upload the bishop's catechesis, his teachings, his pastoral notes on the diocese's Facebook page, which serve as working documents for each of our meetings and we discuss them among ourselves", declares the president of the Catholic Women's League in interview.

**Online discussions and debates**

Social networks also appear within the Catholic community as spheres of discussion and debate. They thus give the faithful the opportunity to express their opinions on the burning questions of the Church. Social networks thus constitute a virtual public space where the different components of the Catholic Church can debate questions on faith, the management of property, the administration of the sacraments, and moral scandals.

Discussions in this virtual public space are generally harsh and highly critical of bishops and clergy. We are thus witnessing a kind of freedom of speech, to the extent that Internet users who are behind a keyboard and who operate in anonymity express themselves without fear. Which they wouldn't be able to do in a face-to-face discussion.

Thus, "the Catholic Church which once chastised penitents for their willful impure thoughts is now chastised for its deviations, shortcomings and abuses" (Bechtel, 1994). The religious institution can no longer hide, the logic of the Internet having modulated the hierarchy of sources, because today it is the media which push religion to redefine itself in the public square, by amplifying the contradictions of which it is lively.

Summary table of the main uses of the Internet in the Cameroonian Catholic community is shown in Table 1 below.

**Table 1:** Main uses of the Internet in the Cameroonian Catholic community

Usages Users	Online evangelism	Spirituality online	Upload and download files	Online Chat
Parishes	100%	20%	100%	15%
associations	80%	70%	100%	60%
faithful	15%	80%	60%	75%
search	60%	20%	50%	60%

Source: the author

The table (Table 1) above highlights the main uses of the internet within the Catholic community. Indeed, it appears

that Catholic digital social media are used extensively for online evangelism. Parishes and associations are the main



actors in this practice through the circulation of sermons, teachings, catecheses of bishops and clergy. 90% of the content on these platforms is made up of evangelistic messages and images. This study also shows that many priests are evangelizers in social networks. They regularly publish their homilies and catecheses on their Facebook page for the spiritual accompaniment of the faithful. Less present in online evangelization (only 15% of the faithful surveyed claimed to have published messages sporadically in connection with acts of evangelization), the Catholic faithful are in the majority for acts of spirituality online. They use social networks to pray, read the texts of the day's Gospel, listen to catechesis, participate in worship, and give mass. This trend is also observed within associations. On the other hand, online spirituality is less visible in parish platforms where we limit ourselves to sharing prayers and meditations. Sending and downloading files is a practice that mobilizes all users. While parishes and associations are distinguished by the circulation of files, the faithful and priests are illustrated by the downloading of texts from the magisterium, pastoral notes, press releases and various announcements. Online discussion is a practice that is more evident among congregants and priests. These users intervene on doctrinal questions, the administration of the sacraments and even on matters of society. It often happens that it is the priest himself who triggers the debate on his Facebook page, eliciting comments from the many faithful. The debates are less present in the parish sites. Usually the faithful make likes to appreciate a particular teaching or a particular sermon. The faithful who are called upon to criticize the parish or the clergy use false profiles or assumed names for fear of reprisals.

### **From religious communalism to religious individualism**

The study of the religious use of social networks highlights the emergence of a virtual Christianity within the Cameroonian Catholic community. There are indeed believers who have transferred their community practices to online broadcasting (you tube) or interaction (Facebook, whatsapp) services and whose religious practice is done not only with but also the Internet. 25 Christians interviewed as part of this study claimed to carry out their religious practices on the internet. "Every day when I want to pray, I do some research on the internet or I consult the Facebook pages of the parishes to have the texts of the day and the meditations. So I pray without having to travel," explains a Catholic Christian.

Digital uses also appear as a way to live one's spirituality by going beyond geographic borders. Thus, people with Internet access to a very wide religious offer can build very complex religious affiliations, by obtaining content on increasingly deterritorialized religious sites (Roy, 2008). "I am a Catholic who has not attended her parish for a long time. But when I want to do mass, I go to the

Vatican website. So I can follow the Pope's masses live or follow his catecheses during his general audiences on Wednesday," explains a Catholic Christian living in Douala.

This study highlights the emergence of virtual communities within the Catholic Church. There are thus people who log on to social networks at specific times to recite the Rosary or to listen to the teachings of a priest. "Within our association of former choirboys, we connect via the association's Facebook page at specific times to recite the rosary or to meditate on the word of God. Thanks to the internet, we pray together without having to meet physically", underlines a faithful Catholic interviewed in Douala.

However, it appears that the virtual practice of religion often results in a religious individualism which is akin to a kind of disengagement. Overcoming spatio-temporal constraints and anonymity, without consequence in reality, can indeed lead to disengaged practices (Jonveaux, 2013).

This questioning leads us to wonder if the internet can be used in all liturgical acts within the Roman Catholic Church. Indeed, while it is true that online religious service re-registers religion as an offer of free choice (insofar as Christians can live their faith without the intervention of the priest), and that digital devices make it possible to prolong the community practice in times of rupture of social ties, it must however be recognized that electronic religiosity does not allow the function of presence and manifestation of the expected presence in Catholic Christian culture to be fulfilled. This is particularly the case during Mass during which certain liturgical rites cannot be virtualized. "If social networks can be useful for meditation or adoration, this is not the case for the Mass which obeys a real discipline of divine worship, with its precise requirements which cannot be met during a celebration virtual", says a priest of the Archdiocese of Douala in an interview.

### **Computer religiousness and sacramental mutations: the case of the virtual mass**

The study of the religious uses of the internet indeed shows that the ritual observance and the organization of the liturgical rites can be modified or abandoned by the interaction with the digital one. Thus, we have been able to observe during the broadcasting of Sunday Masses or during solemnities (the great Christian feasts) that the rite of sprinkling holy water was not performed. It seems unlikely that a priest celebrating Mass online could sprinkle holy water on the faithful attending Mass in their homes through a screen. It also seems difficult for Christians attending an online Mass to exchange a sign of peace, as long as they do not attend the Mass from one location. Indeed, while the online mass may be real, it is nonetheless true that the link to the community remains in a way "virtual".

This research also highlights the fact that during virtual masses, the Catholic faithful connected to social networks cannot take communion. In fact, during the Mass, the

Christian receives communion by receiving the consecrated host, thus becoming in union with Christ. "Every time I attend Mass online, I fail to receive Communion. However, when I do not take Communion, I have the impression of not having participated in Mass", laments a faithful Catholic during an interview.

The concerns of this Christian are also true since the Catholic Church recognizes sacraments only performed through the body or the senses. In fact, in the Catholic tradition, the Blessed Sacrament of the Eucharist cannot be received at a distance by an interposed screen but requires a physical presence of the Church and of the faithful.

The digitization of the Mass also leads to the disappearance of the rite of the presentation of offerings by the faithful. "When I participate in Mass from Facebook, I cannot give the quest since I am not physically present at the place of the celebration," notes a Catholic Christian interviewed in Douala. Faced with this difficulty, the Catholic Church resorts to technological innovations to resolve the question of the impossibility of the physical quest during virtual masses.

"In some of our parishes here in Douala it is possible to ask for Masses and give your offering through money transfers. I get it myself. I just want our Church to evolve with the instruments of its time," says a priest from the Archdiocese of Douala.

From what precedes, it appears that digital religious communicational forms remedy (Bolter and Grusin, 1988) those which precede it or are external to digital - and vice versa. On the one hand, the religious crosses digital spaces, mobilizing them and causing the metamorphosis and adaptation of its forms. On the other hand, digital forms of communication become places of incarnation and metamorphosis of religions.

## Conclusion

Digital technology seems to be contributing to the reconfiguration of religious practices within the Catholic Church in Cameroon. Its use appears as an innovation not only in the perspective of the new evangelization advocated by the Vatican, but also in the relationship of Christian Internet users to the faith and to the community. However, its use is not limited to aspects related to spirituality, since it reconstructs the relationship between the faithful and the clergy.

This study also highlights the construction of new identities within the Cameroonian Catholic community, because through the use of the social interaction media Facebook, the faithful have become very active subjects who contribute through their voice on digital interfaces to bring the religious institution to redefine itself. We also observe in the Cameroonian Catholic web sphere, the emergence of a form of religious individualism. Social networks are thus tending to become places for individual meditation, sometimes practiced with others. However, in

the context of any religious practice on the Internet, anonymity, a source of freedom for believers, raises questions. For example, what value can anonymity have in a religion where relationship and commitment come to the fore?

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