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10 DIGITALISED CULTS IN THE TIME OF THE COVID-19 LOCKDOWN IN ABIDJAN: THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS OF LITURGICAL RESILIENCE

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INTRODUCTION

Côte d'Ivoire is a French-speaking West African country of nearly 23 million inhabitants and sixty ethnic groups. It is a secular and multi-confessional state.² Several religious institutions rub shoulders and compete with ardour in their strategies to increase their number of faithful and retain them.³ The concept of "religious institution" is taken here in the broad sense of the term and refers to religious groups and sects active in the territory of Côte d'Ivoire. Figures from the 2014 General Population and Housing Census (RGPH) show the presence of several religions and sects in Côte d'Ivoire.⁴ Out of a resident population of 22 671 331, Islam is the religion with the most followers, making up 42% of the population. Christianity is the next largest group, comprising 34% of the population.⁵ Animists and members of other religions are, respectively 4% and 1% of the population. Those "Without Religion" account for 19% of the population.⁶ The data on religion in Côte d'Ivoire also specify that among the foreign population, Muslims represent 72% and Christians represent 18% of the population. Among the native Ivorian population, however, Christians comprise 39% and Muslims 30% of the population.⁷

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- 1 Research Professor at Félix Houphouët-Boigny University, UFR Information, Communication and Arts. It is with great sadness that ACLARS reports that Professor Célestin Gnonzion passed away suddenly on 31 August 2022, just one week after submitting this essay. We remember and honour his life and many contributions to ACLARS.
 - 2 Gadou MD. 2011. Gadou Dakouri, "Muslims and Christians of Côte d'Ivoire: How religions triggered the Ivorian crisis!", *Our Way*, No. 3966, 22 October. See also Mathias Dacouri Gadou's earlier remarks on religion as Côte d'Ivoire was approaching another crisis, that of civil war, in 2002, in Hartill L. 2002. "In time of crisis, Ivorians turn their eyes to heaven", *The Christian Science Monitor*, 25 November.
 - 3 Gadou, "Muslims and Christians of Côte d'Ivoire: How religions triggered the Ivorian crisis".
 - 4 Institut National de Statistique. 2014. General Population and Housing Census [hereinafter RGPH]. Online at: <https://www.ins.ci/RGPH2014.pdf>
 - 5 Christianity includes in order of the number of followers, Catholics, Protestants and other Christian religions.
 - 6 Those "Without Religion" include agnostics, atheists and deists.
 - 7 Institut National de la Statistique (INS) de Côte d'Ivoire. 2014 Recensement Général de la Population et de l'Habitat (RGPH) 2014 [General Population and Housing Census 2014].

All of these religious groups make use, to varying degrees, of the means of media for the communication of faith, whether traditional broadcast media in the sense of television and radio or new media in the sense of digital social networks. It is also notable that among non-Catholic churches, especially the Pentecostal churches, new information and communication technologies and media are “used in a competitive logic by prophetic pastors to give a gain of ‘marketability’ to revelations”.⁸ In this competitive religious media environment, “Divine revelations become ‘media products’ and a marketing space facilitating the meeting of supply and demand.”⁹

Unlike in the Protestant churches, in the time before Covid-19, there was rather timid use of new media within the Catholic Church in Côte d’Ivoire. But the advent of Covid disrupted the communication and media practices of Catholic Christians, prompting them to move from the communication of faith through in-person and face-to-face interactions and to an intensive use of social media networks in a time of health crisis. This is why this use of new media and information and communication technology imposed upon the Catholic Church in Côte d’Ivoire by Covid deserves attention and is the subject of this study.

The present study examines, from a communications and media perspective, the forms of resilience implemented during the Covid lockdown period and their theological justifications in the founding texts of the theology and the magisterium of the Church. The study was based on a qualitative approach to data collection, using both individual interviews and group and focus group interviews, as well as virtual observation of religious practices on Facebook during the lockdown that took place during Holy Week 2020. The target population of the study comprised Catholic Christians from a dozen parishes in the city of Abidjan, as well as leaders of Christian movements and religious leaders of the parishes.

CONCEPTS FOR UNDERSTANDING DIGITAL RELIGIOSITY AND RESILIENCE

Before presenting the results of the research, it is important to define some key concepts of the study. These are the concepts of Lent, worship, digitalised worship and digitalised religiosity, crisis, and resilience. These provide context for the Catholic Church’s shift to new media and communication methods during Holy Week 2020 in Côte d’Ivoire.

Lent

The time of Lent among Catholics is a key moment in the liturgy and expression of the religiosity of the Christian. In Côte d’Ivoire, this religiosity is often popular, expressive and syncretic, but also spiritual. Lent can be defined as “a time of

8 Guiblehon B. 2014. “Le marche des revelations divines dans le contexte de crise politique en Côte d’Ivoire [The market in divine revelations in the context of political crisis in Côte d’Ivoire]”, *Journal of the Anthropological Society of Oxford Online* 6(1):79-98.

9 Guiblehon, “Le marche des revelations divines”.

preparation of forty days for the feast of Easter, the heart of the Christian faith, which celebrates the resurrection of Christ".¹⁰ Of Lent, it is said: "These forty days ... make it possible to relive with Christ in the desert the forty years of the Hebrews' march to the promised land. It is the same experience of intimacy with God that the whole community of believers, baptised or candidates for baptism, wishes to relive as it sets out towards Easter."¹¹ In 2020, the other key moments in this spiritual journey were: Palm Sunday (5 April 2020), Holy Thursday (9 April 2020), Good Friday (10 April 2020), Holy Saturday (11 April 2020) and Easter Sunday (12 April 2020). It should also be noted that the last three days of Lent, called the Paschal triduum, have a special importance in that they mark the passion, death and resurrection of Christ.¹² In 2020, all of these holy days fell within the Covid lockdown period.

Worship

The notion of worship alludes to a moment of celebration or worship during which the followers of a religion pay homage to their divinity. Among Catholics, the most used term for worship is that of the Mass. When the Mass is celebrated remotely through the internet through means of communication, such as digital social networks, we speak of digitalised worship.

Digitalised worship

The expression "digitalised religiosity" refers to the manifestation of religious faith, beliefs, convictions and piety through the resources offered by the internet. In the expression "digitalised cults" we mean the religion celebrated through digital social networks.

Crisis

The notion of crisis can be understood well through the work of Ivoirian communications scholar Jules Evariste Agnini Toa. Toa quotes French communications theorist Thierry Libaert in defining crisis as "a passage between order and disorder ... perceived as an unexpected event jeopardizing the reputation and functioning of an organisation".¹³ Libaert further describes crisis as a "sudden and brutal change

10 Église Catholique en France. n.d. "Carême [Lent]". Online at: <https://eglise.catholique.fr/approfondir-sa-foi/la-celebration-de-la-foi/les-grandes-fetes-chretiennes/careme-et-paques/careme/>

11 ECF, "Carême".

12 Église Catholique en Yvelines. n.d. "Pâques et la Semaine sainte [Easter and Holy Week]. Online at: <https://www.catholique78.fr/priercelebrer/liturgie/les-fetes-catholiques/triduum-pascal/>

13 Toa JEA. 2017. "Les technologies médiatiques dans le traitement de la crise de Grand-Bassam en Côte d'Ivoire [Media technologies in the treatment of the Grand-Bassam crisis in Côte d'Ivoire]", *Communication, technology and développement* [Communication,

between two states, which causes a rupture of equilibrium ... a serious phenomenon, but nevertheless normal, disrupting the functioning of an organisation, and altering its course".¹⁴

Resilience

As for the notion of resilience, there is the definition provided given by Beninese-Ivorian sociologist Francis Akindès, who has written, "Resilience is to faith, in the face of a crisis, the ability to resist, to adapt, to respond, to bounce back, to rebuild, to self-organise, to return to its state of equilibrium, to absorb a shock, to load structurally, to perpetuate."¹⁵

COVID IN CÔTE D'IVOIRE: FINDINGS, PROBLEMS AND QUESTIONS

Having defined the concepts of the study, it is important now to specify the context, findings, problem and questions underlying this research pertaining to Covid-19. The reality and context of Covid in Côte d'Ivoire can be perceived, initially, through a number of observations about government measures, including restrictions and constraints on individual and religious freedoms. Côte d'Ivoire recorded its first Covid case on 11 March 2020. The balance sheet from the health point of view reported 81 959 cases and 799 deaths, as of the time of this writing in 7 May 2022; yet, just days after the first case, from 16 March 2020 forward, the Ivorian authorities had already taken measures against the disease.¹⁶ These included the closure of schools and places of worship, the isolation of greater Abidjan, the curfew, the closure of land borders, the mandatory wearing of masks, the imposition of barrier measures, the closure of leisure areas, such as bars and discotheques, a ban on gatherings of more than 50 people and prohibitions on shaking hands. The last of these had direct religious and liturgical consequence in the manifestation of the peace sign during Mass, which was now to be signified by the gesture of nodding one's head in acknowledgment from a distance instead of the customary handshake.

These measures presented some problems at the level of religious practices, especially for the Catholic Church. In the middle of Lent, it was impossible to physically visit the churches to celebrate worship in assembly, to participate in the Stations of the Cross, to receive the Eucharist and to celebrate the Paschal triduum, a key moment in the Catholic faith. These problems aroused great fear among Christians and religious leaders, as well as an economic shortage in parishes.

technology and development] 4, 3 para 10 (citing Libaert T. 2001. *La Communication de crise*. Paris: Dunod, Les Topos, 9).

14 Thierry Libaert, *La Communication de crise*, 9.

15 Akindès F. 2011. *Côte d'Ivoire: La reinvention de soi dans la violence*. Dakar: CODESRIA, n.p.

16 Coronavirus disease: Côte d'Ivoire. Google. [Accessed 7 May 2022].

The Covid pandemic also raised a number of other questions: What kind of resilience did Christians in Abidjan implement in the face of the restrictive measures caused by Covid? How did they experience their religiosity in times of confinement? What were the media preferred by the parishioners of Abidjan during the period of confinement in Holy Week? What are the theological foundations of and justifications for these remote liturgical celebrations?

Finding answers to these questions was the focus of the present study. The presentation of the results of the study below is structured around five key points: (1) the perception of Covid-19 by Catholic Christians, (2) liturgical and spiritual resilience through digitalised religiosity through the use of media and social networks, (3) the formation of new forms of communities and virtual practices, (4) the theological foundations of the use of the media for the communication of faith and, finally, (5) the role of digital culture and digital social networks in the popular religious expression of crisis.

PERCEPTIONS OF COVID-19 BY CATHOLIC CHRISTIANS: AN ATTACK BY THE DEVIL IN WHICH BELIEVERS WIN

The measure banning gatherings of more than fifty people was initiated on 16 March 2020 by the government during the extraordinary meeting of the National Security Council (NSC), chaired by the president of the Republic. This measure was taken 18 days after the beginning of Lent, which had begun with the celebration of Ash Wednesday on 26 February 2020 and which marked the beginning of the spiritual and liturgical journey towards the Feast of Easter. But how was Covid perceived by Catholic Christians in Côte d'Ivoire? The answer obtained from listening to the focus group for the present study was that "Covid is an attack from the devil".

According to some of the Catholic Christians whose words were collected during the focus group, Covid and the lockdown that followed were perceived by parishioners as "a personal and spiritual fight", "an attack of the devil", "a spiritual attack that began in the middle of Lent and ending the liturgical celebrations" and "a ruse of the devil to weaken the faith of the Catholic Christian that because the Church was closed without celebration."¹⁷ Moreover, if Covid was perceived as an attack from the devil, for some Christians, it was also perceived that believers would emerge victorious from this attack. The following quotes from the focus group attest to this idea of the victory of the believer over the pandemic: "The devil thought to weaken the faith of Christians, but he allowed us to find other ways to praise God", "The Church came out of this matter grown", "During the lockdown I thanked GOD, because he used the stupidity of the devil to awaken the faith of Christians."¹⁸

17 Interview with focus group participants by C Gnonzion. Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire. c. April 2020–May 2022.

18 Interview with focus group participants.

LITURGICAL AND SPIRITUAL RESILIENCE OF BELIEVERS THROUGH A DIGITALISED RELIGIOSITY

Beyond the perception of Christians of the challenges of the Covid-19 lockdown, it is also important to account for liturgical and spiritual resilience through digitalised religiosity and the use of media and digital social networks. From the point of view of liturgical resilience, there were adaptations at two levels. First, there was rationing and limitation of the participants in the Mass, and then there was the transition from the church of assembled faithful to the church of connected faithful.

One of the structural responses to the ban on gatherings of more than fifty people was rationing and limitation of participation in the Mass. This was accomplished through ration tickets, which had to be secured from the parish every week. Each Christian had to take an individual number, choosing the time of the Mass in which they wished to participate. Once the number of fifty people was reached, it was necessary to choose another time of passage.

Apart from the rationing of places in churches, resilience in times of Covid mainly manifested itself in forms of religiosity that were no longer face-to-face and involving physical interaction. There was a shift from assemblies of the faithful to building connections among the faithful, and there was a change in the order of community interactions through the use of the media. The new order of interaction was no longer face-to-face. But it was a new order of interactions centred on virtual distance via the media, especially digital social networks, namely Facebook and then WhatsApp, during the Pascal triduum, as well as WhatsApp forums, web-based radio stations, the television station KTO, and the Ivorian Catholic radio station Radio Espoir. The celebration of Holy Thursday was the one for which the media were most used, followed by Good Friday and then Holy Saturday. The most used social network was Facebook, followed by WhatsApp.

These efforts at digital and communicated resilience were initiated in the face of the great fear that parish leaders had of losing ardour, piety, faith and, ultimately, Christians. If it was impossible to see Christians, greet them physically and talk to them, what could be done to keep them in the faith? These efforts prompted many reflections from leaders of Christian movements in Abidjan parishes who participated in focus groups conducted for the present study. One participant observed, "Christians began to ask questions of the various parish priests who raised the problem, it was at this moment that the Vatican gave the order to the various leaders of the communities to use the means of communication through the Internet to keep Catholic Christians always in the faith."¹⁹ Another religious leader observed, "As the leader of a prayer group when the problem arose, the clergy sent us notes asking us to do everything possible to be able to keep Christians but also our members in the bath of the spiritual. This is how we set up a web radio that works 24 hours a day and that has helped to maintain the flame of the members of our group."²⁰ Still another religious leader participating in the study observed, "The

¹⁹ Interview with focus group participants.

²⁰ Interview with focus group participants.

various leaders have made efforts to keep their members in prayer, either through WhatsApp forums or online publications. But it is difficult to maintain this flame if the Christian is not previously in a group on the parish.”²¹ This last participant raised a possible limit of social networks, in that they can only be useful if the Christian belonged to a face-to-face community.

FORMATION OF NEW FORMS OF VIRTUAL EUCHARISTIC COMMUNITIES AND PRACTICES

Covid has led to the formation of virtual Christian communities. Though the formation of these virtual communities was imposed during the period of lockdown, it is notable that many Christians remained at home during the time when the churches were opened, forgetting that virtual religiosity is an exceptional case. The advent of the pandemic also gave rise to the concept of virtual communion. This expression and the practice to which it alludes emerged during the focus group.

Virtual communion can be defined as: “Communion with Christ present in the Eucharist, not by receiving him sacramentally, but by the sole desire stemming from a faith animated by charity.” Focus group participants also added, “The value of spiritual communion rests on faith in the presence of Christ in the Eucharist as a source of life, love and unity. It is a privileged way of uniting with Christ for those who cannot receive communion bodily.” It was also noted that the lockdown period during Holy Week 2020 was also marked by the exhibition of the Blessed Sacrament in the Archdiocese of Abidjan and it was said to be “a comfort for Christians to worship the Eucharist”.

THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS OF THE USE OF THE MEDIA FOR THE COMMUNICATION OF THE FAITH

It is important to understand the theological foundations of this use of the media for the communication of the faith. Following the fracturing and fears aroused in Christian communities by Covid-related restrictions, the concern of clergy and community leaders was the maintenance of the flame of belief. Therefore, there was need to communicate the faith.

To understand the concept of communication supporting these efforts at communication of faith, one can look the definition of communication offered by French philosopher and political theorist Francis Balle, to the effect that communication is “the action consisting, for humans, of exchanging messages, face-to-face or at a distance, with or without the help of a media, and whatever the form or purpose of this exchange”. As Balle describes it, “Communication therefore refers to both an action and the result of that action: *communicare et communitas*.”²² From this definition, we can adapt the idea of the purpose of communication to consider the

21 Interview with focus group participants.

22 Balle F (ed). 2006. *Lexique d'information communication* [Lexicon of communications information]. Paris: Dalloz, 82.

purpose of the communication of faith. And in the communication of faith, there is an insistence on media and mass media. Several studies and publications have indeed highlighted the importance of the media in the communication of the faith.

The pastoral instruction *Aetatis novae* on social communications for the twentieth anniversary of the papal encyclical *Communio et progressio* notes that: "The means of communication can and must be instruments at the service of the programme of re-evangelisation and new evangelisation of the Church in the contemporary world."²³ But long before that, the *Communio et progressio* had shown the importance of the media in proclaiming the Gospel. As the encyclical stated, "The media are rightly among the most effective resources and possibilities that man can use to strengthen charity, itself a source of communion."²⁴

In the context of the Covid pandemic, as Cameroonian priest and social scientist Noël Sofack points out, "The health crisis has therefore been an opportunity to strengthen the link that the Catholic Church has forged with the media since the Second Vatican Council."²⁵ The Covid pandemic crisis enabled the Church to "equip itself with electronic culture to transmit the message of Jesus to the men of audiovisual, digital and Internet civilisation".²⁶ Much as Pope John Paul II had seen in the Internet "a new forum for proclaiming the Gospel",²⁷ Pope Benedict XVI had considered social networks to be "doors of truth and faith" and "new spaces for evangelisation".²⁸ This is because they were not a pure virtual space or disconnected from a "real" life but, on the contrary, an element of social life that was increasingly important in interpersonal relationships. During the Covid pandemic, these digital media offered a "real" possibility, through the "virtual", to meet God.

It can therefore be said that the "rise in power of the spiritual uses of the media ... which has made it possible to give the faithful the opportunity to follow religious services through radio, television, Facebook live, and other digital media" finds its foundation and follows several writings of the magisterium of the Church.²⁹ It is also important to highlight "double religiosity" of the virtual and the real that prevailed in the face of Covid-19 during the 2020 lockdown in Côte d'Ivoire.

23 Vatican, Pontifical Council for Social Communications. 1992. Pastoral Instruction *Aetatis novae* on Social Communications for the 20th anniversary of *Communio and Progressio*. Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, para 11.

24 Second Vatican Council. 1971. Pastoral Instruction *Communio and Progressio* (On the Means of Social Communication), 23 May, para 12.

25 Sofack N. 2021. "Catholicisme et Covid-19 au cameroun: contraintes et resilience [Catholicism and Covid-19 in Cameroon]", *Revue de l'ACAREF*.

26 Sofack, "Catholicisme et Covid-19 au cameroun".

27 Pope John Paul II. 2002. "Internet: A New Forum for Proclaiming the Gospel", Message for the 36th World Communications Day, Vatican City, 12 May.

28 Pope Benedict XVI. 2013. "Social Networks: portals of truth and faith; new spaces for evangelisation", Message of His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI for the 47th World Communications Day", Vatican City, 24 January (quoted in Sofack, "Catholicisme et Covid-19 au cameroun", 493).

29 Sofack, "Catholicisme et Covid-19 au cameroun".

DIGITAL CULTURE, DIGITAL SOCIAL NETWORKS AND THE EXPRESSION OF POPULAR CRISIS RELIGIOSITY

Studies have highlighted the use of new media by evangelical and Pentecostal pastors and preachers. The latter, in particular, make extensive use of the new media for the communication of the faith and to expand their ministries. They have websites and are present on digital social networks. These means are an integral part of the communication of the faith and the expansion of these religious leaders. They thus make Marshall McLuhan's expression that "the real message is the medium itself" a reality, because the medium determines and conditions the message. For the faithful who use them, the media are not just means of communicating the faith through ministries, but constituent objects of the message of faith to be communicated.³⁰ These preachers make structured, elaborate and professional use of social networks in their vocation and profession of ministry.

But this professional use is not the main focus of the present study, which has focused mainly on the perspectives of laypeople in the church and their perspective on media use in the context of a crisis. We consider these "popular" laypeople to be amateurs, because their communications, mostly through Facebook and WhatsApp, are not part of a constructed and well-elaborated pastoral process. The study focused on the use of mobile phones and digital social networks by these amateurs, not only to disseminate messages with religious connotations, but also to keep in touch with fellow believers and to maintain their religiosity in times of Covid and confinement.

It is in this sense, that we note that the advent of Covid has given rise to the manifestation of a "double religiosity". The first religiosity, popular and profane, sees in Covid an attack of the devil. This perception does not seem far from those who think in terms of a conspiracy. There is, in this an attempt to atone for the violence of the pandemic, something of a theory of the scapegoat, "because we need a culprit" as theologian René Girard points out.³¹

But we also have the manifestation of a form of a second and non-secular religiosity that one could even describe as "intellectual". The latter can be seen through the hierarchy of the church, which apprehends the need for communication strategies in a context of crisis with much more intellectual and theological hindsight, the heart of which demands information and uninterrupted contact between the cardinals, princes and leaders at the top of the summit and the flock of the Christian faithful in the grassy fields below. It therefore appears that in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic in Côte d'Ivoire and especially during the lockdown period, digital social

³⁰ See Asamoah-Gyadu JK. 2009. "'We Are on the Internet': Contemporary Pentecostalism in Africa and the New Culture of Online Religion", in Hackett RJ, Soares B et al (eds). *New Media and Religious Transformations in Africa*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 157-170.

³¹ Girard R. "Le 'bouc émissaire' [The "Scapegoat"]". Online at: <https://www.les-crises.fr/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/le-bouc-emissaire.pdf>

networks served as a space for the expression of a popular religiosity that may be framed by leaders, but which also often erupts in a spontaneity dictated by digital culture and context.

CONCLUSION

Côte d'Ivoire is a secular republic in which freedom of expression and religious freedom are recognised freedoms guaranteed by the fundamental law of the Constitution of the Republic of Côte d'Ivoire, 2016. The advent of the Covid pandemic has put these constitutional freedoms to the test, inviting the state to intrude upon the field of religion by imposing measures of restrictions and constraints on these freedoms. The state has certainly not questioned the "freedom of worship", but it has imposed limitations on "freedom of participation in worship" that have caused much frustration among believers, especially Catholics.

The present study showed the type of resilience developed by parishioners as a response to government restrictions and bans. The use of the media, especially of social media networks, in a crisis context and in an unstructured way, can sometimes entail inaccuracies and amateurism that fall short of crisis solutions that are structured, elaborate and professional. Despite these limitations, the present study has also shown that the use of social media by Christians in Abidjan in the time of Covid was justified and is based on writings of the magisterium of the Catholic Church from the documents of Vatican II, Pope John Paul II to Pope Benedict XVI and beyond. We can learn from this magisterium that social media networks offer a "real" possibility through the "virtual" to meet God.