

Article

Religion and Social Media: Communication Strategies by the Spanish Episcopal Conference

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Abstract: Over the past few years, we have seen significant changes in religious values and practices. This article describes and analyzes communication strategies carried out by the Spanish Episcopal Conference—i.e., Conferencia Episcopal Española (CEE)—through social media. For this, we have followed up the conference’s activity on Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube for the last three years. Along with the evolution of followers, we identify and assess the messages that have received the majority of likes and the content that has generated the most controversy. At the same time, a comparison has been made between activity in the media in which the above-mentioned institution participates in Spain and the rest of the Episcopal Conferences in Latin America. Results allow us to obtain a diachronic vision of the CEE strategies on social media in order to generate a strong virtual community and on how it tries to connect with the thoughts and feelings of followers. In conclusion, it can be confirmed that social media is one of the most enthusiastic and outstanding platforms for Catholics to demonstrate their commitment to their Church, by which they form a common space to share and celebrate their vision of the world.

Keywords: Conferencia Episcopal Española (CEE); Catholic Church; religion; social media; communication strategies; virtual communities; Spain

1. Introduction and State of the Art

Throughout history, one of the fundamental tasks of any religion has been the systematic spread of its beliefs, values, and practices. It should be remembered that the origin of the term propaganda, before it adopted a pejorative meaning, dates back to the 17th century, “when Pope Gregory XV promulgated in 1622 the Congregatio de Propaganda Fide, a mission organized by the Vatican to counter rival ideas of the Protestant Reformation” (Clark 2000, p. 7). For centuries, religious authority used artistic manifestations in architecture, sculpture, and painting as vehicles to communicate its doctrines. In the Spanish case, after the religious persecution of Catholics and their hierarchies in the Civil War (1936–1939), especially during the first Franco regime, cinema became an ideal means of evangelization, aimed at large groups of the population by enjoying a predominant place in popular leisure (Moral and Colmenero 2015). Moreover, throughout the 20th century and up until today, the Spanish Catholic Church maintains a significant representation in mass media through programs in public broadcasting services and, in turn, being part of privately-owned media projects in the press, radio, and television.

Present social media platforms have become a relevant communication channel with interactive participation. They allow for what Manuel Castells called more than a decade ago “mass self-communication”, which increases the autonomy of subjects by converting them into senders and receivers of messages (Castells 2009, p. 25). Social media platforms are technological tools that enable the appearance of social interaction that favors the exchange of ideas, information, and knowledge

between people and organizations, and institutions and their audiences, becoming a vehicle for social and cultural transformation due to its ability to generate collective or individual opinions (Valentini 2015, p. 172; Gershon 2016, pp. 196–97). In addition to social media being an ideal channel to promote ideas and disseminate persuasive discourses through two-way communication (Auger 2013, p. 369), it also facilitates the expansion of the participatory and interactive commitment of followers “that encompasses attachment cognitive, attitudinal, and behavioral” (Yang and Kang 2009, p. 323).

Different studies have explored the concept of commitment or engagement generated through social media from different perspectives. These perspectives have demonstrated an ability to start and build relationships in non-profit associations (Smitko 2012, p. 633); generate attractive political discourses that constitute a community (Adams and McCorkindale 2013); convey a perception of authenticity and accessibility from CEOs and companies’ messages to create positive effects on society (Men and Tsai 2016); produce collective feelings by creating a positive word of mouth (WOM); stimulate the participation of its members (Taylor and Kent 2014); prove that, in the increasingly noisy environment of social media, there is relevance in community size and its ability to bring together conversations that are essential to achieve the degree of desired interest (Guo and Saxton 2018).

In recent times, we have witnessed significant changes in how communication technologies influence the way people practice religion. This reality has prompted the emergence of “digital religion”, which describes the changes that produce and deepen one’s study of evolution (Campbell and Vitullo 2016). It is a concept that analyzes the way in which online religious phenomena are articulated and constructed in different cultures, grouping investigations referred to with the new interrelations that emerge between religious processes and digital platforms. Consequently, digital religion spans from the birth of the earliest entities of cyber church—often with websites created by independent groups who seek to replicate or reflect some of the characteristics of the church through a participatory design such as a religious text scriptorium page or a place to leave a prayer request (Campbell 2013, p. 1)—to platforms that give voice and leadership to previously silenced groups, such as Muslim women (Gray 2019), or have adapted traditional norms and rites for online antagonists and critics (Hutchings 2019). From a communication economy perspective, this is an area that, in recent years, reflects a process of concentration in the United States, and its development has led to the creation of large media conglomerates that generate high traffic on the Internet (Ward 2018; Montalbano 2018).

Religious affiliation is an important identifying characteristic for social behavior. Since the end of the last century, the secularization of society and the loss of cultural homogeneity has been one of the predominant theoretical paradigms in sociological studies of religion in Spain (Pérez-Argote 2012). In many European countries, globalization, migration, and extremism have configured a context in which a positive perception of religion has been largely lost (Dinham and Shaw 2017). Many secular values prevailing in these societies, however, have a religious background that usually goes unnoticed. In the last 40 years, there have been significant variations in the social condition of Spanish believers and their religious self-definition. “The most intense change has occurred in the Catholic religion both quantitatively (from 89% to 68.7%) and qualitative with a decrease in the level of practice” (Rosado et al. 2019), increasing from 49% to 59.3% by those who declare themselves non-practicing Catholics. According to Foessa, 15.3% of Spain’s population declares themselves to be non-believers or indifferent towards religion. Further, 10.2% identify as atheist, and only 3.4% belong to other, non-Catholic religions (Fernández-Maíllo 2019, p. 50).

The Spanish Episcopal Conference or Conferencia Episcopal Española (CEE) is a permanent institution constituted by the Bishops of Spain under the authority of the Pope. According to its statutes, its pastoral functions is that of strengthening the evangelizing mission of the Church, coordinating ecclesial activities of a national nature, fostering relations with other conferences, and offering guiding criteria regarding relations with civil authority. Within its organizational chart we find the General Secretary, on whom the Press Office has placed in charge of relations with different publics and managing their social media.

Our object of study assesses how an institution characterized by a rigid hierarchy (Naim 2013, p. 292) and marked traditional character adapts to a new reality fostered by a communication revolution that demands immediate reaction to social events and language adoption to each local culture. The link between religion and technology configures the starting point of this work. This is a link as complex and exciting as the social condition of human beings. However, it should be pointed out that our central focus in this study is the examination of changes in communication management that the Spanish Episcopal Conference, or Conferencia Episcopal Española (CEE), as an organization, has produced in Spain.

2. Materials and Methods

The main objective of our research is to describe and analyze CEE's digital communication processes and tools, and to identify the organization's capacity to influence how followers live out their religious experience. Research design examines both mixed quantitative and qualitative data. The former is related to the evolution of user numbers and their interaction with the institution on the different social media analyzed, for which the Welovroi tool was used. This allows us to know the evolution of the organization's digital presence. In addition, as a counterpart for the analysis, Facebook Analytics and Twitter Analytics were used.

The qualitative aspects include variables related to the interest generated by certain messages or content proposed by the organization, based on its ability to generate positive comments and viral trends. The latter has allowed us to assess the relationship between consumption and involvement with content in this case study.

The research design has been structured in three stages: Exploratory, analytical, and conclusive. The exploratory phase included carrying out a documentary study to collect information from external sources and primary data on the CEE itself. For this purpose, interviews were held in the previous exploratory phase with those responsible in CEE's press office, which enabled us to identify what resources were allocated and how social media were managed in relation to the strategic lines of CEE's institutional communication. The social media selected for the study are Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, as they were identified as the platforms in which most activity was carried out during the defined time frame starting in 2017 and ending in May 2019. The period selected covered from Epiphany 2017 to Easter 2019 in an attempt to study how social media actions are connected to liturgical celebrations and communication strategies from CEE. In short, the present study can be considered a descriptive historical analysis of messages that CEE has posted on social media, which also allows us to identify audiences' engagement based on their reaction and participation. Instagram and Flickr were dismissed in this opportunity for the purposes of this research. The first because CEE's account was opened after the time frame set in the study, specifically in September 2017, once the analysis had already begun. Regarding Flickr, although the account was created in June 2010, it was dismissed due to the low number of followers. Even now they have not one hundred (92 followers).

This research is situated in the middle of a growing process of media convergence, in which traditional media and practices coexist with those derived from new technologies. "The link between technological and social changes is evident, but their outcomes do not have to be synchronous as this stage of convergence is characterized by progressive integration" (Baraybar-Fernández and Linares-Palomar 2016, p. 141). Consequently, we consider it essential to investigate and compare social media activity from those traditional networks in which the CEE is a reference shareholder. We are referring to 13TV, a national general television station that broadcasts through Digital Terrestrial Television (DTT), cable, and Movistar, the main internet television platform in Spain (IPTV), and also to the radio station COPE, the second most popular general station and audience leader in terms of relevant consumer time slots.

Once this phase was completed, we attempted to answer, among others, the following questions: What relevance does CEE grant to social media within its communication strategy? How have CEE's different social media evolved regarding the number of followers and their involvement with posted

contents? What issues have generated more positive engagement among users, and which ones have generated more controversy or rejection? What degree of effectiveness does CEE achieve in comparison to Episcopal Conferences from Latin America?

During the analytical phase, all data obtained were interpreted using different specific indicators to describe and analyze CEE's social media evolution. We considered which contents have generated the most satisfactory responses and which have generated the most controversy, because as institutions increase their presence on social media, it is advisable to know what contents drive public activity and to identify those emotional or informative attributes that lead to participation (Lee et al. 2017). For this purpose, the amount of likes and publications' scope on Facebook were considered in order to identify the commitment or engagement generated by institutional contents. On Twitter, in addition to likes, the number of responses and retweets was also considered for the same purpose. On the other hand, the number of subscribers and views were studied on YouTube, considering the channel's opening date as a reference. With the aim of looking in-depth into variables such as the production and use of multimedia contents, videos' scope, and other audiovisual contents produced by CEE's communication department, we carried out a quantitative analysis on the number of impressions in order to describe a ranking of the most viewed videos per year on the three social media analyzed.

The analysis has been carried out by registering the number of messages or particular publications posted; impressions or people who have seen the message; and the volume of interactions, in order to identify the level of positive or negative reactions to contents. Impressions are the total number of people for whom contents are visible, as opposed to reach, which refers to the number of people who choose to access specific contents and engage with them using interaction tools such as likes, comments, or shares. In social media, messages are the minimum content unit which can adopt different forms, for instance, images, audio or video clips, memes, etc.

3. Results

3.1. CEE Social Media Landscape

Currently, the Spanish Episcopal Conference is active in five of the eight most relevant and popular social media. The CEE manages active profiles on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, and Flickr. There is a significant contrast between the opening dates of CEE's different profiles in each social media. Illustratively, it is worth mentioning the more than six years difference between the opening of their Facebook page, 28 September 2009, and the beginning of their activity on Twitter, January 2015. The third platform under study, in this case YouTube, started to have a CEE presence on 20 October 2009, almost synchronously with messages posted on Facebook by the institution.

Nowadays, CEE also has two networks in Spain, among other traditional media. On the radio, we find COPE, with a clear leading position, and on television, 13TV with more modest audience figures. Here we focus on the presence they have on social media, more specifically on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, as stated in Table 1. These networks have even more audience online than offline, and they are even more popular than CEE's official social media.

Table 1. CEE's (Conferencia Episcopal Española) traditional networks on social media 2017–2018–2019.

| Network | Facebook | Twitter | YouTube |
|---------|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------|
| COPE | @Cope 195,115 likes 3 April 2008 | @Copel 171 followings 378,200 followers October 2007 | 78,200 subscribers 30,588,353 views 22 March 2007 |
| 13TV | @TRECEtves 81,196 likes 20 April 2011 | @Trece_es 239 followings 67,300 followers February 2011 | No official channel |

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

In short, messages and ideals of the Spanish Episcopal Conference are much more far-reaching through social media. They are being able to generate a greater number of contents related to current social interest and, consequently, this favors opportunities for conversation or entertainment. The COPE station manages to generate a wide community on their own official channel. This fact can be explained, in general, by monitoring radio in Spain, because this medium, unlike the press and despite the generation gap in its audiences, still endures the challenges of other leisure and information alternatives linked to Internet development. Spaniards consume an average of 104 min a day on radio, and more than a quarter of listeners are under the age of thirty-four (Santín and Monzoncillo 2017, p. 90).

Within television consumption in Spain, 13TV's audience ratings are in fact much lower in than the ones from other general networks. During the last quarter of 2019, 13TV reached an average of 2.1% of share, with a slightly rising trend (Barlovento Comunicación 2019). The high conversion rate of CEE's television audience into social followers is relevant, both on Facebook and Twitter. If we consider that their current average prime-time audiences are around half a million viewers and look at the data obtained, we can certify a strong loyalty with the proposed editorial line and a very valid communication channel for CEE.

3.1.1. CEE on Facebook

The Facebook page shows a growth in followers since its creation, as seen in Table 2, with less intensity during 2018 and with an evident slowdown during 2019. During 2017, CEE managed to add a total of 13,722 followers, and obtaining 1713 likes with a monthly average of 142.75. Growth was steady during 2018, with a monthly average progression of 124.16 more followers, reaching 15,298 at the end of the year, but with a lower outcome than in the previous year (−223). In the first half of 2019, this progression slows down significantly; with an average monthly increase of 37.6 followers and a total of 15,576, and a lower growth (−458) compared to the one experienced in the same period of 2018.

Table 2. CEE followers' evolution on Facebook 2017–2018–2019.

| 2017 | Jan | Feb | Mar | Apr | May | Jun | Jul | Aug | Sep | Oct | Nov | Dec |
|-----------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| Followers | 12,078 | 12,185 | 12,375 | 12,515 | 12,829 | 12,992 | 13,035 | 13,134 | 13,463 | 13,538 | 13,661 | 13,722 |
| Variation | +174 | +107 | +190 | +140 | +314 | +163 | +43 | +99 | +329 | +74 | +61 | +19 |
| 2018 | Jan | Feb | Mar | Apr | May | Jun | Jul | Aug | Sep | Oct | Nov | Dec |
| Followers | 13,872 | 13,928 | 14,081 | 14,259 | 14,437 | 14,574 | 14,718 | 14,843 | 14,953 | 15,072 | 15,198 | 15,298 |
| Variation | +122 | +56 | +153 | +178 | +137 | +144 | +125 | +110 | +119 | +126 | +100 | +120 |
| 2019 | Jan | Feb | Mar | Apr | May | Jun | Jul | Aug | Sep | Oct | Nov | Dec |
| Followers | 15,418 | 15,474 | 15,504 | 15,535 | 15,576 | N/A |
| Variation | +56 | +30 | +31 | +41 | +30 | N/A |

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

Regarding the publication rate, the average registered during 2017 was 37.6 monthly publications, which reached a total of 452 publications that year. In relation to publication seasonality, the months that coincide with vacation periods were the least profuse: Summer months, August (12 messages) and July (23 messages), together with December (12 messages). On the contrary, the months of March (63 messages) and September (52 messages) were identified with having the most activity.

In 2018, the publication rate was higher, with a monthly average of 53.83 publications and an annual total of 646. The months with the fewest publications are again August (40 posts) and July (42 post). March was again the most active month (72 messages). However, instead of September, January (64 messages) was the second month with the most publications.

During the first semester of 2019, the average of monthly publications continued with an evident dynamism (99.98) and CEE spread a total of 499 during this period; the month of April being the most abundant month in messages (115 messages) followed by January, in which we registered a smaller number (88 messages).

From the data explained so far, we can see the absence of a direct relationship between the proactive attitude from the organization and the increase in followers. Among the reasons that allow us to argue this reality, which will be dealt with more precisely in the conclusions section, it is possible to infer a certain decline in the Facebook platform itself.

Among the relevant research data, it is worth highlighting the scope achieved with the publications stated previously. The average number of impressions of the Episcopal Conference Facebook profile during 2017, as stated in Table 3, was 137,433, having the highest impression rate in the months of September (279,508) and March (229,274). On the contrary, the months of December (24,849) and August (60,158) registered a lower rate. We found a correspondence with the participation rate, identified by the number of interactions generated by community members, since the months with the best level of interactivity were September (2315 likes) and March (2157 likes). In the same way, the latter happens with the number of comments received, a total of 1672 in 2017.

Table 3. CEE impact indicators on Facebook 2017–2018–2019.

| Period | Media Impressions | Total Comments | Total Likes |
|-------------------|-------------------|----------------|-------------|
| 2017 | 137,433 | 1672 | 15,964 |
| 2018 | 135,310 | 560 | 26,053 |
| 1st semester 2019 | 154,273 | 308 | 6932 |

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

In 2018, impact was lower, the average number of impressions or people reached was 135,310, obtaining the highest level in the months of July (360,987) and December (193,328). Again, the month of August (70,369) registered the worst data for impressions, along with the months of March (80,068), April (95,241), and June (95,368). The CEE received a total of 560 comments throughout the year, a significant reduction, representing less than half of those received the previous year; instead it appreciably improves the "likes" received, a sign of acceptance by followers of the contents generated.

During the first semester of 2019, the scope data improved appreciably in April (229,274) and February (159,085). However, the average number of impressions (154,273) and the interaction, according to the comments generated (308), remain in line with 2018 impact.

3.1.2. CEE on Twitter

The growth of CEE followers in this platform presents a better evolution than previously analyzed on Facebook, as shown in Table 4. In 2017, CEE's virtual community on Twitter added 2754 individuals, which increased by 1947 in 2018, although in a lower amount (−737) compared to the previous year, and that recovered the upward trend (+190) in the first semester of 2019, increasing its users by 836.

Table 4. CEE followers' evolution on Twitter 2017–2018–2019.

| | 2017 | Jan | Feb | Mar | Apr | May | Jun | Jul | Aug | Sep | Oct | Nov | Dec |
|-----------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|-----|
| Followers | 11,044 | 11,246 | 11,529 | 11,809 | 12,015 | 12,203 | 12,315 | 12,594 | 12,860 | 13,084 | 13,293 | 13,468 | |
| Variation | +344 | +202 | +283 | +280 | +206 | +188 | +112 | +279 | +266 | +224 | +209 | +161 | |
| | 2018 | Jan | Feb | Mar | Apr | May | Jun | Jul | Aug | Sep | Oct | Nov | Dec |
| Followers | 13,658 | 13,865 | 14,109 | 14,320 | 14,453 | 14,578 | 14,697 | 14,806 | 14,915 | 15,095 | 15,255 | 15,415 | |
| Variation | +200 | +207 | +244 | +211 | +133 | +124 | +119 | +109 | +130 | +180 | +160 | +200 | |
| | 2019 | Jan | Feb | Mar | Apr | May | Jun | Jul | Aug | Sep | Oct | Nov | Dec |
| Followers | 15,615 | 15,785 | 15,970 | 16,167 | 16,327 | N/A | |
| Variation | +170 | +185 | +197 | +160 | +124 | N/A | |

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

Regarding the number of publications or tweets, the monthly average was 73.1, with a total of 881 publications during 2017. August (38) and July (62) were again the months with the lowest publication rate, while January (97) and February (90) registered greater activity. In 2018, the average of

monthly publications increased (99.08), and also the annual total (1189) by 308 more messages or tweets. Unlike the previous year, the months of the year with the lowest publication rate were May (78) and February (80). Meanwhile, October (120), September, and March (108) were the most active months. In the first semester of 2019, the total number of messages rose (499), with an average of 99.08 results more than 2018 in more than 198 tweets. The months of the year with the lowest publication rate were April (115) and May (106). Consequently, no seasonality has been detected in the increase or decrease in message diffusion during the period under study.

As shown in Table 5, the average number of impressions of the CEE Twitter profile during 2017 was 213,961, with November (314,000) and March (256,357) being the months with the best rate and, on the contrary, the months of August (95,998) and February (154,135) the worst. Its relationship with the interactivity rate is direct. The months with the highest retweet rate (RT)—that is, to share and make messages viral with all your followers—were March (1788 RT), December (1681 RT), and November (1424 RT). The same occurs with another variable interrelated with the rate of impressions—the mentions received. The total annual average is 393.91 mentions, with September (600), November (590), and March (559) being the best months in this regard.

Table 5. CEE impact indicators on Twitter 2017–2018–2019.

| 2017 | Jan | Feb | Mar | Apr | May | Jun | Jul | Aug | Sep | Oct | Nov | Dec |
|-------------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| Impressions | 163,376 | 154,135 | 256,357 | 250,000 | 222,335 | 168,313 | 160,056 | 95,998 | 258,000 | 167,000 | 314,000 | 240,000 |
| Mentions | 119 | 314 | 559 | 315 | 380 | 430 | 520 | 273 | 600 | 314 | 590 | 313 |
| RT | 1029 | 1044 | 1788 | 980 | 931 | 1159 | 993 | 592 | 1255 | 1179 | 1424 | 1681 |
| Favorites | 1200 | 1382 | 2135 | 1900 | 1146 | 1474 | 1203 | 837 | 1704 | 1559 | 1710 | 3627 |
| 2018 | Jan | Feb | Mar | Apr | May | Jun | Jul | Aug | Sep | Oct | Nov | Dec |
| Impressions | 306,00 | 371,000 | 383,000 | 294,000 | 193,000 | 242,000 | 245,780 | 201,210 | 200,836 | 302,875 | 327,000 | 310,254 |
| Mentions | 370 | 434 | 528 | 587 | 460 | 389 | 301 | 299 | 270 | 334 | 401 | 362 |
| RT | 2000 | 2120 | 2072 | 2081 | 2102 | 2090 | 2080 | 2000 | 1900 | 2102 | 2304 | 2150 |
| Favorites | 4339 | 4452 | 1875 | 1942 | 2503 | 2603 | 2598 | 1207 | 2068 | 3687 | 2458 | 3500 |
| 2019 | Jan | Feb | Mar | Apr | May | Jun | Jul | Aug | Sep | Oct | Nov | Dec |
| Impressions | 210,000 | 220,000 | 210,000 | 292,000 | 233,000 | N/A |
| Mentions | 158 | 207 | 298 | 436 | 351 | N/A |
| RT | 692 | 1159 | 2030 | 1681 | 980 | N/A |
| Favorites | 1044 | 1203 | 2560 | 1901 | 908 | N/A |

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

In 2018, the number of impressions obtained an average increase of 67,452 (with a total of 281,413). Regarding seasonality, although March (383,000) was again one of the months with the most impressions, February (371,000) had the best figures, although the previous year had one of the worst records in this area, and during 2019, it did not achieve relevant results. The interactivity rate with the highest RT on CEE account occurred in November (2304 RT) and December (2150 RT), in the same way this happened with the number of mentions received, again showing its relationship with the rate of impressions.

One of the most striking issues, related to the management of this social media, is the use of two similar accounts: @confepiscopal and @prensacee. The first has been chosen in this study, as it is the official account of the CEE, which “retweets” many of the contents of the second, but with greater activity and periodicity.

3.1.3. CEE on YouTube

Regarding the type of audiovisual content distributed by CEE, videos' characteristics coincide with the research carried out previously by several authors (Cancelo et al. 2015, pp. 119–28; Pérez Dasilva and Santos 2017, p. 1376), which highlight how they are directly related to the liturgical calendar, messages from religious leaders, and social activities supported by the institution.

Consequently, unidirectional communication prevails with a manifest promotional intention of religious beliefs and values. The use of audiovisual platforms such as YouTube as a complement to further distribution is carried out in a manner which misuses the two-way nature of social media and their clear potential for creating an environment for dialogue with their followers.

The inclusion of videos in CEE's messages is also significant, a very successful practice to increase the degree of satisfaction of the community towards the content, as evidenced by the increase in the percentage of "likes" received in response to those that only use texts. In general, the practice of including videos is widespread in CEE's communication actions, as shown in Table 6, with Facebook achieving the most views. In turn, the YouTube channel stands out for its excellent results.

Table 6. CEE's most popular videos on Twitter, Facebook, and Youtube 2017–2018–2019.

| Twitter | 2017 | 2018 | 2019 |
|-----------------|-----------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------|
| First Position | 2 December 2017 Primera Vela 3375 | 16 March 2018 Día del Seminario 7500 | 10 May 2019 Argüello San Juan 2268 |
| Second Position | 12 July 2017 Celiacos 2224 | 7 February 2018 Trata de personas 2300 | 8 February 2019 Juntos contra la trata 1362 |
| Third Position | 4 September 2017 Vuelta al cole 2174 | 1 March 2018 Jóvenes Sínodo 2300 | Easter La Iglesia: vecina de la España vaciada 1060 |
| Facebook | 2017 | 2018 | 2019 |
| First Position | 13 June 2017 Corpus Christi 15,395 | 16 March 2018 Día del Seminario 8500 | Easter Semana Santa 6597 |
| Second Position | 29 May 2017 Apostolado Seglar 11,500 | 13 April 2018 Clase religión 5300 | 22 March 2019 Jornada por la Vida 3700 |
| Third Position | 4 September 2017 Celiacos 13,122 | 14 February 2018 Cuaresma deporte 4700 | N/A Labor educativa La Iglesia en la educación 3502 |
| YouTube | 2017 | 2018 | 2019 |
| First Position | 14 Apr 2017 Viernes Santo 5262 | 2 February 2018 Vida Consagrada 4400 | N/A Labor Cultural 1 Semana Santa 5000 |
| Second Position | 16 May 2017 Comunion 3486 | 16 March 2018 Día del Seminario 1400 | N/A Labor educativa 1 La Iglesia en la educación 1500 |
| Third Position | 1 March 2017 Ceniza 2649 | 14 February 2018 Cuaresma I 1200 | N/A Labor educativa Un gol al fracaso escolar 1300 |

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

With the intention of illustrating the ability to generate more visits in a short period by using audiovisual messages and, at the same time, as an example of the controversies raised in the community regarding the messages proposed by CEE during the time frame of the investigation, it seems appropriate to dedicate a space to a specific case study: The video published on the occasion of the festivity of Santa Cecilia, patron saint of music. This video was the one that caused the most impact in a shorter time. Produced by the CEE's own communication office under the title of "the importance of music for the Church", it sparked the greatest controversy among the followers. The message was intended to highlight the importance of music in liturgical celebrations and encouraged followers on CEE's social media to participate with their voice or playing any instrument in these religious events.

According to the CEE communication office, one of the main objectives here was to connect with younger followers, trying to express the concept of how music is a valuable element for the celebration and prayer of their faithful supporters. CEE realized that the most popular videos have a musical background which connects to young people's consumption patterns regarding popular culture. On the contrary, more textual and traditional contents provoked rejection or contempt, particularly from teenage audiences.

The video provoked numerous comments and reactions with contradictory opinions in just over two hours. The generating element of the controversy was the use of the song *Despacito*, by composer Luis Fonsi, very popular at that time. In just over two hours, it had an impact of more than 6800 views on Twitter, 168 RT, 114 likes, and 88 comments; while on Facebook the video got a total of 8325 views, being shared 135 times, with 90 likes, 110 dislikes, and 77 comments. Although the video tried to convey that music helps to celebrate and pray better, in the face of numerous negative reactions from followers, the Episcopal Conference decided to withdraw it from its official channels.

In order to deepen the study of this case, in a timely manner and due to the increase in Instagram use in Spain during 2019, which was widely used by young audience profiles ([International Advertising Bureau \(IAB\)](#)), we observed that in this platform the content had a good reception, with 90 reproductions in that short period of time, with an average reproduction superior to one visualization every 120, and no negative comments. This data allows us to elaborate certain hypotheses related to the heterogeneity of audiences that we developed in the conclusions section, although this assessment exceeds the scope of our study.

3.1.4. CEE and Latin American Episcopal Conferences Social Media

Spanish Episcopal Conference presents results comparable to the rest of countries with Episcopal Conferences with a presence on social media, especially in the Ibero-American region. By way of illustration, we can appreciate the data obtained from the Episcopal Conferences of Brazil and Mexico, which triple their statistics on Facebook and Twitter profiles. The case of Brazil is significant, with more than 87,000 followers on Twitter and 257,582 on Facebook. The figures obtained by the Mexican episcopate, with 38,300 followers in the first social media and 54,763 in the second, are also relevant. Undoubtedly, the numbers are still very far from the current figures of CEE. It's true that these countries have a population greater than that of Spain, more than four times in the case of Brazil and almost three times in the case of Mexico. Nonetheless, Venezuela, with a population similar to the Spanish one, presents better results on Twitter than the CEE. Additionally, the Nicaragua, Argentina, and Colombia Episcopal Conferences considerably exceed the results of Spain in the number of followers on Facebook.

By contrast, the Spanish Episcopal Conference performs above average on YouTube. In fact, it leads the ranking with respect to other Episcopal Conferences in Latin America in terms of views, as Table 7 shows. The official channel of the CEE has more than 6,645,154 views, quadrupling figures with respect to other official channels of the rest of the episcopal conferences.

Table 7. Comparison of the CEE on YouTube with the Latin American Episcopal Conferences.

| Episcopal Conference | Facebook | Twitter | YouTube |
|----------------------|---------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|
| España | @conferenciaepiscopal 15,964 likes 28 September 2009 | @Confepiscopal 29 followings 17,500 followers January 2015 | 5730 subscribers 3,636,488 views 20 October 2009 |
| Antillas | @aebishops 738 likes 13 February 2018 | N/A | N/A |
| Argentina | @Conferenciaepiscopalargentina 30,335 likes 1 July 2011 | @Prensa CEA 426 followings 10,300 followers June 2010 | 1440 subscribers 168,093 views 7 June 2009 |

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

Table 7. Cont.

| Episcopal Conference | Facebook | Twitter | YouTube |
|----------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|
| Bolivia | @ConferenciaEpiscopalBoliviana 646 likes 1 May 2019 | @AlertasCEB 85 followings 593 followers February 2014 | 1230 subscribers 412,380 views 11 August 2009 |
| Brasil | @cnbbnacional 257,582 likes 14 July 2011 | @CNBB Nacional 107 followings 87,000 followers November 2009 | 3390 subscribers 420, 806 views 30 October 2008 |
| Chile | @Iglesiacatolicachile 3830 likes 2 November 2010, | @iglesiachile 75 followings 13,900 followers March 2009 | 797 subscribers 489,640 views 11 April 2008 |
| Colombia | @episcopadocol 29,162 likes 28 July 2011 | @episcopadocol 422 followings 14,700 followers August 2011 | 2990 subscribers 550,464 views 11 September 2013 |
| Cuba | @conferenciadeobisposdecuba 2392 likes 14 June 2011 | @Iglesiacubana 37 followings 96 followers September 2015 | N/A |
| Ecuador | @Confepec 24,345 likes 17 November 2010 | @Confepec 796 followings 3405 followers September 2010 | 416 subscribers 101,338 views 8 May 2015 |
| El Salvador | N/A | @iglesia_sv 152 followings 1827 followers January 2013 | N/A |
| Guatemala | @ComunicacioncatolicaCEG 7957 likes 16 January 2011 | @Secomsceg 729 followings 382 followers January 2012 | N/A |

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

4. Discussion and Conclusions

Throughout history, one of the most significant characteristics of the Catholic Church has been its endurance. As an organization, the Church has always been able to adapt itself to different cultural changes and to several political scenarios. In recent times, there has been a growing academic interest in the study of relations between religion and new media, since “new mediations based on older communication practices serve as a vital element for the evolutionary nature of religious authority and the forms of spiritual organization” (Cheong 2017, p. 25).

CEE has made an effort to engage with new information technologies through the inclusion of social media in its communication plans in a systematic and professional way, as confirmed by interviews with staff members from the institution's press office. Additionally, we can ratify that the Catholic Church continues to generate a considerable level of attraction and interest through online contents. CEE is trying to integrate social media into its own institutional culture, aligning them with the institution's traditions, values, and beliefs. This has been verified when analyzing the contents of those messages that have generated more acceptance and interaction from the audience.

Communication management carried out by the CEE Press Office on the analyzed social media can be considered efficient, taking into account the resources allocated. Whilst considered a valuable activity, it does not seem to be a priority. This situation may respond, among other elements, to a communication strategy design mainly based on the convergence and integration of traditional media owned by CEE as the keystone in generating and developing a strong community on social media. Numerous studies, such as those conducted by the International Advertising Bureau (International Advertising Bureau (IAB)) or Zenith Media (2019) in the Spanish case, endorse this communication policy, because online consumption is more successful when the content is linked to entertainment and information from previous proven strategies.

One of the most relevant weaknesses in CEE social media management is the absence of content segmentation in relation to the platforms they have chosen to appear in. The same contents are posted regardless of the specific bias and nature of each social media. This situation shows a lack of strategical

analysis and knowledge from the institution about the patterns of use from followers, which is very useful for establishing segmentation strategies, considering geographical, temporal, age, or lifestyle elements for each of the social media involved (Ritter et al. 2013).

The use of two similar profiles on Twitter, @confepiscopal and @prensacee, is quite confusing. The latter illustrates a communication policy with a wide margin for improvement. This is an example of a one-way model, that amplifies official messages rather than serving as a platform for generating meaningful interactions. The unidirectional nature above mentioned has also been shown through the actions undertaken for exceptional situations such as the crisis caused by COVID-19. In this case, CEE's social media have limited themselves to spreading messages from different communities that retransmit ceremonies and religious services so that people can practice their faith online, through events such as the Holy Mass, the recitation of the Rosary, or virtual catechesis for children preparing for their First Communion. CEE has neither generated its own contents for these events, nor interactions about them. On the contrary, and with great acceptance, CEE has posted messages about the social actions that the Spanish Catholic Church has undertaken to face the COVID-19 pandemic. Face mask production at convents or the anonymous letters of encouragement that have been sent to the sick from different religious congregations could serve as examples.

Overall, CEE's social media present a significant level of interactivity. It seems appropriate to remember that "relationships begin to be truly fruitful when they last over time and try to flee from a simple eventual exchange. As these are developed and maintained over time, the ties between the parties become closer and trust increases" (Tuñez et al. 2011, p. 55). The CEE has achieved a faithful and constantly growing community, although it is worth noting the loss of influence in the case of Facebook, which is more related to the constant decline of users registered in this platform at a global level since 2017 than with the management of the Spanish institution itself.

Despite their liturgical potential, CEE's social media is understood here more as an ally in generating sociability among the community of Catholics, rather than as a means of disseminating religious doctrines.

In relation to this aspect, as users do not stop using social media, constant migration to new platforms has been a reality. CEE also has an active position on Instagram, and future research would require its inclusion in further analysis. The opportunity provided by this platform to connect with the younger audiences, which value the possibility of accessing stories about aspects unknown (Newman et al. 2015, p. 82), encourages the recommendation of its use for digital religion purposes in a country such as Spain, with youngsters being less and less interested in Catholicism.

Although this exceeds the purposes of our research, the assessment of the Despacito video case study on Instagram, with a majority of young followers and no negative reactions to the message, shows us how content management for different audiences is essential. As on the analyzed social media, the video received very negative responses, and new hypotheses arise for further research in the future regarding the importance of content segmentation and comparing older and more conservative followers with younger users. In any case, a more specific analysis of the type of responses from the audience should be a valuable line of research to be considered.

CEE's positive evolution on Twitter is remarkable, and the massification of its contents on YouTube is very significant, as reflected in comparison with the rest of the Latin American Episcopal Conferences. We have not detected a seasonality bias in the posting of messages regarding the most important dates on the ecclesiastical calendar. Among other reasons, the lack of resources and the consideration of social media as an extra, and not a priority, within CEE may explain this finding. Illustratively, we can mention the decrease in the number of messages published during Christmas 2017, a relevant moment for believers, with numerous celebrations that involve almost all of Spanish society. Reality shows us that the dichotomy between digital and analog realities is a matter of the past that could have been valid a decade ago, but not today. The digital world is fully integrated into our way of life. Technology is rooted in society; even more, new technologies have become a second nature for all of us, even in religious practices.

Regarding content topics, they are divided into two main blocks: Those related to liturgical events and those related to the social initiatives carried out by the Church. The use of elements for emotional purposes that seek to increase interactivity is observed, always from an institutional and informative perspective that pursues participation.

The role of members from the ecclesiastical hierarchy is limited, and those audiovisual messages that require the followers' intervention are the most accepted by far. Regarding the number of comments and their meaning, it can be confirmed that social media is one of the most enthusiastic and outstanding ways of demonstrating Catholics' commitment to their Church by configuring a common space to share and celebrate their moral vision of world.

In short, social media have become relevant but still not primary sources of information and interaction on religious issues in the Spanish case. Religious contents and experiences attempt to shape or adapt topics and genres according to popular desires and demands. Being a part of the cultural and social strategies led by the institution, they reinforce CEE's communication actions, not only by providing spiritual and moral guidance, but also by celebrating important dates that take place throughout the liturgical year, and producing a community of belonging.

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