

From God to Caesar: Negotiating authority in the current media ecosystem*

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This article investigates how the Catholic Church's presence, authority, and legitimacy are negotiated within Italy's digital public sphere. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of public religion and digital religion, and adopting an agenda-building perspective, the study examines how social media platforms reshape both the actors involved in public debates about religion and the issues through which religious institutions gain visibility. The Italian case is particularly relevant given the Catholic Church's longstanding influence in public life and the growing challenges to its authority in contemporary media environments. The analysis is based on a large-scale dataset of 75,959 Facebook posts published during the first six months of 2018 and 2019 - two pivotal years marked by national and European election campaigns and a renewed political instrumentalization of religious symbols. Data collected via CrowdTangle are examined through a mixed-methods approach. Findings show that social media platforms foster a marked expansion and diversification of actors engaging with the Catholic Church. Alongside institutional voices at the national level, local parishes, clergy, religious orders, associations, citizens, media outlets, political actors, and even disinformation sources all contribute to shaping the Catholic Church's public visibility. This plurality of voices fragments institutional authority and undermines the possibility of a unified communicative narrative. At the same time, the Catholic Church's online presence extends beyond traditional political or moral controversies to include a wide range of strictly religious content - such as prayers, liturgical life, and ecclesial news - that had previously received little attention in legacy media. To conceptualize these dynamics, the article proposes and empirically tests a typology of the Catholic Church's presence in public debate based on two dimensions: the type of actor and the type of issue. The resulting four categories capture the hybrid and contested nature of religion's visibility in contemporary digital media ecosystems.

Keywords: Catholic Church; public religion; authority; digital platforms; agenda-building

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“If before we gave to God what should have remained in the hands of Caesar, now it is Caesar who holds and wields what belongs to God.”¹ With these words, published on his Instagram account, Father Spadaro commented on the recurring habit of certain populist leaders of using religious symbols for political purposes.

More broadly, Father Spadaro’s expression captures several dimensions of the debate on the relationship between religion - specifically the Catholic Church - and politics. By evoking a “before” in which God (the Catholic Church) should have left to Caesar (politics) what belonged to him, he recalls a long-standing controversy in which the Catholic Church has been accused of overstepping its role and interfering in key political decisions. Conversely, he highlights emerging dynamics in Italy’s political landscape which, though not free from religious or spiritual influences, exhibit new and previously unseen features (Marchetti et al., 2022). What is at stake is not simply the use of religious symbols by political actors, but a broader loss of ecclesiastic control over matters that are, to varying degrees, inherently religious. For the Catholic Church, this means not only feeling compelled to intervene in public debates, but also being drawn in by an expanding array of actors who, in today’s media ecosystem, are far more numerous and diverse than in the past.

To understand why this occurs, two levels must be considered. First, the Catholic Church functions as a civil society actor that, like others, seeks to place its issues and frames at the centre of public debate (Marini, 2011). Second, the current media ecosystem poses new challenges to a complex hierarchical institution, especially regarding its authority.

Today, with the rise of digital media and widespread disintermediation, new actors are increasingly legitimised to enter public debate (Bentivegna & Boccia Artieri, 2021). For a complex institution like the Catholic Church, this means it can no longer speak with a single voice or through a single, controlled channel. While this allows the Church’s internal diversity to emerge, it also creates the risk of losing control over its own communication, as any member can potentially speak on social media in the institution’s name. In the current platform-based ecosystem, it also means that a wide range of external actors can intervene in discussions about the Catholic Church, challenging it, provoking it, or appropriating its symbols. These include not only established political and media actors but also new - and at times malicious - figures who spread disinformation (Giglietto et al., 2020) and exploit the Catholic Church for their own aims (Douglas, 2018).

This paper adopts a media and communication perspective, treating the Catholic Church as one civil society actor among many in public debate (Marini, 2011). It examines the Catholic Church’s presence on social media, analysing when and how it communicates directly through its own accounts and when and how it is legitimised to take part in public debate within today’s media ecosystem. The study examines these issues through two key perspectives in media and religion research: (a) the processes through which religious institutions gain legitimacy in the public sphere, and (b) shifts in authority within online environments. These transformations create major challenges for institutions seeking to maintain control over their messaging in today’s media landscape. Despite the Catholic Church’s longstanding influence in Italian public life, its role in public debate has received

limited attention, especially within media and communication research. Key questions - how it gains legitimacy within social media discourse, which issues it engages with, and which actors shape this legitimacy - are still largely unanswered. This is particularly relevant in the Italian case, given the presence of the Vatican and the historically rooted influence of Catholicism on Italian political, cultural, and media dynamics. At the same time, these characteristics make Italy a valuable case for future comparative reflections on religion in contemporary public debate.

To conceptualize these dynamics, the article proposes and empirically tests a typology of the Catholic Church's presence in public debate based on two dimensions: the type of actor and the type of issue. The typology thus functions both as an analytical framework and as an empirical outcome of the study. The analysis focuses on two pivotal years - 2018 and 2019 - during which religious elements re-emerged prominently in Italian political discourse because of the national and European election campaigns. In this period, alongside the Catholic Church's traditional interventions on matters of public interest, its visibility was further amplified by the actions of right-wing actors who, through the instrumentalization of religious symbols and narratives, reignited the debate over the legitimacy of religion's role in Italian political life.

The paper proceeds as follows: the next section outlines the theoretical framework, focusing on public religion from an agenda-building perspective, as well as on digital religion, shifting authority, and platform dynamics. This is followed by the research hypotheses and methodology. The paper then presents the data analysis and concludes with a discussion of the findings.

Theoretical framework

Although media scholars have shown growing interest in the public role of religion, the involvement of religious institutions in public and political debate remains relatively underexplored within communication studies - both in the Italian context and internationally. This is a notable gap, as political communication offers valuable tools for analysing how key democratic issues are framed and contested in the public sphere. This is particularly important where religious institutions still play a central role in supporting or opposing matters that deeply affect citizens' lives, such as abortion, euthanasia, family policy, immigration, and security (Lövheim, 2019).

The question of religion's public role absorbed scholars studying the relationship between religion and media until roughly a decade ago, when a perceived resurgence of religion in the public sphere led researchers to ask, "Is God back?" (Hjelm, 2015). Among the literature addressing the public role of religion, one of the most relevant strands for our research is the classical body of work developed under the concept of public religion. Equally important is the other growing body of scholarship on digital religion, which explores, among other issues, how religious authority is being reconfigured in contemporary media environments. This study seeks to contribute to and expand upon these approaches by integrating the theoretical frameworks of religion, media, and the public sphere with the analytical tools and

methods of political communication - thereby addressing a critical gap in the current literature.

Applying an Agenda-Building Perspective to Public Religion

The public role of religion - first systematically examined by Casanova (1994) and later expanded by Habermas (2006) - remains central to scholarly debate. Following Casanova (1994; 2008), we understand public religion as the participation of religious groups in the public sphere as civil society actors, a role that becomes especially visible within media debate. Although Casanova’s concept differs from media religion, the two are closely intertwined (Axner, 2015): the media constitute a primary arena in which religion, like political or economic actors and major public issues, gains visibility. Understanding these dynamics therefore requires attention to the processes that shape the public agenda and to the evolving features of the media ecosystem. A key area of research examines how religion - and religious institutions - gain legitimacy in the public sphere. This involves two main dimensions: (1) the issues around which institutions such as the Catholic Church seek legitimacy, and (2) the religious and secular actors that shape their visibility.

Building on these two dimensions, we further define them across four distinct categories, as presented in Table 1. Religion becomes visible through the direct participation of religious institutions in media debates - via interventions by leading Church figures (the Pope, bishops, clergy, etc.) - whether on explicitly religious matters (A. *The Church being the Church*) or on broader public issues (B. *Religion made public*). Then, religion also gains visibility when secular actors invoke it, drawing on its symbols and references (C. *Public use of religion*) and indirectly calling the Church into debates on matters of public interest (D. *Secular calls to the Church*).

This typology provides a useful framework for interpreting the results of our analysis, which are presented in the Findings section of this article.

Table 1. Typology of the Catholic Church’s presence in public debate

Actors	Issues	
	Religious	Secular
Religious	(A) The Church being the Church Intervention of religious actors on religious issues	(B) Religion made public The Church engaging in public-interest issues
Secular	(C) Public use of religion Use and discussion of religion by secular actors	(D) Secular calls to the Church Secular actors calling on the Catholic Church over public-interest issues

Regarding the issues on which religions and their institutions are considered particularly legitimate, research shows that churches assert their presence in the public sphere by engaging in broad sociopolitical debates (Ozzano & Giorgi, 2016; Lövheim, 2019; Marchetti

& Pagiotti, 2023). As value-based institutions, they intervene not only on strictly religious matters but even more on issues shaped by moral and ethical concerns. Casanova (2008) identifies three domains in which churches are especially legitimized to participate in public debate: (1) defending democracy and fundamental freedoms, including religious freedom; (2) advocating for marginalized groups and offering moral critique of dominant power structures (e.g., poverty, the arms trade); and (3) safeguarding the lifeworld, particularly in relation to contentious moral issues such as abortion and euthanasia.

In Western societies - especially in Europe - religious institutions remain visible in political discourse despite declining levels of religious practice and affiliation (Inglehart, 2021). Churches assert themselves both by collaborating with governments on welfare and social initiatives and by opposing certain policy decisions. This tension is evident in debates on same-sex marriage, education (Norris & Inglehart, 2011), LGBTQ+ rights (Lövheim, 2019), and bioethics (Vitullo & Mastrofini, 2024). Recent scholarship shows that religious institutions continue to wield visibility and influence in political debates, particularly those involving values, identity, and the symbolic terrain of contemporary culture wars (Äystö & Hjelm, 2024). Yet most of these studies focus on specific issues; what remains lacking, is research that captures the broader picture of religion's overall presence in public debate. In this context, traditional agenda-building theories (Cobb & Elder, 1980) offer useful insights into how the public arena is structured and how certain issues gain prominence. Key factors include the plurality of actors, their competition and interactions - which drive public opinion and democratic processes - the cultural orientations of organized groups, and the role of news media (Marini, 2006). Yet the rise of digital media, and especially social media platforms, has significantly reshaped these dynamics (Skogerbo et al., 2016), altering both the nature of public issues and the range of actors empowered to enter the debate.

Today, the public agenda is shaped by the interaction of multiple media agendas and competing logics (Bentivegna & Boccia Artieri, 2021). Such convergence often intensifies the visibility of issues, particularly within digital media, driven by the strategic actions of diverse actors (Stier et al., 2019). As a result, issues previously absent from traditional media agendas can now emerge. For the Catholic Church, for instance, activities tied to strictly religious matters - such as prayers or the commemoration of saints - once received little attention in legacy media (Marchetti et al., 2019), yet in today's media ecosystem these matters increasingly surface within public debate.

Digital religion, shifting authority and the dynamics of platforms

If we shift our focus to the actors involved in these processes of legitimization, agenda-building theory shows that such dynamics arise from the interaction of multiple actors within the public sphere. In the past - especially during pivotal political moments such as election campaigns - it was relatively easy to identify who controlled the dominant agenda and which actors held ownership of specific issues (Petrocik, 1996). Today, however, that control has become far more elusive. This is due to the proliferation of actors able to speak in the public

arena, the expansion of communicative spaces, and the growing personalization of media content. The rise of digital media and processes of disintermediation have further blurred the boundaries of participation, allowing an even wider range of actors to intervene in public debate (Bentivegna & Boccia Artieri, 2021). Alongside traditional political and institutional voices, a wide range of unofficial actors - including ordinary citizens and platform-native entities such as disinformation accounts - have gained visibility and influence in public discourse (Giglietto et al., 2020).

For religious institutions, this diversification of voices poses a dual challenge to their authority. First, internally (i), within the religious domain itself, where both official ecclesiastical representatives and non-institutional actors (such as online religious communities) contribute to reshaping religious discourse. Second, externally (ii), from actors traditionally outside the religious sphere who may contest or instrumentalize religious authority, often in ways that can weaken its legitimacy. Complex institutions such as traditional churches can no longer rely on a centralized, monolithic communication strategy. While decentralization may showcase internal diversity and vitality, it also heightens the risk of losing control over official messaging. Individual members - priests, nuns, religious orders, Catholic movements and associations - can express views on social media that diverge from institutional positions, complicating the Church's public image and communication efforts.

These risks are well documented in the literature on digital religion, one of the most dynamic and rapidly evolving areas in the study of religion and media (Karis, 2025). Digital religion refers to the ways in which religious individuals and communities engage with digital media and emerging technologies (Campbell & Bellar, 2023). It has developed both as a significant sociocultural phenomenon and as a distinct field of scholarship examining how digital environments reshape religious practices, identities, and institutions. Key features include the rise of online religious communities, the circulation of religious content across digital platforms, and the increasing challenges faced by traditional forms of religious authority. Hoover (2016) and Hjarvard (2016) were among the first to observe how the expansion of media platforms disrupt traditional religious hierarchies by weakening institutional control over religious narratives and requiring religious authorities to adapt to media logics. Drawing on Weber's (1978) typology of authority, Campbell and Bellar (2023) show that digital environments simultaneously empower both traditional and alternative religious voices. On the one hand, they provide new opportunities for institutional actors to assert authority and shape public discourse; on the other, they enable unofficial voices to emerge, often challenging or reinterpreting official teachings. This dual dynamic creates fresh opportunities for engagement while intensifying tensions surrounding religious authority in the digital age.

Research hypotheses and methods

Starting from this framework, we hypothesize the existence of a multifaceted image of the Catholic Church emerging from online discussions:

H1. We expect that the Catholic Church no longer enters public debate solely through its most prominent leaders, but also through a mosaic-like array of internal voices, in a media environment that likewise enables non-religious actors to call upon the Church to intervene.

H2. We expect to find not only the polarizing non-religious issues already documented in traditional media debates, but also a wider array of strictly religious content - previously largely absent from legacy media - reflecting the broader range of issues that various actors now address on social media platforms.

In order to verify our research hypotheses, we selected all the posts published by public Facebook pages mentioning at least one of a set (at least one of 38) Catholic Church related keywords² in the first six months of 2018 and 2019. Facebook was selected as case study because it remains one of the most widely used social media platforms in Italy, including for news consumption, as highlighted in the latest Digital News Report (Newman et al., 2025). Instead, the choice to analyse the first six months for both years was dictated by the need to have different moments within the corpora, both the Catholic calendar (ordinary and extraordinary times, such as the Easter holiday), and above all the political debate. In both cases, in fact, there are important electoral moments for the country. In 2018 Italian General elections of March 4; in 2019 the European elections on 26 May. Considering our interest in actors who intervene in the debate (H1), from the entire corpus, we selected, in each of the two considered periods, a sample consisting of only Facebook pages that published more than 5 posts and gained at least 20 total interactions.

We collected a total of 40,074 Facebook pages' posts for the 2018 and a total of 54,006 Facebook pages' posts for the 2019. From the corpus originally selected, all posts that did not refer to the ecclesial world and that were beyond our research objectives have been deleted (for example, the posts that mention funerals in local churches). We analysed 75,959 Facebook pages' posts, which generated a total of 30,780,890 interactions, through CrowdTangle (Table 2).

Table 2. Facebook dataset summary (N)

	January – June 2018	January – June 2019
Posts	31,786	44,173
Unique entities	2,881	3,399
Total interactions average	376.7	425.7

To verify if social media platforms offer suitable chances to actors who usually have no standing in mainstream media to intervene in the public debate (H1), it was necessary to classify all the unique entities that have published Catholic Church-related posts in the considered periods. The Facebook pages' classification process started from the classification proposed by CrowdTangle and was later checked and reworked by the researchers. Five macro categories (politics, the Catholic Church, media, ordinary people, and other actors) have been identified for a total of 13 categories of actors (Table 3). Within these categories, we then considered between actors who would easily have a standing in the media and actors who, on the other hand, would not have the same status. The first category included politicians and parties, traditional news outlets (national and local), the

Catholic Church at national level, associations and organizations, actors related to the educational system, and public administration. The second category considered individual or organized citizens (bloggers, communities), journalism-like media (sources of news not regularly registered in the Italian courts), and ambiguous sources already identified as sources of disinformation by debunking sites. All these entities were also classified aimed at detecting their religious identities (i.e. those connected in some way to the religious dimension, such as Catholic Church hinges but also unofficial pages devoted to religious content such as prayers) and non-religious identities, that is, not concerning in any way the religious sphere. A qualitative analysis of the description, the username and the cover photo was conducted to identify religious and non-religious entities.

Table 3. Facebook pages' classification (%)

Type of entities		Description	2018	2019
Politics	Politicians and parties	Italian parties and politicians who are members of the European parliament, the National parliament, the government structure and main Italian national political parties as well as local sections of the main Italian political parties and local government members (mayors, councillors, regional governors)	3.8	6.3
The Catholic Church	Catholic Church institution	The institutional Catholic Church pages at "national" level	9.2	9.4
	Local Church	Local Church institutions such as dioceses, parishes, pastoral units, etc. but also priests	6.1	6.2
	Religious orders	Religious orders relating to institutes of various types (such as women's monastic orders, regular clerics, etc.)	1.6	1.3
Media	National media	National newspapers, news websites, tv channels, radio, televisions or radio programs, magazines (regularly registered in the Italian courts), and journalists	5.9	5.5
	Local media	Local newspapers, news websites, tv channels, radio, magazines (regularly registered in the Italian courts)	14.1	13.2
	Journalism-like media	Alternative to mainstream media, not regularly registered in the Italian courts	6.4	7.2
	Disinformation	Facebook pages included in the black-lists of debunking sites such as butac.it, bufale.net and avaaaz.org and in other studies	1.1	0.8
Ordinary people	Bloggers	Ordinary people who have a blog	3.4	3.1
	Communities	Communities of people joined by a common interest (e.g. sport, food, entertainment, geographical affiliation, corruption, etc...) but also political supporters/opponents	22.2	23.8
Other actors	Associations/organizations	NGO, local associations, organizations both religious (including denominations other than Catholic) and non-religious	16.2	14.0
	Education and culture	Entities with competences in education (schools, universities, etc.) and more general cultural matters (such as institutes dealing with cultural heritage)	5.2	4.9
	Public administration	Police, Army, municipalities	4.9	4.1
Total			100.0 (2,881)	100.0 (3,399)

As regarding the issues on which the Catholic Church presence is legitimized in the public debate (H2), we carried out a content analysis on the posts published by the Facebook entities in the two selected periods using QDA Miner and WordStat. For posts containing

images, videos, or hyperlinks, the analysis encompassed not only the textual content of the post itself, but also the textual elements embedded within images (image text), as well as the URL or the title of the shared video. We adopted an inductive and deductive approach to topics analysis. We began with an inductive, data-driven method, with no predefined categories of study to identify issue-specific topics. In this first phase, it was possible to identify some topics linked to specific events or statements. During the deductive phase, these topics were subsumed under more broad categories via a two-step process of synthesis and comparison with generic topics from the literature. This mixed approach has the advantage of avoiding both the dispersion of inductive logic typical of textual materials and the excessive rigidity of deductive logic.

The inductive analysis was carried out first by a topic modelling analysis, which allows the most important topics within a given corpus to be extracted, and then by extracting the most frequently occurring words and phrases using WordStat, and cluster analysis using QDA Miner. We created an initial analysis sheet that was later combined with generic topics mentioned in the literature (deductive analysis). The texts were classified through a supervised machine learning algorithm. Documents (divided into segments) were classified into one (the main) predefined category based on an inductive learning process performed on a set of previously classified documents. In other words, for each Facebook post it was identified the main discussed topic. Three different researchers manually classified a random sample composed of 1,000 Facebook posts per each of the two periods and assigned the codes listed in the codebook³. The use of random sampling ensured that the annotated subset was representative of the overall corpus and minimized selection bias. The inter-coder reliability was measured using Krippendorff's alpha coefficient, which achieved a value of .840⁴. Then, researchers used two "search and retrieval" tools ("Query by example" and "Code similarity")⁵ to finalise the analysis.

Finally, the issues, the Facebook entities, and their religious or non-religious identities as well as productivity of the actors in terms of published posts and total interactions received by each post, and the two selected periods (2018 and 2019) were analysed through correspondence analysis.

Findings

Some initial insights into the first hypothesis regarding the expansion of actors in the social media debate (H1) emerge from the data presented in the previous section. In fact, although the majority of actors participating in Facebook discussions are actors who would already have a standing in legacy media, our analysis also reveals a substantial proportion of actors who do not enjoy the same level of visibility or institutional status (40.7% in 2018 and 42.6% in 2019) (Table 3). While it may seem self-evident that Facebook discussions involve a wider range of participants, it is crucial to examine who these actors are, as "who says what" significantly influences the interpretation of the messages being shared. Indeed, a message can take on different meanings depending on the identity and motivations of the user posting

it. In other words, the same statement shared by a politician, a media outlet, or an ordinary citizen may carry distinct implications.

As anticipated, the data support the hypothesis of an expanding range of actors involved in the debate, both in terms of the increasing diversity of Catholic Church-affiliated actors, and the growing number of non-religious actors referencing the Catholic Church on Facebook. Further evidence comes from a broader analysis of the religious affiliation of Facebook pages, which shows that the Church's presence in the debate is not limited to explicitly religious pages. In fact, participation appears to be fairly evenly distributed between religious and non-religious pages. In 2018, religious pages accounted for 57.2% (18,187) of posts, while non-religious pages produced 42.8% (13,599). This distribution became even more balanced in 2019, with religious and non-religious pages contributing 50.2% (22,164) and 49.8% (22,009) of the posts, respectively.

Table 4. Posts published by different actors (%)

	2018			2019		
	<i>Non-religious actors</i>	<i>Religious actors</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Non-religious actors</i>	<i>Religious actors</i>	<i>Total</i>
<i>Associations/organizations</i>	5.0	12.5	9.3	4.0	13.9	9.0
<i>Blogger</i>	3.7	0.4	1.8	3.2	0.5	1.9
<i>Catholic Church institutions</i>	0.0	14.4	8.2	0.0	18.6	9.3
<i>Local Church</i>	0.0	5.3	3.0	0.0	6.4	3.2
<i>Communities</i>	17.4	38.0	29.2	21.9	32.5	27.2
<i>Disinformation</i>	4.1	0.0	1.8	4.3	0.0	2.1
<i>Education and culture</i>	1.7	4.5	3.3	1.6	4.8	3.2
<i>Journalism-like media</i>	8.0	4.3	5.8	7.6	4.5	6.0
<i>Religious orders</i>	0.0	3.6	2.0	0.0	3.3	1.7
<i>Public administration</i>	2.6	0.0	1.1	1.8	0.0	0.9
<i>National media</i>	34.7	12.9	22.2	32.3	11.3	21.8
<i>Local media</i>	20.1	3.9	10.8	18.0	4.1	11.0
<i>Politicians and parties</i>	3.0	0.0	1.3	5.5	0.0	2.7
<i>TOTAL</i>	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
	(13,599)	(18,187)	(31,786)	(22,009)	(22,164)	(44,173)

Consistent with previous research conducted by Marchetti and colleagues (2019), our findings related to the first hypothesis (H1) indicate that the Catholic Church, rather than functioning as a monolithic entity, is represented online through a diverse array of actors. While the national-level institutional presence of the Catholic Church remains significant - accounting for 8.2% and 9.3% of total posts in 2018 and 2019, respectively (see Table 4) - the Facebook debate also includes local entities such as parishes and dioceses (3.0%, 3.2% of posts, respectively), and associations (religious ones 12.5% and 13.9%, respectively) which are typically not newsworthy for legacy media. In addition, religious orders contribute to the discussion, generating 2.0% of posts in 2018 and 1.7% in 2019. These results are consistent with the literature on digital religion (Campbell & Bellar, 2023), suggesting a potential fragmentation of religious authority, as it becomes dispersed across a multiplicity of actors and communicative channels.

Simultaneously, our analysis reveals a wide variety of non-religious actors referencing the Catholic Church on Facebook (H1). As shown in Table 4, a substantial proportion of posts originates from traditionally influential public actors, particularly national and local media outlets, which together account for 22.2% and 10.8% of posts in 2018, and 21.8% and 11.0% in 2019, respectively. Through their coverage, these media - both secular and religious - contribute to legitimizing the Church's presence in online spaces. However, new types of actors have also gained prominence, notably communities (both religious and non-religious), which constitute the largest share of posts after the media (29.2% in 2018 and 27.2% in 2019). In parallel, social media platform have enabled the emergence of problematic actors, such as disinformation pages. Although their share remains relatively small - 1.8% in 2018 and 2.1% in 2019 - their presence underscores how religion has become a strategic target within the broader landscape of information disorder (Caramancion, 2023).

Table 5. Main topics and their description (%)

Topics	Description	2018	2019
Bioethics	Bioethical issues such as euthanasia, abortion, stem cell debate, etc.	2.6	1.6
Catholics and politics	Positioning of Catholics on the political/party scene, both when a member of the Church intervenes, and a politician that declared Catholic orientation	2.6	5.2
Ecclesiological issues	Issues of the Catholic Church relating to faith and liturgy (e.g., Mass in Latin).	1.7	1.7
Exotic	Funny and irreverent content related to the Catholic Church, e.g. the wife cheating on her husband with the priest, the priest organising the aperitif after Mass, etc.	2.8	3.6
Family and civil unions	Issues related to the debate on family, civil unions, LGBTQ+ rights, and divorce.	2.4	2.7
Immigration	Issues related to immigration and migrants welcoming management.	5.0	8.9
Islam and interreligious dialogue	Issues related to Islam in Western societies, Islamic terrorism, construction of Islamic places of worship in Italy, Christian roots of Europe, interreligious dialogue, and religious freedom.	2.6	3.7
News from the Catholic Church	Updates from the Catholic Church at national institutional level (election of the Pope, appointments of Bishops, Extraordinary Jubilee, etc.), but also at the local level, such as the entry of a new parish priest into the parish, dioceses or parishes' appointments	34.4	29.4
Prayers	Purely religious content such as prayers, stories of saints, commemorations of saints of the day, religious pictures, and aphorisms.	31.1	25.2
Scandals	Scandals of various kinds (sexual, financial, mafia-related, etc.) involving the Church.	7.4	9.0
Social issues	Issues related to the Church's social action supporting situations of poverty and social risks (e.g., Caritas reports).	4.2	5.6
Wars and crisis situations	The Catholic Church intervening or condemning situations of crisis and war in other countries.	3.2	3.4
Total		100.0 (31,786)	100.0 (44,173)

Regarding the issues on which the Catholic Church is present in the Facebook debate, our findings support the hypothesis (H2) that the Church's online presence spans both strictly religious topics and broader public policy discussions. As shown in Table 5, the most prominent content relates to religious and ecclesiastical matters - particularly the news from the Catholic world, such as updates on the life of the Catholic Church - which accounted for 34.4% of posts in 2018 and 29.4% in 2019. In addition, a significant share of content focused

on prayer and spirituality (31.1% in 2018 and 25.2% in 2019). These findings reflect how social media platforms serve as spaces where traditional religious content intersects with the communicative styles and affordances of digital media. This convergence not only broadens the Church's online visibility but also fosters new expressions of faith and engagement previously not found in studies on traditional media and digital and online-only media outlets (Marchetti et al., 2019), consistent with emerging practices of digital religion (Campbell & Tsuria, 2022).

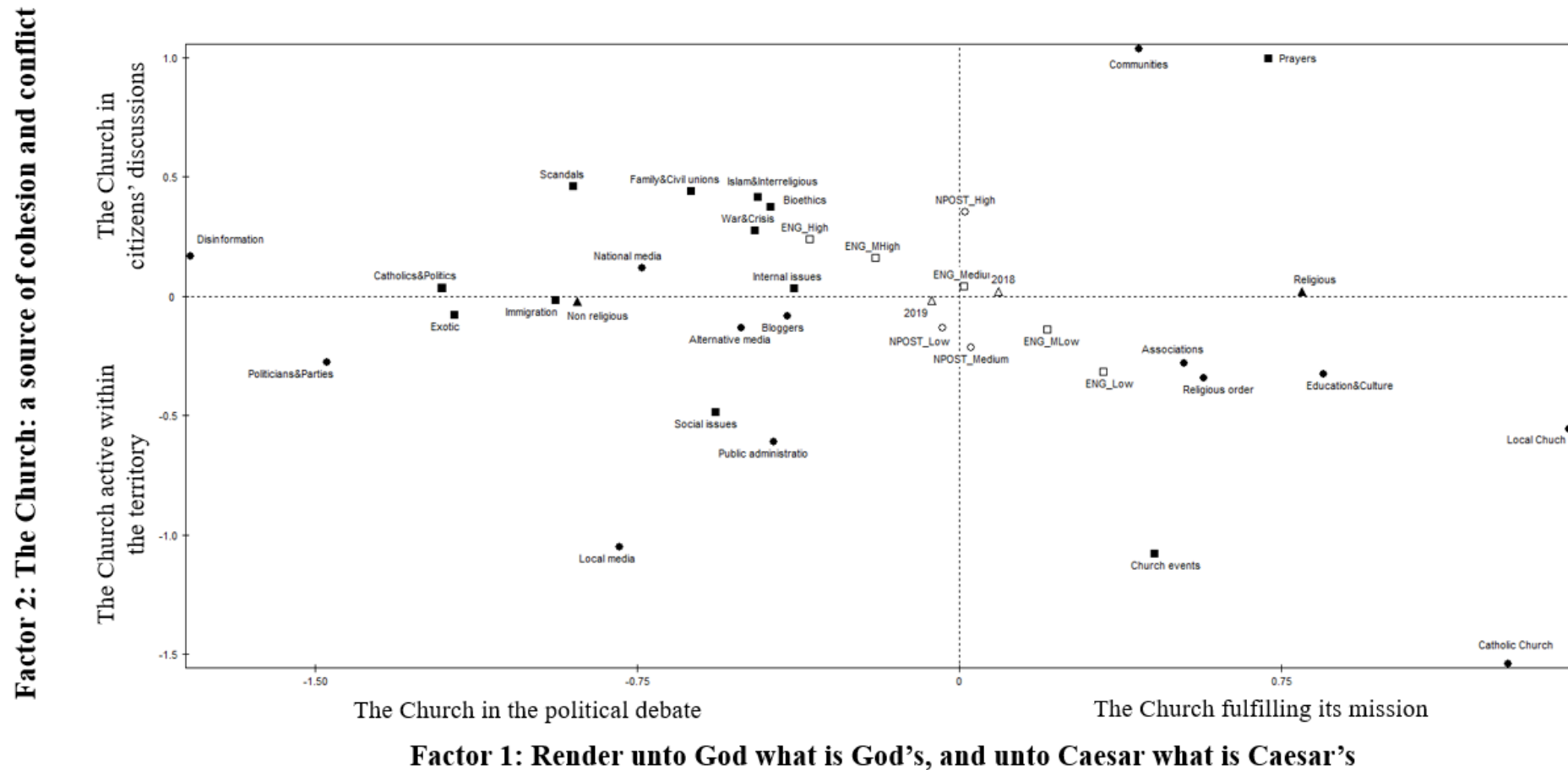
Beyond strictly religious content, the data on the issues in which the Catholic Church is most prominently featured on Facebook align with analytical frameworks proposed by scholars (Lövheim, 2019; Ozzano & Giorgi, 2016). Notably, the Church is frequently referenced in connection with scandals, which represented 7.4% of posts in 2018 and increased to 9.0% in 2019. Scandals emerge as the most prominent topic after core religious content, underscoring the high news value and virality typically associated with controversial or sensational events.

Moreover, the Catholic Church is legitimized to participate in broader public debates, particularly on divisive or polarizing issues. As shown in Table 5 and in line with previous studies (Ozzano & Giorgi, 2016), the Church is often invoked in discussions related to moral questions, especially those concerning the "world of life and death", such as topics categorized under "Bioethics" and "Family and civil unions." It is also involved in issues framed through conflict dynamics, as Lövheim already highlighted (2019), including "Wars and crisis situations" and "Islam and interreligious dialogue." In addition, the Catholic Church frequently engages in advocacy around themes of social justice and support for marginalized groups (Marchetti et al., 2019), particularly in discussions about "Immigration" and "Social issues". Finally, the data reflect the Catholic Church's involvement in debates concerning the public role of religion within secular states, as seen in the category "Catholics and politics."

Among these issues, immigration and social issues stand out as particularly significant following scandals, accounting for 5.0% and 4.2% of posts in 2018, and increasing to 8.9% and 5.6% in 2019, respectively. These findings point to the strategic ways in which religious institutions gain visibility on digital platforms - not only through doctrinal or ecclesiological matters, but also by engaging in broader societal debates that reinforce their public relevance.

To get a more synthetic two-dimensional mapping of discussions involving the Catholic Church on Facebook by various type of actors (that include both institutionalized and noninstitutionalized actors and religious and non-religious actors) and to explore the relationships between the topics, the type of actors, the posts' engagement and the posting activity of actors who took part in the debate, and the time periods, we decided to use the projection of frames on a factorial plane (Figure 1). The correspondence analysis allowed us to extract two main dimensions that reproduce about 24.8% of total inertia⁶.

Figure 1. Projection of topics, type of actors, religious and non-religious actors, engagement, posting activity, and time period into dimensions 1 and 2.



The first factor (“Render unto God what is God’s, and unto Caesar what is Caesar’s”) perfectly fits with our second research hypothesis, according to which there is a clear differentiation between religious contents in strictly sense (e.g. prayers, church events, ecclesiological matters etc.) and non-religious divisive issues on which different actors (both religious and non-religious) debated (Figure 1). In particular, the positive half-plane (“The Church fulfilling its mission”) highlights a representation of the Church that is deeply rooted in its spiritual identity and pastoral mission, reflecting an ordinary communicative function and a stable ecclesial presence on Facebook. The Catholic Church’s communication in this context presents itself as a space for spiritual accompaniment and community-oriented information. The analysis of Facebook posts located in this area of the factorial space reveals a coherent and consistent discursive pattern, centred on the idea of a Church that “does what the Church is meant to do”: a religious institution focused on fulfilling its pastoral, liturgical, and communal responsibilities. The content associated with this semiaxis is primarily produced and disseminated by institutional religious actors - including the Catholic Church in its various articulations - who use the digital platform to sustain their connection with the faithful and maintain their territorial presence. This kind of posts is both devotional and informative, revolving around two core topics: the sharing of prayers and the promotion of Church-organized events. In the first case, many posts include daily prayers, invocations, spiritual reflections, or intercessory appeals tied to religious festivals, liturgical calendars, or moments of collective hardship. Here, prayer emerges as a recurring and performative element, reinforcing the religious community’s identity and offering a virtual space for contemplation and participation. In the second case, the posts focus on events organized by the Church in local communities, such as masses, processions, catechetical meetings, charitable initiatives, or cultural activities with a religious character. These expressions of ordinary pastoral life - through words, gestures, and shared rituals - are made visible and accessible through social media, which play a crucial role in extending the Church’s presence and mission into the digital public sphere. According to the typology outlined in the theoretical framework of this study (see Table 1), this corresponds to the type A “*The Church being the Church*”.

The negative half-plane of the Factor 1 (“The Church in the political debate”) is clearly distinct from the positive side, not only in terms of content but, more importantly, in the nature of the actors involved in the production of posts. It reflects a representation of the Church as an actor that contributes to pluralizing the political debate, being invoked or referenced by actors who do not strictly belong to the Catholic world, or as a topic of discussion. Unlike the positive semiaxis - where religious institutions are directly engaged in communication - here, the Catholic Church becomes the object of external narratives, drawn into the conversation by others. In this context, the Church’s visibility is often passive or reactive, generated by external actors - such as politicians and political parties, national and local media outlets, and even misinformation pages - who invoke the Church to advance their own informational, polemical, or identity-driven agendas. The Church is therefore “brought

into play” by these actors, not as a speaker but as a symbol or institution under scrutiny, frequently in connection with contentious societal issues.

The content located in this area of the factorial space comes from a diverse range of non-ecclesial sources. These actors use the Catholic Church’s positions, presence, or actions as discursive tools to situate themselves within broader debates on matters of public concern. Often, their posts produce polarizing, critical, or instrumental narratives, especially when addressing highly divisive issues such as bioethics, education, civil rights, migration, and Church–state relations. Another recurring theme in this half-plane concerns the public discussion of scandals involving ecclesial actors, such as cases of abuse, financial mismanagement, or opaque relationships with political powers. These controversies contribute to framing the Catholic Church as a problematic institutional presence, subjected to public judgment and media scrutiny. In such cases, the Catholic Church’s presence in the digital space is not the result of its own communication efforts, but is constructed externally, often emphasizing its ideological influence or institutional contradictions. In sum, this semiaxis maps a dynamic in which the Catholic Church is spoken about rather than speaking, revealing the contested and mediated nature of its presence in the political discourse on social media platforms. This aspect is fully consistent with Type D (*“Secular Calls to the Church”*) in the typology presented in Table 1.

The second factor extracted by the analysis (Figure 1) concerns “The Church: a source of cohesion and conflict”, understood both as “The Church in citizens’ discussions” (positive half-plane) and as “The Church active within the territory” (negative half-plane). The positive half-plane of this factor presents an image of the Church as a central presence in citizens’ public discourse. It highlights a Church that is lived and discussed from the bottom up, whose digital presence is shaped by a complex interplay of devotion and debate, fidelity and dissent. Facebook thus emerges as a space where religion is not only transmitted from above, but also negotiated and co-constructed by users who engage with it - commenting, sharing, and at times, questioning its role.

The posts positioned along this semiaxis are produced by communities of users - often organized around thematic pages, prayer groups, religiously oriented profiles, as well as by lay individuals - who engage with the Church as a spiritual, cultural, and social reference point. In this discursive space, the Catholic Church is not only invoked as an institution but also as a symbol of identity that permeates everyday life and personal experience.

A first prominent thematic area concerns the sharing of prayers and invocations, which fosters connections among users and reinforces community cohesion around shared religious practices. However, alongside these unifying contents, there also emerge forms of disagreement and tension, particularly when the Catholic Church is brought into the conversation in relation to controversial issues - such as civil rights, social policy, or moral debates. In these contexts, communities that appear cohesive in their devotional practices may become divided, giving rise to intense and polarized discussions that underscore the ambivalent nature of the Catholic Church’s presence in the online public sphere. What distinguishes this semiaxis is the prevalence of widespread discursive participation, where the boundaries between institutional and grassroots communication are increasingly

blurred. This finding aligns closely with Type C ("*Public use of Religion*") identified in the typology presented in Table 1.

Finally, the negative half-plane of this factor (Factor 2) offers a representation of the Catholic Church as deeply embedded in the local social fabric and actively engaged in the life of communities. The Facebook posts that occupy this area of the factorial space depict a Catholic Church that is close to the most vulnerable, capable of responding to social fragility and local emergencies in the territories where it operates. In this semi axis, the Catholic Church emerges as a recognized civic actor, valued not primarily for its spiritual or symbolic role, but for its tangible, on-the-ground engagement. It is a Church that organizes events, promotes charitable initiatives, supports families in need, welcomes migrants, works alongside the poor, and collaborates with public institutions and third-sector organizations. This practical dimension of ecclesial presence is frequently highlighted and appreciated by local media, which provide coverage of these initiatives and often praise the Catholic Church's contribution to social cohesion and the collective good. This results in a positive narrative that attributes to the Catholic Church an active and constructive role in the promotion of the common good, acknowledging its capacity to act concretely and visibly in everyday life. It is a Church incarnated in social reality, one that responds directly to the needs of the population and receives public recognition for its civic commitment. In the typology previously outlined (Table 1), this aspect fits well within Type B ("*Religion made public*").

Conclusions

This study has explored the multifaceted presence of the Catholic Church within the digital public sphere, highlighting how its authority and legitimacy are negotiated in increasingly hybrid and decentralized communicative environments. Our findings confirm that social media platforms enable a plurality of actors, both religious and non-religious, to engage with, invoke, or contest the Catholic Church, contributing to a fragmentation of its public voice. In this fragmented communicative space, both "God" and "Caesar" are simultaneously present, as religious references intersect with political agendas and secular issues, blurring the boundaries between spiritual authority and political discourse.

The Catholic Church's communication is no longer solely shaped by institutional strategies but emerges from a network of voices that includes local parishes, individual clergy, lay believers, media outlets, political actors, and even disinformation pages. This pluralization undermines the possibility of a unified institutional narrative, but it also reveals new opportunities for visibility, engagement, and bottom-up participation. This leads to a proliferation of issues that were previously absent from media narratives about the Catholic Church. Among these are prayers and other strictly religious content, which only through the current affordances of digital platforms have become visible within today's media ecosystem.

By attempting to make sense of this mosaic of presences, the article tested a typology of the Catholic Church's presence in public debate, which has proven robust in light of the

empirical findings. According to this typology, which considers both the type of actor (religious or non-religious) and the type of issues on which the Catholic Church is visible (religious or non-religious), four categories can be identified to conceptualize its presence: *The Church being the Church*, *Religion made public*, *Public use of religion*, and *Secular calls to the Church*. We believe that this typology may be useful beyond the scope of the present study, particularly as a tool for systematizing the multiple ways in which traditional complex institutions can appear within contemporary media ecosystems. For this reason, we hope that the typology will also be tested in contexts other than the Italian case examined here, as well as in comparative studies involving countries that share political, cultural, and religious characteristics with Italy, but also in more diverse settings. This potential applicability concerns not only the Catholic Church, but also other religious organizations and denominations. At the same time, considering the complexity of the contemporary media ecosystem, the different dimensions involved (religious and secular), and the interconnectedness of multiple media sources, the typology is also intended to contribute to and support intermedia agenda studies.

Beyond its empirical contribution, this research responds to a broader call to fully understand how public opinion is shaped in current mediatized societies. As we argued in the introduction, we must take seriously the communicative practices of civil society actors - including religious ones - whose interventions in the public debate are often strategic, influential, and politically consequential. The case of the Catholic Church in Italy demonstrates that the public debate today originates from a wider and more complex set of actors, whose legitimacy is constantly negotiated across media platforms. Understanding these dynamics is crucial not only for scholars of religion and communication but also for assessing the evolving nature of public discourse and the democratic conditions under which it unfolds.

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Notes

¹ In 2018, Father Spadaro, former editor of one of the most famous Catholic newspapers in Italy *La Civiltà Cattolica*, wrote this sentence on his Instagram account.

² The keywords are: arcivescovo (archbishop), benedetto XVI (benedict XVI), bergoglio, cardinal, cardinale (cardinal), cardinali (cardinals), cattolicesimo (catholicism), cattoliche (catholics), cattolici (catholics), cattolico (catholic), cei (i.e. acronym for italian bishop conference), chiesa cattolica (catholic church), conferenza episcopale (bishops' conference), curia, diocesane (diocesan), diocesani (diocesan), diocesano (diocesan), diocesi (diocese), frati (friars), giovanni paolo II (john paul II), monsignor, papa benedetto (pope benedict), papa emerito (pope emeritus), papa francesco (pope francis), parrocchie (parishes), parroci (parish priests), parroco (parish priest), pontefice (pontiff), prete (priest), preti (priests), ratzinger, santa sede (holy see), suora (nun), suore (nuns), vaticano (vatican), vescovi (bishops), vescovo (bishop), wojtyla.

³ Respectively, 3.2% of the corpus in 2018 and 2.3% of the corpus in 2019.

⁴ Krippendorff suggests relying on variables with reliability $\geq .800$, except when tentative conclusions are acceptable, and a reliability $\geq .667$ could be acceptable (Krippendorff, 2004).

⁵ The query by example retrieval tool may be used to find text similar to all segments associated with a specific code and thus retrieve sentences or paragraphs that may potentially be coded the same way. The code similarity retrieval tool quickly identifies sentences or paragraphs that share some similarities with existing coded segments in the project.

⁶ To address the well-known downward bias of inertia in multiple correspondence analysis, a Benzécri correction was applied (Di Franco, 2017). By rescaling the variance explained by each dimension relative to the number of original variables, the first two dimensions together account for approximately 98% of the adjusted inertia. This suggests that they capture most of the underlying structure of the data, even though the unadjusted inertia appears relatively low.