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THE CATHOLIC INFLUENCER AS A CHALLENGE FOR SPIRITUAL
LEADERSHIP IN THE AGE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

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Abstract: Currently, the Internet is a space where many people and institutions carry out various activities. This situation was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to the pandemic, a large proportion of educational, cultural and religious activities took place through the Internet. This network is also a space for people to meet and exchange views and experiences. The Internet, with its huge media possibilities, is a natural environment for influencers, including Catholic influencers, who appear to be leaders and spiritual advisers in the contemporary mediatized world. The characteristics of Catholic influencing and answering the question of whether this is a challenge for traditional spiritual counselling direction and are important goals in this text. The article refers to broadly understood counseling, but focuses on religious counseling and spiritual guidance realized through social media.

Key words: influencing; catholic influencer; spiritual counselling, spiritual direction; spiritual leadership; media.

1. Introduction: context and methodology

The fact that a person is looking for communication and counseling is due to his social nature. Every person needs another person; he needs his point of view and his knowledge and experience (Frunzã 2019b, 9-11). Researchers note the increasing demand for counseling practice and leadership in modern society. The reason for the development of this tendency is increasing uncertainty both in terms of the individual and social life (Fuchs and Mahler 2000, 356–360). “In the social and individual situations of specific life, consulting an expert by individuals, groups or organizations has become a routine practice, which led to a generalized need for counseling” (Frunzã 2019a, 22). Due to the pandemic, the need for counseling on spiritual and religious values has also increased. Recently, it can be noticed that the place of seeking counselors is more and more often the Internet.

Today, there is no need to prove to anyone that the Internet has become an element of the contemporary human environment. Currently, however, the Web is not an infrastructure that helps people to communicate and exploit information better than through traditional media. Indeed, it is a space people use to locate various activities (Wyrostkiewicz 2015). A particularly popular element of the “Internet world” is social media. For an Internet user, these are not only an interactive cognitive tool, but also a kind of “extension of the senses.” This means that modern people get to know the world and experience it through them (‘W Sieci’ 2021, 8; Nowak 2012). Media understood in this way has become a natural place for the emergence and development of influencing.

Observing influencer activities has led to a research hypothesis that in the modern mediatized world, an influencer, including a Catholic influencer, can act as a spiritual guide. Yet, in doing so, he challenges traditional spiritual direction. Verifying this hypothesis is one of the goals of this research, which is an interdisciplinary study in media studies and theology.

Assuming a positive verification of the hypothesis, another substantive goal of the research was set. It points to the mechanisms of spiritual guidance found on the web (and audiovisual materials) in social media activities (YouTube) in the context of the Catholic influencing phenomenon. These mechanisms are specific determinants of the practices of spiritual people in Poland during the pandemic which indicate the challenges that the Catholic Church has to face in the “fight” for man on the Internet, that is, for spiritual guidance in the contemporary mediatized world.

Elaborating on the above fairly general information, it can be added that the research carried out will provide answers to many questions,

including the following: Who is a Catholic influencer? What are their forms and which dominate in the context of YouTube? What tools are used by Catholic influencers seeking to provide spiritual guidance, direction and counselling through social media? What language do spiritual influencers use? What is the content of the materials prepared by Catholic influencers? Are clergymen spiritual guides or are they trying to be spiritual guides for Internet users? Can an Influencer be a spiritual director?

The above-stated research tasks will be carried out in three steps, as expressed in the article's structure. First, the phenomenon of *influencerism* will be characterized and the Catholic influencer will be presented against this background. Second, the results of the analysis of the media material constituting this study's empirical research material will be presented. In the last, third step, conclusions will be presented.

The description of a Catholic influencer in the first theoretical part made it possible to spot people who could be described as such in the network. Their activities recorded in social media constitute the research material analyzed in the second part of the text. The first formal (non-substantive) criterion for selecting influencers was language. Polish-speaking influencers were studied. The second determinant was time. Materials from the period from March 2020 to June 2020 were examined. At that time, the most rigorous lockdown was in force in Poland, preventing not only participation in church services, but also including complete closure at home.

The selection of research material included several stages. The first was to find YouTube channels belonging to people who met the criteria of Catholic influencers. In all cases, they turned out to be clergymen. The next step was to select the channels that met the time criteria. When collecting media material, we searched for materials that would give as broad a view as possible, with a variety of forms, messages and content. An important selection criterion was the authorship of the presented content and exposure of the person appearing on the screen as an element of research on the importance of Catholic influencers in spiritual guidance in contemporary society. The channels of the following authors were analyzed (arranged according to the number of subscribers):

1. Fr. Adam Szustak (*Langusta na palmie* [Langoustine on a Palm] – 799 thousand subscribers);
2. Fr. Teodor Sawielewicz (*Teobańkologia* [Theobankology] – 325 thousand);
3. Fr. Dominik Chmielewski (*Kecharitomene* – 125 th.);
4. Fr. Rafał Głowczyński SDS (*Ksiądz z osiedla* [The Neighborhood Priest]– 41.2 th.);
5. Fr. Tomasz Nowak (*Strefa wodza* [The Chief's Zone] – 39.2 th.);

6. Fr. Michał Chaciński (*Ksiądz Michał Chaciński* [Fr. Michał Charciński] – 35.4 th.)
7. Fr. Piotr Śliżewski (*Ewangelizuj_pl* [Evangelize_pl] – 14.9 th.);
8. Fr. Wojciech Węgrzyniak (*Wojciech Węgrzyniak* – 14.3 th.);
9. Fr. Leonard Bielecki OFM and Fr. Franciszek Chodkowski OFM (no slogan – 9.7 th.)

These authors' channels differ in form and purpose, and sometimes also their intended target group. Some of the materials were specially created for this period (often continued after the lockdown was over), while others are a special edition of an already functioning series.

When looking at the selection method of research material, it is easy to notice that the undertaken research is of a pilot study nature. Its effects show trends and not detailed data on the activities of Catholic influencers.

It is worth noticing the fact that the research on religiosity during the pandemic in Poland conducted by the professional agency from March to June of 2020 showed that the media (also the Internet) provided a new way to participate in the Holy Mass. Many parishes organized online broadcasts so that Poles could “be” in their church and listen to their priest. The research also shows that the faithful felt the lack of communal prayer and the ability to practice their faith. The most popular medium was television (60%), while the Internet took second place (21%), mostly used by young people (26% aged 18-24) and people living in larger cities (26%). On the one hand, research shows that the pandemic poses a threat to religious practices, yet, on the other hand, it has been noticed that the pandemic is also an opportunity to deepen one's faith and practice more consciously (Bożewicz 2020).

However, no research was carried out related to using other religious opportunities on the Internet, meaning religious channels, vlogs of clergymen, or joint prayer streams apart from the Holy Mass. Therefore, the undertaken research appears to be an important supplement to the research on the religious practices of Poles during the pandemic. Most of all, however, it indicates the potential for spiritual matters present on the Internet, especially Catholic influencers.

2. From influencer to catholic influencer

Contemporary research on influencing is based on Katz and Lazarsfeld's earlier theories of the two-stage information flow model (Katz and Paul Lazarsfeld 2006), Weber's concept of charismatic authority (Kaczmarek 2007, 15-34), Goldhaber's attention economy (Goldhaber 1997), and Berger's social contagious (virus) theory (Berger 2013, 293-296). The importance of influencers is strongly supported by the phenomenon of digital celebrities preceded by research in the field of celebrity culture (Godzic 2007; Rojek 2001). According to Robert Cialdini's theory of

influencing people, an influencer is a person who bases his activity on 1) the *rule of reciprocity*, meaning two-way communication; 2) *social proof of rightness* emphasizing that if others trust a given person, we can also trust them; 3) *the rule of liking and sympathy*, when recipients are interested and help people they like who are similar to them; 4) the *rule of authority*, when an authority figure is trusted but the recipient does not undertake personal analyzes or make independent decisions; 5) the *rule of inaccessibility*, indicating a desire for something rare and original; 6) the *rule of involvement and consequence* emphasizing the willingness to perceive recipients as people consistent in their actions and credible in making decisions (Cialdini 2016).

An influencer has specific features that shape their image and build an appropriate bond (dependence) between the sender and the recipient of the message. Although most studies describing the operation of an influencer are undertaken in the field of management theory and economics (marketing), his importance in contemporary communication goes beyond the economic framework. Influencers are more and more often becoming guides in terms of lifestyle, health or worldview. Therefore, an influencer is characterized (Stopczyńska 2018, 108-109; Wilusz 2017, 249-256):

- commitment, including a high frequency of communication with recipients;
- activity and building relationships;
- an authenticity that shows the truthfulness of their beliefs;
- professionalism in activities (often being an expert);
- selectivity in choosing their coworkers and audience;
- making an influence on their recipients; forming opinions;
- building trust;
- parasocial skills;
- continuity of activities and frequent communication by.

An influencer is, therefore, an influential person whose messages and behavior often have a genuine impact on recipients. They inspire and push people to undertake certain actions, often forming an opinion on a specific topic. They have an influence on other people's ethical attitudes and way of looking at reality. In other words, it can be said that influencers are influential opinion leaders who have many strengths that are extremely attractive and give them an advantage over current promotional strategies (Wilusz 2017, 151). They can be people created top-down (through institutions or brands), but also people created bottom-up (due to the genuine interest of Internet users) (Siuda 2009, 31-43).

Influencers operating in the Network use new technologies to create their content on social media. The development of communication tools has caused the discussion community to flourish and at the same time led

to the evolution of the web from Web 1.0 to the modern state of Web 4.0 (Tomaszewski 2011, 429-436; Swarowski 2007, 32-39; Aghaei 2012). This evolution has promoted the emergence of many types of influencers (from *bloggers* to *CGI influencers - artificial intelligence*), as well as their influence power on the audience. Researchers and industry circles make many divisions among influencers, categorizing them in terms of outreach, age and tools used. The division that classifies the content shows that (Fabijańczyk and Cupriak 20016, 35-39; Kuchta-Nykiel 2016):

- influencers as idols attract people with their personality and charisma;
- influencers as experts who possess knowledge;
- influencers deal with the topic of lifestyle;
- influencers are activists and build communities based on social, political or economic issues;
- influencers are artists whose content is mainly visual materials that attract with their aesthetics.

An influencer willingly shares opinions, does not create barriers, arouses emotions and often builds a bond with their recipients. They express specific views and behaviors, often being the “face” of a brand or institution. On the one hand, she or he is an authentic figure, yet, on the other, it is emphasized that the Internet does not allow presenting a real image and complex personalities, and influencers (network celebrities) work on simplifying their personalities into easily understandable personal brands (Banet-Weiser 2012). An influencer primarily creates a community of followers. Thanks to social media, he or she can reach niche social groups or those that have no other possibility of contact. These emerging groups (online communities, mobile communities) mean that an ideological group can arise around one person. These observers' motivations are ambiguous and often characterized as bodiless, non-hierarchical, anonymous, astigmatic, asynchronous, which significantly influence the evolution of digital celebrities and new opinion leaders on the Internet (Szpunar 2004, 157-184).

Among the great crowd of influencers, a special place is taken by the Catholic influencer, meaning a person who refers in his statements to the Catholic faith and identifies himself with the Catholic Church, even promoting the “Catholic ecclesial brand.” Just like every influencer, the Catholic influencer also builds a network of followers around himself. However, he tries to bind them not with himself, but with the Church (with the “ecclesial brand”). It is precisely this relationship with the Church and service to man, who is the “primary route that the Church must travel in fulfilling her mission” (John Paul II 1979, 58), that are the basic qualities of the Catholic infiltrator.

The Church's activity is primarily expressed in proclaiming the kerygma (Francis 2013a, 164), which also means explaining existential problems in the light of evangelical studies (Dyk, Klementowicz, and Wyrostkiewicz 2019, 63-103), building a community understood as a *communio personarum* (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 1995; Pokrywka 2005) and encouraging people to pray and accompanying them in it, as well as through their testimony of a Christian life (Francis 2013a, 259–280; Francis 2013; Migut 2012). Generally speaking, it can be said that the activities of Catholic influencers are to implement the mission of the Church carried out professionally through the Internet media (a detailed discussion of the Catholic influencer's identity and their place in the Catholic Church is new in the research and is part of the content of a separate study prepared by the same authors, whose publication is scheduled for 2022).

3. The activities of Catholic influencers (analysis of media material)

The research study materials have various formal characteristics. The vast majority of materials appear specially made for Internet viewers, broadcast in thematic series, focusing on interaction with the recipient. There are also some materials for viewing on the YouTube channel, but these were recorded during parish retreats.

The analyzed materials were often created directly for this pandemic period to find a form of contact with the faithful (“#PrzeżyjWielkiTydzień” [ExperienceHolyWeek] (Śliżewski)). Many series were carried out earlier and the pandemic made it possible to introduce a different topic and refer to the current situation in Poland (“Houk with ...” (Nowak)). Part of the materials did not mention the current pandemic situation; they only implemented the thematic plan (“Vlogi ks. Śliżewskiego” [Fr. Śliżewski's Vlogs] (Śliżewski); “Pytania i odpowiedzi” [Questions and Answers] (Nowak)). The form of a short (6-11 minutes) commentary to the daily readings was proposed (Węgrzyniak). On the *Langusta na Palma* [Langouste on a Palm] and *Theobankologia* [Theobankology] canals, there were live online prayers with the audience (rosary, holy mass).

The thematic analysis showed that the subject of the researched materials included:

- topics related to the retreat series: “#ExperienceHolyWeek,” “Fr. Dominik Chmielewski's Sermons on ‘What kind of water’” and “Non-parish retreats – Theobankology;”
- advisory topics related to the Holy Mass in the series “#PrayduringtheEucharist;”
- topics related to spirituality in the series “Houk with ...,” and “At midafternoon;”

- topics related to the life of priests and the church included “Priestly confession;”

- topics related to religious practices in the series “Fr. Śliżewski’s vlogs” and “Questions and Answers;”

- advice related to self-improvement, including psychological support at “Theobankology.”

The analysis of the forms of audiovisual expression showed the genre diversity in the posted videos:

- streaming or audio material illustrated with static graphics in the series “Fr. Dominik Chmielewski’s sermons;”

- the author speaking directly to the camera in the series “Fr. Śliżewski’s Vlogs,” “Questions and Answers,” “Houk with....,” “At midafternoon,” “#ExperienceHolyWeek” and “#PrayduringtheEucharist.”

The analysis of the material in terms of using audiovisual means showed that there are:

- materials based only on the speaker’s statements in front of the camera in the series “Fr. Dominik Chmielewski’s sermons,” “At midafternoon,” “Questions and Answers,” “Theobankology,” “We can do it with God’s help” and “Deus vult.”

- materials assembled at different locations, open-air videos for “Houk with;”

- assembled materials introducing graphic elements, inscriptions, photos in “Priestly confession,” “#PrayduringtheEucharist” and “What kind of water;”

- headlines, graphic markings, background selection, posterboards, and the most diverse solutions were by Szustak. It is interesting to note, for example, that the characteristic graphic designs of episodes by Węgrzyniak appear starting in the 14th episode (initially it was rather amateur).

The language of the statements of the analyzed influencers varies from the typical (non-Internet) form of a sermon or biblical commissary (Węgrzyniak) to statements with self-irony or jokes (Theobankology, Non-parish retreats), including loose “Youtuberian language” (Szustak, apart from when reciting prayers, deliberations etc.). Szustak is aware of the balance between different styles of communication when he stated that “Someone here will tell us that we are not being seriousness in proclaiming the Word of God.”

The variety of communication styles is also visible when we take into account the following types of statements: from typically homiletic or lecture styles (Węgrzyniak) to more involved (“Teobankology”), or very free (Szustak). In this context, worth mentioning is a noticeable personal approach to the biblical passages commented. This can be seen in such statements as “I did not see this before, but I now notice it while reading,” “I really like this fragment,” and “these words have really ‘mixed up’ my life” (Szustak).

The analysis of the materials in terms of referring to the Gospel, the Holy Scriptures showed that:

- as to quoting the Scriptures in the authors' statements, more or less all podcasts made references to the Gospel or the Scriptures;

- when quoting the Holy Scriptures and presenting them graphically on video for recipients, viewers can read selected fragments, and then the author interprets these words in the context of the topic of the podcast (Główczyński; Śliżewski).

- direct commentary on the Scriptures by Fr. Węgrzyniak in “We can do it with God’s help” as the content of the episodes.

The analysis of appealing to the sacraments, liturgy and community shows that there are:

- references to the liturgy in the series “#PrayduringtheEucharist;”

- references to the community in “Houk with;”

- talks about “stationary” communities, including traveling to many places related to community worship, such as monasteries, churches, including stories about the community, congregation, and personal pastoral activity (Główczyński SDS);

- references to the sacraments (Śliżewski), for example in the episode “Catholic magic? Sacramentals, exorcisms and blessings;” in the series “Questions and Answers” (e.g. the episode “Why is a daily examination of conscience worth practicing?”);

The materials also show references to the Church community, encouraging people to look for opportunities to attend Holy Mass despite the pandemic and to go to confession. For example, in Theobankology, we hear that “maybe during a pandemic it is more difficult, and we will have to wait outside.” The influencer explicitly encourages taking part in the sacraments.

In terms of contact with the recipient, the analysis of materials showed the following methods:

- phrases stated directly to viewers and followers are visible in all materials; most often these are greeting and farewell statements such as “hello!” “greetings,” “God bless,” “good morning,” “regards” (in all materials), “all of you,” “you,” “think about it.” The form “us” is also used, which builds a community with the recipient by confirming participation in the same experience (prayer, pandemic); this shortens the distance between them.

- a request to inform others about the videos recorded by the author, for example, “Fr. Śliżewski’s Vlogs” and “Theobankology.”

- blessing the viewers and making the sign of the cross in “Fr. Śliżewski’s Vlogs,” “#ExperienceHolyWeek,” Węgrzyniak’s “Teobankology,” Chaciński’s “Deus vult,” Szustak’s “Love in times of the plague” (in Wstawaki [Get-Up-ers]), there were shorter, looser sections with the formula at the end: “Hugs, greetings, blessings (-:).”

- answering viewer-submitted questions (most often reading these questions, sometimes showing their written form on the screen and the author's answer) in the "Questions and Answers" series, "What kind of water?" and "Priestly confession;"

- less frequently, there is an attempt to make personal contact with the recipient through competitions and interactions, for example in "What kind of water?" and "Theobankology;" "If someone stayed to the end, write something in the commentary;" Szustak says "perhaps you can write and explain how to say 'seduced by Jesus' and 'drawn by Jesus' differently."

- referring to personal experiences by saying a story about one's life (Główczyński, Nowak, Węgrzyniak, Chaciński);

- audiovisual materials were commented on by viewers; unfortunately, none of them referred to these comments regularly; there was no streaming material focused on interacting; all materials were recorded and posted on the Web; some of the materials were recorded in advance and then posted regularly on the Internet. The exception was when Szustak asked for information about technical problems and did not start the Holy Mass (he was already standing in front of the camera in a chasuble), and waited until he found out that all interested parties were ready to participate in the service. In addition, he answered questions "live" in the Q&A series. In the series "Love in times of the plague," he not only referred to viewers' comments, but also asked for a sign. In addition, he managed viewer activity. For example, during the rosary, the rule was not to write comments. It seems that Szustak's greater inclination towards interaction with the recipient results from his greater experience of being present on the Web and for a longer period than others.

In addition, influencers advise in matters of faith, showing how the Church functions, and try to answer recipients' questions; as part of retreats or thematic series, they prepare recordings that focus on specific topics. Almost all of them (except Szustak) are dressed as clergymen. This is an unambiguous identification. Significantly, Szustak is also wearing his religious habit in the episode during which he recites the rosary.

Also worth noting is that, in most cases, vlog authors weren't "network celebrities," meaning that they weren't previously known as "media persons." Their material was often not professional, but it received a lot of views. It is evident that people from the younger generation have a different, more modern and looser approach to vlogging. It was noticed that the materials were made especially for the Internet recipient, with a shorter form and periodic frequency of publishing the materials. One can also feel the "awareness of an online tool," for example, indicating what year the posterboards appear and how the microphone works.

The comments by Internet users show the need for spiritual advisers. Specific questions are asked about faith and morals. There are also

expressions of appreciation for the advice given. All this points to the need and value of the activities of Catholic influencers.

4. Conclusions: The Catholic influencer as a spiritual director

Development of communication changes relations to others and to reality: “This reality also includes the virtual space that has already become a part of the relational reality of daily life” (Frunză 2019b, 9), Nevertheless, in modern communication, there should be a balance between technology and the philosophical humanistic or theological aspect, which strive for true interpersonal communication (Frunză 2019b, s.10-11). This means that in the area of consulting we should not give up either traditional communication or modern media communication.

The conducted research showed that there are professional Catholic influencers in the Polish-language realm of YouTube. They turned out to be Catholic clergymen. The aforementioned professionalism concerns an influencer's workshop and the content resulting from their relationship with the Catholic Church (with the “ecclesial brand”). Most of them turned out to be micro-influencers (from 1,000 to 100,000 recipients) and nano-influencers (from 1,000 to 10,000 recipients). Only two authors (A. Szustak and T. Sawielewicz) can be classified as macro-influencers (from 100,000 to 1,000,000 recipients).

In order to accomplish the goals of this study described in the introduction, meaning to determine whether a Catholic influencer can act as a spiritual adviser and leader, or even if this challenges the Church in this regard, it is necessary to understand what counseling and spiritual leadership are for the Church. From the point of view of Catholic theology, these activities fall within the area of the spiritual direction. This term is used in theology to describe the support given to an individual or a group of people in their pursuit of perfection (this is not related to the sacrament of penance and reconciliation, which distinguishes leadership from spiritual fatherhood, emphasizing “spiritual birth” or “giving spiritual life” whose best place is a sacramental confession).

Spiritual accompaniment is synonymous with properly understood spiritual direction. This phrase speaks not only of guiding a person in need of spiritual support, but also about making a friendly check on them. The friendliness mentioned above is an important issue here. It emphasizes a partnership between the spiritual director and the person led. It assumes making a free choice by the supervised person about selecting their director and full consent to putting oneself under his care. It also points to the director's need for personal involvement in the relationship with the person being led. This also enables a director to select those he is spiritually guiding (such as Jesus, who “summoned those whom he wanted” (Mk 3:13)). Integrally understood spiritual direction makes a positive influence on a person by providing them with knowledge,

explaining and being close to them, as well as by experiencing God in community prayer (Misiurek 2000).

The influencers whose activities were analyzed do not try to be celebrities, but serve the recipient through their programs; they want to support someone in understanding the truths of the faith and putting them into practice. Influencers want to help people understand what it means to “live the Gospel” and do it in one’s everyday life. Their statements are not abstract, but mainly concern existential situations. The kerygma is introduced only in this context. The studied influencers perceive the problems during the pandemic that affect the thinking and functioning of recipients, but they do not limit themselves to it. They show a broader perspective of Christian thinking focused on integral development, culminating in the salvation of every person. The pandemic is just one of the challenges facing man in the world. Without underestimating this issue, however, influencers mainly talk about faith, hope and love in the contemporary world. They encourage community building (*communio personarum*) and include themselves in this process. Influencers attach great importance to prayer. They not only show its value, but also pray together with their recipients. They do not focus attention on themselves, but lead others to God. They do not stop at network activities, but show the value of “real” communities.

Based on the analysis, it can be concluded that the Catholic influencer is not only a leader and influential person, but also an authority in matters of faith and morals, including personal meetings with God (prayer and spirituality). He is also a formator who helps to change a person’s life into one that results in good deeds, the integral development of the person as a whole, and prayer, with particular emphasis on meeting God in His Word and the liturgy. All of this shows that a Catholic influencer is an appropriate person to fulfill the role of spiritual direction.

Building an online channel and maintaining relationships (interactions) with followers is an expression of accompanying them in life. This is confirmed by regular posts and recordings, as well as by their willingness to continue discussions and receive advice beyond the main channel through individual meetings. Declaring to pray for followers is also important. In this way, the relationship is strengthened, and God who is the addressee of the prayer is included in it. Common prayer in which “they stand together before God, their common Father” is a confirmation of the community nature of the relationship between a Catholic influencer and a follower.

The features and methods of Catholic influencers’ actions observed in the study lead to the conclusion that the research hypothesis has been positively verified. The presented research shows that professionally acting Catholic influencers can play the role of spiritual advisers and leaders. Moreover, for many of them, it seems that this is the case. What is more, research should be undertaken with the participation of recipients

of activities carried out by Catholic influencers (this may become the subject of a further study that would complement the present research).

The above theses lead to another conclusion, namely, that Catholic influencing is a challenge for the spiritual direction accomplished in the Catholic Church. This is largely due to the fact that the Internet is a space where people are “always present.” Here, they look for answers to various questions: from the simplest ad hoc advice to the most serious issues concerning the meaning and purpose of life.

The challenge is, therefore, to properly prepare Catholics to act as influencers. In addition to knowledge in the field of theology, media education is also needed. It is impossible to be a professional influencer without it. As a result of the research, we can recommend that candidates for the priesthood, as well as participants of courses and schools of formation and evangelization, learn about methods of media influence that they can use in their future activities on the Internet. This activity, as already noted, not only cannot be beyond the Church’s area of interest, but must be properly estimated. Today, an influencer can build strong relationships and reach a community that is often absent from real social or religious activities. Their strength should be directed towards building a traditional vision of religion, but it may become an extraordinary force of the new idea of Christianity.

The Internet is part of the “fourth power” (media) that controls social life, influencing public opinion possessing a consultative and control function that is incomparable to other institutions (Garlicki 2004). Influencers, as opinion leaders, also include their activities in this function. *Digital activism* or *cyberactivism* is the movement of people all over the world who want to influence the social and political reality using the Internet and mobile phones (du Val 2013, 97-111). Therefore, from the theological point of view, the Church needs Catholic influencers who will become formation leaders and help people to direct their actions resulting in good deeds, becoming a source of personal development and social order.

Counseling is a needed practice today: „philosophical counselling is considered more and more as a solution that can be used in our cultural space”. (Frunză 2019, 74). It is similar in the area of spirituality. Spiritual and religious counseling can be an important practice of strengthening interpersonal communication, but also building a community. As shown, this is where catholic influencerism can work well as a spiritual leadership in the age of social media.

Acknowledgements: The article is a part of the project funded by the Ministry of Education and Science, Republic of Poland, “Regional Initiative of Excellence” in 2019-2022, 028/RID/2018/19, the amount of funding: 11742500 PLN

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