

ФИЛОСОФИЯ НА РЕЛИГИЯТА

DIGITAL EMPATHY OR DIGITAL INDIFFERENCE? A STUDY OF PASTORAL SUPPORT IN THE ERA OF VIRTUAL COMMUNICATION

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Резюме

Хедвига Ткачова. Цифрова емпатия или цифрово безразличие? Изследване на пастирската подкрепа в ерата на виртуалното общуване. Нарастващата дигитализация на междуличностното общуване оказва влияние и върху сферата на религиозния живот и пастирското служение. В този контекст все по-често се поставя въпросът, как цифровите технологии влияят върху качеството на духовната подкрепа. Изследването се фокусира върху концепцията за цифрова емпатия, като един от ключовите показатели за ефективно и автентично пастирско присъствие във виртуалното пространство. Целта е да се изследва кои фактори подпомагат или възпрепятстват възникването на емпатия в онлайн среда, какви са симптомите на цифровото безразличие и какви стратегии могат да се използват за предотвратяване на повърхностно или безлично общуване. Особено внимание се отделя на възможностите на хибридният модел на пастирска грижа, който съчетава предимствата на личния и дигиталния контакт. Теоретичният и концептуалният анализ се основава на интердисциплинарен подход, който интегрира знания от теологията, психологията и медийните изследвания, с особен акцент върху дигиталната комуникация. Резултатът от изследването са препоръки за развитие на емпатична и същевременно професионално обоснована пастирска практика в дигитална среда.

Ключови думи: цифрова емпатия, онлайн пастирска грижа, пастирско обръщане, виртуална комуникация, цифрово безразличие, хибриден модел, пастирска грижа и технологии

Анотація

Гедвіґа Ткачова. Цифрова емпатія чи цифрова байдужість? Дослідження пастирської підтримки в еру віртуального спілкування. Зростаюча цифровізація міжособистісного спілкування впливає також на сферу релігійного життя та пастирського служіння. У цьому контексті все частіше ставиться питання про те, як цифрові технології впливають на якість духовної підтримки. Дослідження зосереджується на концепції цифрової емпатії як одного з ключових показників ефективної та автентичної пастирської присутності у віртуальному просторі. Метою є вивчення того, які фактори підтримують або перешкоджають виникненню емпатії в онлайн-середовищі, які симптоми цифрової байдужості та які стратегії можна використовувати для запобігання поверхневому або безособовому спілкуванню. Особлива увага приділяється можливостям гібридної моделі пастирської опіки, яка поєднує переваги особистого та цифрового контакту. Теоретичний та концептуальний аналіз базується на міждисциплінарному підході, що поєднує знання з теології, психології та медіазнавства з

вужчим акцентом на цифрову комунікацію. Результатом дослідження є рекомендації щодо розвитку емпатичної та водночас професійно обґрунтованої пастирської практики в цифровому середовищі.

Ключові слова: Цифрова емпатія, онлайн-пастирська опіка, пастирське навернення, віртуальна комунікація, цифрова байдужість, гібридна модель, пастирська опіка та технології

Abstract

Hedviga Tkáčová. Digital Empathy or Digital Indifference? A Study of Pastoral Support in the Era of Virtual Communication. The increasing digitalization of interpersonal communication has also extended into the sphere of religious life and pastoral practice. In this context, growing attention is being paid to the impact of digital technologies on the quality of spiritual support. This study focuses on the concept of digital empathy as a key indicator of effective and authentic pastoral presence in virtual environments. The aim of the article is to examine the factors that foster or hinder the development of empathy in online communication, to identify manifestations of digital indifference, and to propose strategies for preventing superficial or impersonal forms of interaction. Particular attention is given to the potential of a hybrid model of pastoral care that integrates the strengths of both face-to-face and digital engagement. The research is based on a theoretical and conceptual analysis grounded in an interdisciplinary approach, drawing on theology, psychology, and media studies, with a specific focus on digital communication. The study offers recommendations for cultivating empathetic and professionally grounded pastoral practice in digital contexts.

Keywords: Digital empathy, online pastoral care, pastoral conversion, virtual communication, digital indifference, hybrid model, pastoral care and technology

Introduction. The digitalization of interpersonal communication is dramatically changing how people initiate and maintain relationships, including spiritual and religious ones. This shift disrupts traditional frameworks within which pastoral trust, empathy, and authentic spiritual connection were once established. The loss of physical presence, limited nonverbal communication, and the absence of symbolic gestures and rituals contribute to a decline in the quality of spiritual care (Baehr, Schaller, 2022). In other words, pastoral service in the online environment faces new challenges – not only technical but also relational, psychological, and spiritual – that influence the quality of communication, emotional resonance, and the authenticity of the relationship between the provider and recipient of support (Equina, Longchar, 2019; Adekuba, 2024).

The relevance of this topic stems not only from the changes mentioned above but also from the growing trend of churches, religious communities, and spiritual leaders increasingly adopting digital technologies as tools for pastoral care, spiritual accompaniment, or prayer-based connection (Glas, 2024; Isetti, De Rachewiltz, Pechlaner, 2024). However, pastoral care and spiritual counselling go beyond mere technical adaptation – their significance lies in a deeper mission: to care for the spiritual and practical needs of those gathered and served by the Church. Pastoral accompaniment enables members of faith communities to better understand the word of God and to apply its values to their daily lives. At the same time, it provides a framework for individuals to address personal, ethical, and moral questions following Christian principles. A key dimension also lies in fostering the capacity to face life's challenges independently, which involves acquiring spiritual and practical skills essential for navigating complex life situations. Pastoral care thus represents a systematic effort to support the holistic growth of individuals and communities in truth and love (Dennis, 2023).

The use of technology in the process of pastoral care accelerated significantly during the COVID-19 pandemic, when worship services, spiritual conversations, and pastoral counselling ex-

perienced an unprecedented shift to the online sphere (Byrne, Nuzum, 2020; Campbell, 2021; Pew Research Center, 2021). This rapid transition posed a major challenge for many church organizations, which had to adapt on the go, often without prior expertise in digital technologies (Arasa et al., 2022). The changes brought about by the pandemic affected not only the format of pastoral activities but also raised important questions regarding the lasting role of digital space in the Church's mission. Responses across Christian traditions varied – some denominations embraced digital tools more openly, while others, such as Catholic communities, remained committed to traditional and hierarchical forms of communication, including livestreamed Masses and content published on official websites (Gelfgren, 2024).

In the post-pandemic period, pastoral communication and support are realized daily in real life and within the virtual space. This shift is not merely the result of technological advancement but also a response to changing social conditions, such as pandemic restrictions, the growing prevalence of loneliness, and the need for more accessible spiritual contact (Brunier, Drysdale, 2022; Vlachantoni et al., 2022; Einav, Margalit, 2023). In this context, the concept of digital empathy has gained particular relevance – namely, the ability to be emotionally present and responsive in digital environments (Campbell, 2022), or more specifically, the capacity to dynamically adapt empathy by “integrating technical proficiency and compassionate communication to effectively respond to the human needs in virtual environment” (Abou Hashish, 2025).

While some studies emphasize the potential of digital tools to facilitate authentic spiritual connection (Cheong, 2013; Campbell, Tsuria, 2021), others warn of the risk of so-called digital indifference – a condition in which communication loses emotional depth, nonverbal expressions are limited, and the experience of the other becomes superficial (Gerlitz, Helmond, 2013; Louw, 2016). This raises important questions: Does pastoral communication in digital settings retain its authenticity and emotional depth? Or are we rather witnessing a new form of indifference, where personal contact and genuine empathy are being pushed into the background?

This contribution is based on the assumption that digital media are transforming the nature of interpersonal contact and disrupting the traditional frameworks in which trust and empathy were, until recently, formed. The key research question thus remains: how do digital technologies influence the quality of pastoral care? The study aims to explore the dynamics of empathy and indifference in digital pastoral work, to analyse the factors that foster or hinder the development of digital empathy, and to propose recommendations for cultivating authentic and effective pastoral support in online environments. At the same time, the study seeks to critically reflect on the potential of hybrid models – combinations of online and in-person pastoral care – as a tool for preserving the authenticity and depth of spiritual accompaniment in the digital age (Knoll, 2020).

1. Digital Empathy: Concept and selected options

Empathy is a fundamental prerequisite for effective pastoral care. In traditional communication, it is expressed through words, and similarly through tone of voice, gestures, facial expressions, and physical presence. In digital environments, however, many of these aspects are limited or mediated by technology. In other words, instead of directly perceiving facial expressions, gestures, and tone, individuals work with reduced cues, such as text, visual presence via screen, or delayed communication. Despite these limitations, according to experts, digitally mediated empathy can be effective if trust, emotional safety, and authentic presence are intentionally cultivated (Oh, Virani, 2019).

In the process of pastoral care, digital empathy can significantly contribute to creating a safe, trusting, and supportive space—even at a distance (Livingston, 2024). Digital empathy refers to the ability to perceive, understand, and share the feelings of others even when communicating through digital media (e.g., email, chat, or video call). It is important for its capacity to identify emo-

tions and express emotional support without direct personal contact. Recognizing emotions in digital environments requires the ability to read subtle cues, such as tone of text, typing rhythm, or the use of emoticons. Providing emotional support means responding to another's emotions with intentional kindness. Because of the absence of nonverbal cues, digital empathy demands active listening, clear verbal expression, and conveying emotional support (Konrath et al., 2011). We can observe that effective digital empathy appears to be a combination of technical skill in using communication tools and deep emotional sensitivity to the other person's situation, even when mediated through a screen (Visionflex, 2022).

Specific expressions and practices of digital empathy include the ability to actively listen and sensitively respond through online tools such as video calls or chat platforms. This also involves an awareness of the importance of words, tone of voice, and timing of responses, as even a slight delay may be perceived as disinterest. In text-based online communication (e.g., emails or messages), the choice of words, emoticons, and punctuation plays a crucial role in conveying the emotional undertone of a message. Maintaining eye contact (during video calls) and using empathetic phrasing (in written communication) are likewise essential. Open-ended questions, which provide the other person with space to express their thoughts and emotions, are another valuable element of digital empathy. Equally important is the ability to adjust the pace of conversation to the partner's needs, especially in situations involving personal or emotionally challenging topics. At the core, however, lies a conscious interest in the other person and a willingness to understand and accompany them, even in contexts where physical presence is not possible.

It is important to note that in the process of digital empathy, technology functions as a mediator rather than a substitute for human contact. Even in online settings, human connection remains essential. The realization of digital empathy is only possible when new forms of expressing support, attention, and understanding are intentionally integrated into communication. The use of technology in the process of online pastoral care thus requires a new sensitivity to the nuanced dynamics of online interaction, along with the ability to actively listen, respond patiently, and create a space in which the other person feels truly heard.

Finally, in the context of digital empathy, one must also consider the spiritual limitations closely linked to pastoral practice. According to the Catholic tradition and teaching, while digital technologies can mediate words and images or facilitate virtual community through a screen, they cannot mediate sacramental grace, which requires visible rituals involving sacramental matter (i.e., bread, wine, water, oil) and personal words and gestures of the liturgy, through which Christ himself acts (Catechism of the Catholic Church, §1127–1134). In other words, while the online environment offers new and meaningful opportunities for pastoral engagement – such as spiritual accompaniment or community-based pastoral discussions – it remains a complement to the liturgical life of the Church, which requires the physical presence of the individual who, in faith, receives the sacraments as visible signs of invisible grace and a personal encounter with Christ.

2. Digital Indifference: Concept and key factors

Despite the potential for developing digital empathy, there is also a risk of the emergence of digital indifference. Digital indifference refers to a state in which individuals in online environments become emotionally detached, less engaged, or insensitive to the needs of others. Under the influence of digital indifference, emotional connection is weakened, engagement diminishes, and trust between support providers and their recipients erodes. In the pastoral context, this phenomenon can significantly affect the quality of relationships and the capacity to provide effective spiritual care.

Factors contributing to digital indifference are often linked to anonymity, limited non-verbal communication, and reduced social presence, all of which weaken emotional bonds between pastoral workers and those under their care (Oh, Virani, 2019; Konrath et al., 2011). The weakening of

emotional connection in digital spaces has also been confirmed by research in the field of computer-mediated communication. For example, Derks, Fischer, and Bos noted that the absence of facial expressions and tone of voice significantly hinders the accurate interpretation of another person's emotional state (2008, p. 4).

Moreover, excessive exposure to digital content may lead to so-called empathic fatigue – a state of emotional exhaustion that impairs the ability to respond authentically to the needs of others (Oh, Virani, 2019). As a result, the spiritual guide's ability to recognize and reflect on the emotional state of the person they accompany is diminished, reducing the overall effectiveness of pastoral care.

Cognitive and emotional overload caused by continuous, fragmented online communication also plays a significant role. Pastoral workers are often exposed to a constant influx of demands via emails, messages, or social media, which can lead to reduced attentiveness and a decline in the quality of responses. Empirical studies confirm that frequent task-switching decreases the capacity to concentrate and respond empathetically (Rosen et al., 2013).

Another risk is the asynchronicity of online communication, which weakens immediate emotional connections and disrupts the dynamics of trust (Baym, 2015). The lack of direct feedback can lead to misinterpretations of emotions and intentions, thereby reducing the quality of spiritual accompaniment. The absence of physical presence may deepen feelings of loneliness or alienation among recipients of pastoral support, especially in crisis situations (Motta, 2020; Gultom et al., 2022).

When long-term contact and personal context are lacking, individuals in digital environments are easily reduced to “profiles” – detached from their unique stories and emotions. This depersonalization effect (Turkle, 2011) can diminish engagement even among spiritual guides themselves, exacerbating distance and passivity. Digital indifference thus manifests as superficial, often automated communication without personal connection, lowering the sense of trust and potentially evoking feelings of loneliness (Smith, Alheneidi, 2023) and/or isolation (Livingston, 2024) in those receiving support.

Furthermore, the phenomenon of online disinhibition (Suler, 2004) operates in digital environments, allowing communication to appear less sensitive or compassionate, which further degrades the emotional quality of interaction. Online disinhibition is a psychological phenomenon whereby internet conditions – especially anonymity, invisibility, asynchronicity, and physical distance – weaken natural social restraints, leading users to behave in less controlled or more impulsive ways (El Khatib et al., 2021). Consequently, spiritual guides may act in online communication in ways they would not permit themselves in face-to-face contact – ranging from cold, terse responses to avoidance of deeper interaction – even though they might otherwise behave with greater empathy and engagement.

3. Hybrid Pastoral Care Model: Integrating in-person and digital spiritual support

With the increasing influence of digitalization on interpersonal relationships and communication, pastoral care is gradually shifting into the online space, where new forms of spiritual contact are emerging – from community discussions to individual accompaniment.

The hybrid model of pastoral care represents an innovative approach that combines the advantages of traditional in-person pastoral ministry with the flexibility and accessibility of digital platforms. This model enables pastoral workers to maintain authentic contact with their spiritual charges physically and virtually, thereby expanding the possibilities of spiritual support and responding to the changing needs of modern society (Campbell, 2020; Cheong et al., 2012).

Thus, the hybrid model creates space for the development of digital empathy through targeted and sensitive communication while simultaneously preserving deep personal contact, which minimizes the risks of superficiality or alienation (i.e., digital indifference) in online pastoral care.

3.1 Hybrid Pastoral Care Models: Practical examples from the church environment

Empirical studies have provided several examples of the practical application of the hybrid model of pastoral care. Pastoral workers often use text-based communication as an initial point of contact with individuals facing sensitive life situations. After several weeks of regular online exchanges, there is often a transition to in-person meetings that would otherwise not be possible. Another example includes regular video calls with congregation members living abroad or outside their home parish, with personal meetings initiated upon their return (Neves, 2024). Thus, online communication serves both as a first contact and as a tool for continuity and relationship maintenance.

Other research highlights the hybrid model within faith communities where evening prayers are held online during the workweek, while weekend services take place in person (Neves, 2024). Digital formats thus provide daily spiritual encouragement and preparation for deeper fellowship during face-to-face gatherings.

The hybrid model has also proven effective as a proactive approach to early intervention, particularly in urgent situations such as domestic violence or serious health issues. It often happens that believers only contact pastoral caregivers during a crisis stage, when intervention is more difficult or even impossible (Neves, 2024).

Pastoral workers also utilize social media for friendly monitoring of community members, especially youth, to identify behavioural changes, sudden silence, or emotional status updates that may signal the need for contact. Such contact usually occurs through personal messages, phone calls, or, if necessary, in-person visits. It is crucial to "simply be available and listen" without immediately attempting to give advice, highlighting that effective hybrid pastoral care relies not only on technology but primarily on the ability to create presence and a safe space, even at a distance. This aspect also relates to the development of digital empathy, which enables pastoral caregivers to perceive and respond to the emotional needs of individuals through digital channels, thereby transcending the limits of physical presence. Conversely, a challenge may arise from digital indifference, where the distance and anonymity of the online environment led to superficial or impersonal approaches, potentially reducing the quality of pastoral care.

The online environment simultaneously allows for more open communication on topics associated with shame, which can be more difficult in face-to-face settings (Joinson, 2001). The diminished perception of "self" in the online public sphere fosters authentic self-disclosure, which is crucial in hybrid pastoral care for building trust and acceptance (Brown, 2006).

These examples confirm that digital tools facilitate initial contact, enable ongoing communication, and lower barriers to discussing intimate topics, while in-person meetings provide depth, authenticity, and nonverbal cues that are irreplaceable in spiritual accompaniment (Shodikin et al., 2021).

Overall, it is confirmed that hybrid pastoral care represents a dynamic and context-sensitive model that produces a synergistic effect – digital platforms complement and extend the possibilities of personal accompaniment, thereby enhancing its accessibility, continuity, and effectiveness.

3.2 Combining the strengths of physical and digital contact

In contemporary pastoral practice, the integration of physical and digital forms of communication – constituting the so-called hybrid model of pastoral care – is becoming increasingly significant. The choice between in-person and virtual contact depends on multiple factors, primarily the nature of the pastoral situation, technological accessibility, the recipient's preferences, as well as broader environmental contexts such as geographical distance or temporal flexibility.

Empirical studies confirm that recipients perceive digital tools as a supplement rather than a replacement for personal contact. Their purpose is not to eliminate physical presence but to create space for its development and deepening through online communication. The combination of online and offline forms thus enables a flexible response to the individual's current needs, combining the

advantages of both types of contact (Neves, 2024).

At the same time, the digital environment introduces new challenges, including the need to develop digital empathy. Successful hybrid pastoral care, therefore, requires not only technical skills but also a sensitive approach capable of overcoming the barriers of online communication. Conversely, there is the risk of digital indifference, where superficial or insufficiently engaged interaction in the digital space can weaken the pastoral relationship and generate feelings of misunderstanding or even isolation.

When adopting the hybrid model, the Church mustn't regard online presence merely as a technical implementation or imitation of in-person meetings, but as an opportunity to create new forms of community and service. Hybrid pastoral care expands the horizons of pastoral ministry, making it more accessible and flexible for diverse groups of believers. At the same time, it calls on pastoral leaders to actively build trust and personal connection in the digital realm, requiring a new kind of awareness and commitment within the online environment (Berlin, 2020).

The indicated risks suggest that online forms of pastoral care currently remain only a supplement; that is, they cannot replace the liturgical life of the Church, which requires physical presence and sacramental celebration as the "visible signs of invisible grace" (Catechism of the Catholic Church, §1131).

Many ecclesiastical documents and experts, however, emphasize that the Church should not reject the digital space but rather develop what is called "digital ecclesiology," which explores what it means to be the Church in the context of digital communication (Campbell, Digital Ecclesiology, 2020). This need is clearly articulated in the document Pastoral Conversion of the Parish Community in the Service of the Evangelizing Mission of the Church (Vatican, 2020), which stresses the indispensability of presence and pastoral care wherever people truly live, including the online environment.

This directs our attention to the practical dimension of implementing hybrid pastoral care. When deciding about the acceptance of a hybrid model, it is essential first to consider how different forms of pastoral ministry affect relationships with the faithful. Questions such as "Who has joined us? Where do they come from?" or "Who has disconnected? How can we encourage them to return?" help to identify the strengths and weaknesses of various approaches (Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 2021). In this context, special attention must be paid to those who may be excluded by the online model – seniors, individuals with limited access to technology, or those who have become invisible to the community.

Furthermore, it is crucial to consider the human and technical capacities of the hybrid pastoral model. This includes questions such as "Who will be responsible for online activities: staff, volunteers, or both?" and "What new training or technical equipment will be necessary?" (Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 2021).

3.3 Limitations of the hybrid approach and recommendations

A fundamental limitation of the hybrid approach in pastoral care is the ongoing need for ethical decision-making that balances accessibility, confidentiality, and trust, key pillars of pastoral ministry. In particular, protecting the privacy of recipients is challenged in the digital environment, where messages may be accidentally disclosed, forwarded to unintended persons, or intercepted by unauthorized third parties. Such risks can undermine the mutual trust between the provider and recipient of pastoral support.

Another limitation is the uneven technological accessibility, especially in remote areas with poor internet connectivity or insufficient technical equipment. These barriers often compel pastoral workers to revert to in-person visits, thereby restricting the reach of hybrid pastoral care (Hove, 2024).

Further, a significant issue is the varying levels of digital literacy among pastoral workers, manifested in differing understandings of ethical norms and varying technical competencies. This heterogeneity is exacerbated by the absence of a clear framework outlining the ethical and practical principles for using digital technologies in pastoral ministry.

Before implementing a hybrid model, it is essential to carefully consider the cultural and ethical norms of various local communities, which may evoke technical resistance or distrust toward digital forms. This requires active education and adaptation (Hove, 2024). Some authors also warn of the risk of reduced inclusion, whereby some church members may become “lost” in the digital space, potentially weakening community life and pastoral accompaniment (Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 2021).

An important aspect is the development of digital empathy – the ability to empathize with and understand the feelings and needs of others in the online environment, which is crucial for maintaining authentic relationships in hybrid pastoral care. Conversely, a lack of empathy may lead to digital indifference, where online participants feel overlooked or ignored, which weakens their engagement and trust.

To overcome these limitations, it is necessary to strengthen pastoral workers' ethical and digital literacy through systematic formation. Church institutions should establish clear ethical guidelines for the use of digital platforms in pastoral care, including data protection, secure communication, and transparency toward the faithful. A unified framework will help reduce uncertainty and promote responsible use of technology.

Hybrid pastoral care also presents a dilemma between the efficiency of digital contact and the depth of personal encounter. While online formats allow broader accessibility and continuous support, face-to-face meetings remain indispensable for creating profound nonverbal connections. It is recommended that the online form of pastoral care should not merely replicate in-person services but be specifically designed for online participants, for example, by including personal address before the camera and actively engaging the audience. Insufficient attention to this aspect may lead to feelings of neglect within the online group (Berlin, 2020).

The technical demands of the hybrid model are higher – not only are technical skills required, but also the coordination of online interactions, chat moderation, technical support, streaming, and even digital marketing. This places increased demands on both human and technical resources (Berlin, 2020).

Insufficient reflection and coordination in hybrid pastoral care led to uncertainty and inconsistency in digital practices, which undermines recipients' trust and diminishes the effectiveness of pastoral ministry.

4. Discussion

The discussion section opens a space for reflection on digital empathy and pastoral presence in the online environment. Abou Hashish (2025) and Baehr and Schaller (2022) emphasize that digital empathy can partially compensate for physical absence, which is particularly crucial in technology-mediated pastoral care. Oh and Virani (2019), as well as Livingston (2024), affirm the importance of digital empathy for maintaining authentic interpersonal relationships, while simultaneously cautioning about its limitations, since the online environment cannot fully replace personal contact. This dynamic illustrates how digital empathy shapes new paradigms of pastoral care that warrant further exploration and development.

The contribution also reflects on the challenges and opportunities brought by digital technologies to pastoral work, especially in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. Byrne and Nuzum (2020), Arasa et al. (2022), and similarly Knoll (2020) describe how spiritual services and pastoral activities rapidly adapted to online formats during the pandemic, enabling continued contact with

the community despite physical isolation. Conversely, Isetti et al. (2024) highlight persistent challenges associated with this adaptation, including technological barriers and feelings of alienation, which limited the effectiveness of such pastoral care. Both perspectives reveal, to varying degrees, the potential of technologies to expand access to pastoral support, representing a significant opportunity for future pastoral methodologies and strategies.

Finally, the discussion turns to the influence of social media and online communication on spiritual life and religious practices. Among others, the Pew Research Center (2021) documented changes in religious service attendance during the pandemic, noting that online platforms facilitated broader, though often more superficial, engagement with spirituality. Gerlitz and Helmond (2013) or, for instance, El Khatib et al. (2021), examined cultural and psychological impacts of these changes, as they shaped current and likely future forms of pastoral ministry.

In the context of the present and near future, the hybrid model of pastoral care emerges as a relevant innovation. This model effectively integrates personal and digital contact to increase the accessibility and flexibility of spiritual support. According to Campbell (2020) and Cheong et al. (2012), the hybrid model helps maintain authentic relationships with pastoral recipients and fosters digital empathy, which is essential for sensitive and responsible communication in the online space. Empirical examples illustrate diverse applications of hybrid pastoral care, from the use of text communication in initial contact to combinations of online prayers with in-person worship services (Neves, 2024). Research suggests that such an approach, among other benefits, lowers barriers to discussing difficult or intimate topics, thereby enhancing opportunities for building trust and effective accompaniment.

Despite the positive aspects of the hybrid pastoral model, it is essential to consider its limitations and challenges. Key among these are the need to develop digital literacy and ethical awareness among pastoral workers, and ensure technological accessibility for all community members (Hove, 2024; Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 2021, and others). There is also the risk of digital indifference, which can lead to superficial relationships, and the potential exclusion of vulnerable groups from the online space, such as seniors or individuals with limited access to technology. Therefore, it is important that hybrid pastoral care is not understood as a replacement for personal encounters but as a complement that broadens the possibilities of pastoral ministry while maintaining an emphasis on deep, personal contact (Berlin, 2020; Catechism of the Catholic Church, §1131).

Conclusion. Pastoral support has historically relied on personal contact, where proximity, nonverbal communication, and shared presence played a crucial role in building trust, providing spiritual guidance, and fostering emotional connection. Within this space, the foundation of a trustworthy relationship between the spiritual caregiver and the individual was formed, often mediated through liturgy, sacraments, and the communal experience of faith.

However, digitalisation has brought a fundamental shift – online platforms, video conferencing, and social media enable presence even when physical meetings are impossible. A new space is emerging in which digital religious subcultures are formed and new types of spiritual relationships take shape, often mediated by screens, but with real impact on an individual's faith, identity, and emotional life.

This transformation brings both opportunities and challenges. Online pastoral care extends the reach of spiritual support and increases its accessibility. At the same time, it raises concerns about preserving authenticity, trust, and emotional depth, i.e., qualities not guaranteed in digital settings.

Maintaining these qualities requires intentional and well-considered strategies, particularly the cultivation of so-called digital empathy – the ability to perceive the spiritual and emotional needs of others through technological means. Pastoral care in the online environment cannot merely in-

volve transferring traditional forms into a digital framework; it must also include a deeper reflection on communication structures, relational dynamics, and new forms of religious experience.

Risks associated with digital detachment and superficiality point to the need for critical reflection on the forms and tools used in digital ministry. Empathy, trust, and mutual understanding do not emerge automatically in digital spaces – they must be deliberately fostered. Therefore, pastoral service cannot ignore the digital environment but must ask how to be genuinely present even where communication is mediated by technology.

A promising approach appears to be the hybrid model of pastoral care, which combines the benefits of in-person and digital contact. This is not merely a technical merging of two formats, but a new way of engaging in spiritual life and service – one that respects the diversity of believers' needs and flexibly responds to changing societal conditions. The hybrid model also allows for meaningful engagement with emerging digital subcultures, which require specific linguistic, relational, and cultural sensitivity.

Ultimately, hybrid pastoral care is not only about a shift in format, but about a pastoral conversion – a renewed, attentive listening to the needs of today's person and the courage to be present wherever that person may be – even if it is in an online discussion forum, on social media, or within a digital community.

Therefore, the task of pastoral workers is to seek new pathways of spiritual presence in digital environments, fully aware that while technology can be a tool of church ministry, it can never replace its human and relational core. It is precisely in this balance between technology and humanity, between accessibility and depth, between the online and offline worlds, that a new chapter of pastoral anthropology is being formed – one that must, we believe, both respond to contemporary challenges and draw deeply from the richness of tradition.

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