

Mediatization of Institutional Communication of the Catholic Church. Reflections on the Margins of the Migration Crisis

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ABSTRACT

The theoretical reflection on the issue of mediatization of institutional communication of the Catholic Church is undertaken in the context of the migration crisis of the second decade of the 21st century in Europe. **Scientific objective:** An attempt to systematize the most important consequences of mediatization processes for a proper understanding of the role of the mass media in the institutional communication of the Catholic Church. **Research methods:** Method of analysis and synthesis. The author referred to theoretical research on mediatization, among others W. Schulz, H. Knoblauch, Ž. Pavić, F. Kurbanovič, T. Levak, but also used the achievements of researchers involved in communication of the Catholic Church (N. González Gaitano, D. Arasa, J.M. La Porte). The text has overview character. **Results and conclusions:** There are the limits of the influence of mediatization processes in the presentation and understanding of the institutional communication of the Church. Mutual relations of contemporary social changes of religions (e.g. processes of secularization) and the processes of mediatization of communicating the ecclesiastical institution, they do not take the form of automatic determinism. In the processes of institutional communication, the Church follows the path of communicating one's own identity, for which the high level of popularity among public opinion is not the reason for its presence in the media. In the case of Pope Francis' attitude regarding his attitude towards the media in the context of the migration crisis, Heidi Campbell's thesis on the attitude of distrust of an ecclesial institution towards new technologies is not applicable. **Cognitive value:** The studies undertaken show the usefulness of the mediatization processes as a key in better knowledge and understanding of the institutional messages of the Catholic Church.

KEYWORDS

institutional communication, Catholic Church, migration crisis, mediatization, Pope Francis



In this article, in the context of the migration crisis in Europe in 2015, the issue of mediatization of institutional communication of the Catholic Church was raised.

There are many theories on the limits of involvement of the Church institutions in the functioning of the state and the broadly understood public life (Węgrzecki et al., 2013, pp. 10–11). The model of the Church's presence in the public sphere is widely accepted, in which "the Church is apolitical by nature and has the right to evaluate political life in the moral and axiological dimension" and a model of equal status and testimony based on the conviction that "the public sphere is a natural area of the Church's activity, but the Church present in it must strive for social recognition, understanding and trust that can be gained through dialogue, openness to criticism and avoidance of the instructive tone" (Węgrzecki, pp. 9–10).

The postulated model of autonomy, i.e. cooperation between the state and the Church for building the common good of societies, was confirmed by the statements of Pope Francis in which he addressed the issue of the migration crisis in Europe in the second decade of the 21st century. At the same time, this crisis emphasised that selected forms of institutional communication of the Bishop of Rome should be classified in the category of political communication¹.

Pope Francis, speaking on the subject of the migration crisis, is guided by the defence of the interests of the weak and disadvantaged people, appeals to the international forum for assistance to refugees and taking steps to effectively address the migration crisis (Franciszek, 2013, 2014; Przyczyna, 2017, pp. 6–7). Values and moral standards proposed by him refer to the Gospel and Catholic social teaching (Gocko, 2017, pp. 47–58; Biaggio, 2014, pp. 189–210). The Bishop of Rome is perceived by the public as a person who genuinely cares for refugees and solving the migration crisis. Support for papal initiatives in the area of help to migrants, however, is met with diversified social acceptance (Libero Quotidiano, 2017, Centre for Public Opinion Research, 2014, p. 4). The issue of mediatization of institutional communication of the Catholic Church is considered in this article in the context of the migration crisis in Europe of the second decade of the 21st century, which is the central topic around Pope Francis's preaching and his activities and initiatives (Carr-Lemke & Glatzer, 2018, pp. 267–284; McPherson, 2018, p. 52; Zunes, 2017, pp. 1–6).

The article is of a review nature, in which the results of research of well-known media experts on the processes related to communication of churches, religious associations and religions were used.

Institutional Communication of the Catholic Church in the Context of Socio-Political Change Processes

The concept of mediatization of Winfried Schulz (2004, p. 88) emphasises that the media play an important role in the processes of socio-political changes that describe four key concepts: *extension*, *substitution*, *amalgamation* and *accommodation*. The recalled theory of a well-known and respected German political scientist is an important prospect of understanding the church's mediatized institutional communication in the context of its statements and presence in public life.

At the *extension* level, the media contribute to the expanding of the natural limits of human communication capabilities. This function is to emphasise that thanks to the media, recipients

¹ The term "political communication of the Church" used by the author should not be treated as a political support by an ecclesial institution of a particular political party, but a communication expressing concern for the common good of the society in which the Catholic Church is present and operates. (See Mazurkiewicz, 2010, pp. 98–123).

interested in the position of the Church, occupied in various matters of public life have the same opportunities to receive transferred messages, regardless of where they are, as if they were eyewitnesses. New technologies contribute to the increasing of the speed of information flow – by transmitting the papal pilgrimage “live”, the recipient of the media is able to receive the Pope’s teaching in real time, i.e. the same as an eyewitness and listener of papal speeches (Zielińska-Pękła, 2015, p. 131).

The media-mediatized form of tracking of the papal messages displaces and replaces being on the spot, in real time and space. This is the essence of the *substitution* function, mentioned by Schulz (2004, p. 88), expressed in replacing traditional forms of communication, as well as in changing interpersonal relations. Tomasz Goban-Klas (2007, p. 44) notes that a society that can be called mediatized or media is a society in which the dominant form of social contacts is not directness, but mediatization through the media. Hence, the broadly understood media have become a contemporary environment of man, and virtuality – his reality. According to data from 2017, the number of people watching the account of Pope Francis on Twitter published in nine languages exceeded 40 million, and after his first year of the pontificate, in 2014, it reached the number of 12 million (Gualtieri, 2014; ann/PAP/KAI, 2017). Thus, over three-and-a-half years, there are over three times more Papal followers. This proves that the online environment is no longer just a worse alternative compared to direct contact with the Pope, but the first and most important form of communication.

The implementation of the *amalgamation* function can be understood as the penetration of all spheres of life (professional, economic, cultural, political etc.) by the media. For the recipient of the message it becomes irrelevant whether he/she acquired content as an eyewitness or through the media. In the case of institutional communication of the Church, it would be about interweaving, mixing of the experience of direct communication with its forms mediatized into one integral whole. The issue of mediatization is therefore somewhat in the background, but the key is to understand the content of the message, and it is not important whether it is mediatized by the media or not.

The fourth process of change described by Schulz is *accommodation*. The media presenting papal communication are guided by their own logic, which is expressed largely in its program line: from media with a Catholic profile, through secular media, to anti-clerical media. This, in turn, may lead to the subjectification of the message, and even its manipulation or instrumentalization (Gierycz, 2016, pp. 73–77). Schulz’s *accommodation* process has obvious consequences in framing of the world, including the church world, presenting views of social or political reality through hierarchs. One should ask: What did Francis say about refugees? How did the media present it? Was this communication used by the media to achieve some particular goals?

In the media-related literature, the distinction between mediation and mediatization can be seen (Couldry & Hepp, 2013, p. 191; Guzek, 2017, pp. 89–90). The first of these terms should be identified with the implementation of Schulz’s *extension* function, and mediatization – with the implementation of the *amalgamation* function. In the first of these perspectives, the media are understood only as a channel of communication for messages of the ecclesial institution (hence the term “mediation”). In the second case, the media become co-creators of the church’s message, taking into account the social teaching of the Church and the cultural, social or political context of the Church’s activities. It should be noted that in this context there is a society that is the recipient of this message.

In the opinion of Hubert Knoblauch (2013, 2016), communication is an essential link between mediatization and social constructivism. Communication changes through mediatization, while communication is the main way to build culture and society. It is the “communication

constructivism” that becomes, in the opinion of a media expert, a theoretical framework for conceptualizing the processes of mediatization, i.e. it helps to properly place the message of an ecclesial institution in a social, cultural, and political context. Thinking about the communication of Pope Francis regarding his appeals to help refugees, it should be noted that the mediation function was carried out by the media (e.g. media reported the Pope’s words on the migration crisis, or reported the first papal apostolic trip to Lampedusa). On the other hand, the media tried to convey to their recipients the interpretation of the migration crisis in the context of the cultural diversity of refugees, the “Arab Spring” or the *ordo caritatis* principle related to the issue of *refugees*.

Željko Pavić, Filip Kurbanović and Tomislav Levak (2017, pp. 243–244), on the basis of research on the mediatization of Catholicism in Croatia, draw attention to the mutual relations of contemporary social changes of religion (e.g. secularization) and the mediatization processes of communication of the ecclesial institution. These relations, however, do not take the form of automatic determinism². In the context of reflection on the migration crisis, it can be concluded that the above thesis will be understood as follows: processes of social change of religions, e.g. secularization of society, may to a limited extent determine the manner of receipt of the Pope’s appeal to help refugees. Media researchers, based on the analysis of religious internet communication, indicate the coexistence of various forms of communication of the Catholic Church and their mediated forms. The results of their research show that the mediatization processes do not lead to new interpretations of the Catholic doctrine or a new way of interpreting the teaching office of the Church. Pavić, Kurbanović and Levak claim, however, that “the media convey specific forms of religious expression that are oriented towards a more personal relationship with God and self-realization, not religious formalism” (p. 264). The conclusion of Croatian researchers proves the existence of the limits of the influence of mediatization processes in the presentation and understanding of the institutional communication of the Church. It should be noted that it is also not indispensable for the strategy adopted by the broadcasters of institutional messages in tracking the interpretation of the message they broadcast (Guzik, 2018).

Media Logic and the Identity of the Church Institution

In the discussion about media tasks, a distinction is made between public media and commercial media (Fiut, 2007, p. 92). The first one should be dominated by informational and journalistic content and contribute to the creation and recording of cultural phenomena. In turn, commercial media are expected to pay more attention to entertainment functions (Mielczarek, 2013, p. 462). One can see a peculiar analogy between public media and deontological journalism as well as commercial media and teleological journalism (Leśniczak, 2016). Thinking about the mediatization of institutional communication of the Church in the context of Francis’ attitude towards refugees, public media should be required to implement the principle of truth and objectivity in informing the public (respecting the 5W principle, embedding the papal statements in the right context, etc.); fulfil the role of a specific forum in building various viewers’ worldviews about the Pope’s communication regarding the migration crisis; offering civic groups a media space to participate in the discussion (guaranteeing space for discussion to the supporters and opponents of the Pope’s views).

² Heidi Campbell (2006, p. 14) in the research undertaken regarding the relationship between religiosity and internet communication does not support the thesis that the use of web mediatized messages will favour the destabilization of the religious identity of the user.

The logic of public media³ should help their recipients to get to know and understand the identity of an ecclesiastical institution or the Pope's statements and to create a discussion forum on this topic. They are, therefore, specific glasses through which the reality of the institutional communication processes of the Church is perceived.

Understanding the logic of profit-oriented commercial media, more focused on achieving specific goals, to increase sales or to increase viewership, than on the concern for implementing journalistic deontology principles and explaining the identity of an ecclesiastical institution to its recipients (especially its supernatural dimension) should lead to capturing a kind of tension on the logic line of the logic of the commercial media industry (whose primary goal is profit) vs. logic of institutional communication of the Church (based on Catholic social teaching and Christian ethics of values). In the justification of this dissonance, it may be helpful to reference to contemporary processes of secularization, which not only postulate the principle of the autonomy of the Church and the state, but reveal the postulate of complete state secularity, including the postulate to eliminate the voice of hierarchs from the public sphere (Fazio, 2001, p. 247; Fazio, 2009, p. 166–167).

In the author's opinion, Schulz's *accommodation* does not constitute the principle of efficient teaching of the Pope in the sense that the Pope in the messages addressed to the public is not guided by the logic of popularity, but the logic of faithfulness to Christian moral and ethical principles (Bova, 2016). Schulz's *accommodation* should rather be read in the use of new techniques and media opportunities offered the Bishop of Rome.

In the context of the institutional communication of the Catholic Church, there is an agreement among the *Church institutional communication* researchers that the media are an important source and communicator of information (González Gaitano, 2017; Arasa, 2018; La Porte, 2009). There is also no doubt that the institutional Church is not afraid of using new information technologies, develops an information policy, establishes spokespersons and press offices to stay in constant contact with the media (Przybysz & Marcyński, 2011; Kloch, 2011). It is, therefore, a church "open to the media", which is recalled in its official Magisterium (Kloch & Przybysz, 2012). During the trip to Lampedusa, to Strasbourg and Poland, Francis did not avoid meetings with journalists and answering questions. The Press Office of the Holy See and Vatican media explained what the Pope communicated (Rolandi, 2013; Il Papa 'conquista' Strasburgo..., 2014). The question of the impact of media logic on the Church's communication strategy is found in various research positions. If we assume that the logic of commercial media is expressed in approval for the processes of tabloidization and celebrityization (Mościcka, 2017, pp. 89–90; Mołęda-Zdziech, 2013, pp. 57–265, 311–331), then it should be noted in the processes of institutional communication, the Church follows another path: communicating one's own identity, for which the high level of popularity among public opinion is not the reason for its presence in the media.

In a speech in the Council of Europe, Pope Francis undertook unpopular issues, his speech was not flattering to any political faction. The Pope did not seek the image of the celebrity in any

³The author accepts the following understanding of the term "media logic": Media logic is a form of communication in which the media present and transmit information. The form of communication consists of various media and formats used by them. Formats are expressed, e.g. in how the material is organised, in what style it is presented, what particular features of behaviour and grammar of media communication can be distinguished in it. The format becomes a structure or perspective used to present and interpret phenomena (Altheide & Snow, 1979, p. 9, Hepp, 2012, p. 3).

way. Also, on the occasion of the visit to Poland in 2016, the Pope did not decide to remain silent on the refugees only because most Poles are against accepting refugees. It results from his way of perceiving the tasks of the Bishop of Rome in the modern world (Mrozek, 2017, pp. 46–48).

The Media Expressing the Culture – Higher or Popular Culture?

In the studies on the processes of mediatization, two main cultural approaches can be found which constitute a key in presenting in the media the content of institutional communication of the Church: favouring high culture or popular culture.

In the context of mediatization, high culture should be understood as the participation of the media in solving important problems, as discussing key, important issues, e.g. presenting Francis' views on refugees as an issue important for the citizens of the Old Continent, not being silent about or neglecting papal appeals in media broadcasts. Popular culture mainly focuses on arousing emotions, presenting important issues as irrelevant or focusing the attention of the recipient on secondary matters (Głuszek-Szafraniec, 2016).

Stig Hjarvard (2012) distinguishes three forms of mediatization of religion, each expressing a special type of institutional framing (p. 28). The first one is represented by *religious media*, which try to create a religious community and identity, using media mediatization. The second form is *journalism on religion*, which exposes religion as the main subject of political discourse taking place in the public sphere. The third form, *banal religion*, is a form of a banned religion, that is, treating religion as a cultural commodity, serving entertainment and self-development. In the author's opinion, the first two proposals of Hjarvard can be linked to higher culture, while the last one can be classified into the mainstream of popular culture. Mia Lövheim (2011) indicates the potential consequences of the mediatized forms of religious communication understood in a banal way (*banal religion*). These include: trivialization of the content of faith, folklorisation of faith, simplification, commodification. In the opinion of the Swedish religion sociology expert, however, it is difficult to determine the direction of changes in religion under the influence of mediatization, they are not deterministic, but rather much depends on a specific context (e.g. type of media, religion) (p. 161). Heidi Campbell (2007) in the context of research on the influence of electronic media on religious communities does not confirm the determining role of the media in experiencing one's own religiosity or perception of messages sent by ecclesiastical institutions. The American scholar notes, however, that the new media ask their recipients questions, among others, about the legitimacy of the statements of new religious leaders, the degree of control of religious online groups by religious organisations operating outside the Internet or new interpretations of religious doctrines. Campbell (2010) emphasises that there is an attitude of distrust of the ecclesial institution towards new technologies, and for this reason the conflict between religion and new technologies becomes apparent, similar to the conflict between religion and knowledge (pp. 41–63). In the case of Pope Francis regarding his attitude towards the media in the context of the migration crisis, Campbell's thesis does not apply, because the Bishop of Rome has good contact with the media and journalists, and Bergoglio's communication and ethical competence would rather confirm the idea of cooperating rather than adopting an attitude of isolation or distrust (Kamiński, 2017, pp. 44–51).

Media experts note that the opinion-forming press is expected to be an expression of a higher culture, while tabloids can be expected to propagate popular culture. The language of tabloids is similar to the language of everyday communication, the language of ordinary people, which strengthens commonly accepted cultural patterns. This language is highly emotionally charged, full of metaphors, irony, word games, categorisation, hyperbolisation, alliteration, colloquialisms and contrasts with the neutral language of the major press. Tabloids are not a forum for discussion for

people representing different points of view, but they are characterised by unambiguity in assessing the phenomena and positions, that they impose on their readers (Wojdyła, 2011, pp. 10–15).

Mediatization of Religion and Mediatization of Institutional Communication of the Church

Norberto González Gaitano (2016) advocates that the key to understanding the institutional communication of the Catholic Church is the distinction between the perception by the public opinion, including the media, of its statements on doctrinal matters, matters regarding obedience to the church hierarchy and other matters. The Spanish media expert notes that in issues related to the doctrinal teaching of the Church in the matters of truth of faith and morality (*level of the faith*) and in the theological understanding of obedience to the church leader (*level of government*), the public opinion has a fairly limited area for discussion. These are most often truths communicated to be believed in, such as the mystery of the Holy Trinity or the theological understanding of the Eucharist. Decisions related to nominations for church offices are only the responsibility of the institutional church and it should be emphasised that there is no obligatory role of the media, or it is at most persuasive, towards church superiors (Grana, 2014; Ippolito, 2018). Other issues, especially of socio-political nature, discussed by the representatives of the Church (*level of the contingent*), e.g. during the electoral campaign on the political program of candidates and parties, should, according to Gaitano (2016), be subject to the assessment of the public and media (pp. 174–175, 184–188).

In the opinion of the author, it seems important to make distinction in the area of mediatization of the broadly understood religious and ecclesiastical sphere into the area of research on the mediatization of religion and on the mediatization of institutional communication of the Church, especially in relation to socio-political issues. In the first case, there would be a theoretical reflection on the issue concerning the limits of media use in informing the public and interpreting the truths of faith, morality or issues regulated by the Code of Canon Law. Mediatization of religion would refer in this sense to the *level of faith* and the *level of government* proposed by Gaitano. In turn, the mediatization of institutional communication, concerning social and political issues, would refer to the *level of the contingent*, defined by the Spanish media expert.

An interesting terminological distinction – mediatization of religion and mediatization of the Church – was made by Peter Fischer-Nielsen (2012) in the context of research into the understanding of the importance of the Internet in the perception of the mediatized ecclesiastical reality. The Danish media expert distinguishes the change in the Church's communication capabilities (*mediatization of religion*) and the change in institutional pastoral practices, caused by the media (*mediatization of church*). The concept appears not only as a theoretical reflection of the ecclesial institution on the technological achievements of the media and the possible way of using them, but also as an implementation of this theoretical reflection.

Conclusions

The undertaken analysis revealed the usefulness of the following theoretical issues in understanding the mediatization of institutional communication of the Catholic Church: the impact of socio-political changes on the way of understanding of the mediatized forms of ecclesiastical institutional communication; dissimilarity of the logic of public media and commercial media in the manner of providing information about the Catholic Church and the way of interpreting the institutional communication of the Church; integrity of the institutional and cultural approach in research on mediatization; the role of the identity of the church institution and the limits of the influence of the mediatization processes in the understanding of the institutional message of the

Church. Mediatization of the *institutional communication of the Catholic Church* is expressed at the level of information and interpretation of the message.

Significant postulates in the understanding of the mediated ecclesial reality are expressed by contemporary media experts, e.g. Gaitano, for whom the *level of faith* and the *level of government* should not be the subject of free interpretation of the media. This is a consequence of the identity of the institution of the Catholic Church, the specificity of which refers to the supernatural reality. The attempts of Hjarvard or Fischer-Nielsen to make distinctions in the area of research on the role of the media in religious communication show attempts to create new paradigms.

It is also worth noting that the mediatization of institutional communication of the Catholic Church cannot be considered without taking into account the social teaching of the ecclesial institution and the cultural context.

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