"Diversidade Católica" Case: Relations and Tensions between Homoaffectivity and Religiosity in Digital Circulation

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Abstract: In societies in mediatization, an increasingly intense process of communicational empowerment of persons and collectives emerges, which can also be seen in the realm of religion. In socio-digital platforms such as Facebook, there are numerous cases of unofficial, non-institutional, alternative religious presences, which may publicly exhibit internal conflicts within religions. In this context, this article analyzes the communicational action of the group "Diversidade Católica" (Catholic Diversity) on Facebook, specifically the process of preparation and divulgation of the 1st National Meeting of LGBT Catholics, held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in 2014. To understand this phenomenon, this paper reflects on the concept of mediatization of religion and the emergence of "lay-amateurs" in digital practices. As a conclusion, it is pointed out that the digital environment becomes an alternative public space for religious minorities, who can also say a "public and networked word" about religions, such as Catholicism, exponentiating its religious "diversity" in the fabric of social relationships. Inside the alleged homogeneity of a religion such as Catholicism, there is the emergence of its pluralism and polysemy in the communicational metamorphosis of practices and beliefs, that are reinvented in relation to what is dominant, hegemonic, traditional and conventional in the Catholic historical context.

Keywords: mediatization, mediatization of religion, homoaffectivity, socio-digital networks, Facebook

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Le cas «Diversidade Católica»: relations et tensions entre homoaffectivité et religiosité dans la circulation numérique

Résumé : Dans les sociétés en médiatisation émerge un processus de plus en plus intense d'autonomisation communicationnelle des personnes et des collectivités, y compris dans le domaine religieux. Sur les plateformes socio-numériques telles que Facebook, il existe de nombreux cas de présences religieuses alternatives non officielles et non institutionnelles qui peuvent exprimer publiquement les conflits à l'intérieur des religions. Dans ce contexte, cet article analyse l'activité de

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communication du groupe « Diversidade Católica » sur Facebook, en particulier le processus de préparation et de diffusion de la 1ère Rencontre Nationale des Catholiques LGBT, qui s'est tenue à Rio de Janeiro, au Brésil, en 2014. Pour mieux comprendre ce phénomène, cet article aborde le concept de médiatisation de la religion et d'émergence des « laïcs-amateurs » dans les pratiques numériques. L'environnement numérique devient un espace public alternatif pour les minorités religieuses, qui peuvent également prononcer un « mot public et connecté » sur les religions, comme le catholicisme, exposant ainsi sa « diversité » dans le tissu des relations sociales. Le pluralisme et la polysémie émergent dans la métamorphose communicationnelle des pratiques et des croyances des religions homogènes comme le Catholicisme, qui se réinventent par rapport à ce qui est dominant, hégémonique, traditionnel et conventionnel dans le contexte historique catholique.

Mots-clés : médiatisation, médiatisation de la religion, homoaffectivité, réseaux socio-numériques, Facebook

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Introduction

In a historical period of digital mediatization, religious institutions, especially Christian Churches, and society in general develop new modalities of perception, interaction and expression of themselves and the world. From these new digital modes of communication, a diverse and widespread network of social meanings on "the religious"[1] emerges, complexifying the religious phenomenon today. In socio-digital platforms such as Facebook, there are numerous cases of unofficial, non-institutional, alternative religious presences, which may publicly exhibit internal conflicts within religions, such as the gay issue and gender identity.

In these digital environments, society in general *talks about religion*, reworking, re-signifying, and updating its meanings to different social contexts, and to an even greater public, in a process of mediatization of religion. In this process, the communicational flow of meanings cannot be stopped or delimited by any structure, and the religious institutions and authorities begin to lose the monopoly of the agency and control of religious meanings in general. This occurs thanks to the emergence of new mediatic agents – individuals, groups, and other institutions – which can now promote complex modalities of signification of the *socius* and the *sacrus* on the web, in a personal and also communitarian, public, heterogeneous, and connected manner, causing both revision, transformation, and (re)invention of religious practices and beliefs.

The Catholic Church is among the religious institutions and Churches that might potentially face challenges in their structures and traditions due to this process. This especially occurs in global regions marked by pluralistic and hybrid cultures and

[1] I understand "the religious" as the socio-cultural and communicational dimensions of practices of religious and spiritual mediation, beyond a theological emphasis on doctrines or institutional religions and authorities.

societies, such as Brazil, which has the largest Catholic population in the world.[2] Even if the share of self-identified Catholics in the country dropped in the last decades, in a contemporary scenario of great religious mobility and syncretism, the Catholic Church still has the religious majority of the Brazilian population (64.6%).[3]

Beyond the statistics, however, the interest here in the networked Brazilian Catholicism is due to the socio-historical and cultural relevance of the Catholic Church in Brazil. In this sense, it is important to "distinguish the evidence of the Catholic numbers and *the tradition and the presence of Catholicism as a cultural reference in Brazil*" (Steil & Toniol, 2013, p. 224, emphasis added). Specifically, in Brazil, the various contemporary "Catholicisms" are not "stagnant and crystallized realities, but they are inserted in a general framework marked by *relations of communication*, proximities and distances" (Teixeira, 2009, p. 20, emphasis added). Given this communicative nature of Catholicism, it is relevant to analyze the mediatic dynamics and the affordances of "the digital" to do that specific, social and cultural work of Catholic "referenciation" in Brazil in a time of networked societies.

Nonetheless, the contemporary problem for the Catholic Church is that social and networked practices online tend to "particularize and relativize and thus challenge religious authority," transforming digital religion into "a complex expression of nuance and constantly layered practice of interacting with tradition, quoting religion, particularizing religions, coming up with new and elastic form of tradition" (Hoover, 2013, p. 267). That is, although the Church, in its institutional level, seeks to make a "good and holy" use of the internet, the social flow of meanings on what is "to be Catholic" finds gaps and leaks in the process of digital circulation, going far beyond (or far beneath) the ecclesiastical interests. Through various networked communicational processes, society mediatically reconstructs the meanings, symbols, and practices of Catholicism, giving birth to "the Catholic," i.e. a diverse and diffuse network of relationships between socially constructed beliefs[4] linked to the Catholic religious experience, the historical tradition of Catholicism and/or the Catholic Church institution.

Given the great socio-historical-cultural relevance of the Catholic Church in Brazil, I will, then, empirically observe these mediatic processes on Facebook, analyzing the communicational actions of a page of a Brazilian Catholic gay network, *Diversidade Católica (DC)*. In order to do that, I will first reflect on the concept of mediatization of religion, the acceleration and diversification of religious practices and beliefs, and the emergence of what I call "lay-amateurs" in the digital practices. After that, I will analyze the interface and communicational actions of DC

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[2] Cf. *The Global Catholic Population*, Pew Research Center, accessed July 15, 2019, http://www.pewforum.org/2013/02/13/the-global-catholic-population/.

[3] More recent data accordingly to the *Census 2010* of the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE), accessed July 15, 2019, http://migre.me/ddYsQ.

[4] According to De Certeau (2012, p. 252, author's translation) a belief involves not only a theological or doctrinal certainty, but mainly the "act of enunciating it, considering it true – in other words, a *'modality' of affirmation*": that is, a *communicational action of religious discourse and practice*, at the same time.

page on Facebook, specifically the preparation and divulgation of the *1st National Meeting of LGBT Catholics*, promoted by DC and held in the city of Rio de Janeiro, in 2014.

In conclusion, I argue that religious institutions and individuals, in order to communicate with each other and with the wider world in the new contemporary languages, constantly try to resignify its symbols, discourses, and practices online, expanding and reconstructing "the religious." Digital media empowers these new voices, forces, and sources of insight and meaning in Catholicism. Therefore, among the alleged homogeneity of a religion such as Catholicism, there is the emergence of its pluralism and polysemy in the communicational metamorphosis of practices and beliefs, that are reinvented in relation to what is dominant, hegemonic, traditional and conventional in the Catholic historical context.

1. Mediatization of religion: a meta-mediatic process

With the emergence of a new social environment, driven by digital technologies, Christian Churches – as the Roman Catholic Church –, which have a mandate to "go into the whole world and proclaim the gospel to every creature" (Mk 16,15), are being compelled to modify its own communicational structures, and internal or external systems of construction of meaning. This process is not neutral, nor automatic: for its occurrence, the Churches need to rethink and update their processes of communicating the faith in the digital environment.

Religion has been historically linked to social communicational processes – from the discourse in a public square, to books, electronic media, and so on. With technological advancements and the emergence of new social practices of symbolization of the world, religious institutions feel the necessity to reshape their symbolic structures to new mediatic processualities, rebuilding and resignifying traditional religious practices in accordance with the protocols of each new mediation.

The concept of mediatization points to this process, being regarded as the "hermeneutic key to the comprehension and interpretation of reality," since "society perceives and is perceived from the media phenomenon, now extended beyond the traditional technological devices" (Gomes, 2008, p. 21, author's translation). It is in this context that the word 'media' and the concept of 'mediatization' acquire their meanings. Today, we are living in a 'media turn,' marked by a "'historically unique degree' of integration of the technological and the socio-cultural" (Friesen & Hug, 2009, p. 65). In this process, the conditions of the possibility of human interaction, social communication, and societal organization become conditioned (but not necessarily *determined*) by mediatic logic, dynamic and practices.

We currently live in a society marked by a socio-communicational "new ambience" (Gomes, 2008). In the contemporary context, there are numerous connected social agents that communicatively manifest their skills on various areas

of the social, including the religious. With technological advancements, the social appropriation of technology, and the new correlated socio-symbolic processes, it is possible to see more and more "an *acceleration* and *diversification* of ways by which society interacts with society" (Braga, 2012, p. 35. author's translation). With the internet and the socio-digital processes, there is also a "mutation in the conditions of the access of individual actors in the mediatic discursivity, producing unprecedented transformations in the conditions of circulation" (Verón, 2012, p. 14, author's translation).

That is why mediatization can be understood as socio-techno-symbolic actions, interactions and retroactions that lead to a reconfiguration of the communicational ecology, generating what Gomes (2008, p. 30, author's translation) calls a "mediatic *bios*." Mediatization also consists of and is consisted of the "communicational mediations of culture" (Martín-Barbero, 2009, p. 152, author's translation), beyond the mediations of social institutions and business media organizations. Mediatization reveals the communicative and communicational nature of culture, being the genesis of a social *medium* (experiences, uses, practices) that generate and are generated by a mediatic *medium* (symbols, discourses, technologies) in an increasing complexity (Sbardelotto, 2016).

Several authors and studies help us to comprehend the communicational processes of construction of the sociocultural reality of religions and religiosities, especially in the digital environment (Aroldi & Scifo, 2002; Brasher, 2004; Bratosin, 2016; Bratosin, Gomes & Neto, 2017, Campbell, 2013; Dawson & Cowan, 2004, Højsgaard & Warburg, 2005; Tudor, M.□A. & Herteliu, 2017). Therefore, thinking about mediatization of religion is not just about realizing how religions today are "mediated" by contemporary media institutions, corporations, and outlets. The process of mediatization of religion is much more complex than the religious mediation of media, or the media mediation of religion. In the new context of social interaction, there is the emergence of renewed religiosities and emerging meanings of "sacred" and "sacredness" in which mediatic processes "can at the same time be a source of religion and spirituality, an indicator of religious and spiritual change, and articulated into religious and spiritual trends – changing religion through those interactions and also being changed by that relationship" (Hoover, 2008, p. 4).

In this shift, mediatization of religion extends the cultural semantics of religion, decentralizing religious institutions, and mining their intention of theological-doctrinal control, opening religious symbols and discourses to multiple constructions of meaning, which, in turn, do not exist beforehand, but are constituted from local religious practices. Mediatization also catalyzes the publicization of religion, which cannot be understood anymore only as a fixed institution or doctrine. It also has to do with socially embodied practices and experiences of individuals, collectives, and institutions in public, open places, in constant interaction and connection. On the internet and within digital media, society as a whole communicationally, socially, and publicly reconstructs the original matrix of religious messages. In communicational networks, religion

"exposes itself to the interaction with a much wider, complex, and differentiated environment of those with which it habitually comes into contact" (Pace, 2013, p. 93, author's translation).

Through the synergy of the contemporary communicational processes and digital media, a new socio-religious configuration emerges. "If mediatic communication (its rationale, devices, and processes) is in constant evolution, then by appropriating it, religion also follows this trend and is compelled to become something different than it traditionally was," in a process of 'mediamorphosis of faith' (Sbardelotto, 2014, p. 83). Online religiosity, therefore, is both a product and a sign of the change produced by the phenomenon of mediatization, in which religions in general, and the Catholic Church in specific, find themselves in a much more complex environment in which different and heterodox religious points of view coexist.

2. The emergence of the networked "lay-amateur"

Beyond the institutional aspects of Catholicism, digital mediatization also involves a process of communicational autonomization. In the case of religion, this leads to new religious configurations, in which ordinary persons socially and publicly "take the floor," re-signifying religious meanings in general. They are what Flichy (2010) calls "amateurs." The internet, by its ease of access and use, and by the expansion of the range and scope of social interactions, gives the power of a "public word" to those who did not have access to traditional media and ecclesiastical apparatuses.

Although it does not have the mediatic or ecclesiastical institutionality behind it, this socio-individual word becomes ubiquitous. This occurs because, at the communicational level, the "toolbox" available today for society in terms of mediatic or religious meaning construction is very accessible and very close (if not equal) to the one of professionals and specialists. Thanks to a greater accessibility to digital media, to the dissemination of information, and to the democratization of the symbolic production pole, ordinary people acquire and develop its know-how in a networked manner, beyond the role played by traditional specialists and institutions.

Given that, therefore, there is a "process of *democratization of skills* that is at the heart of the amateur activity" (Flichy, 2010, p. 79, author's translation), in which experts and non-experts cooperate in a common construction of the various know-how, including religious ones. There is thus a new form of communicational participation, marked by social empowerment and sharing of information.

The digital, expanding the reach and the scope of social interactions, enables common people to assume a power to have a "public word." A vast majority of the population now, especially those who did not have access to an industrial or technological communication apparatus, easily use technological means of consumption, production, and distribution of information (sometimes all in the same artifact). In the digital environment, the so-called "receivers" also participate in the

construction of "the religious," occupying places previously detained only by the technicians, in a mediatic sense, or by the clergy, in a religious sense.

In this context, virtually all aspects of religious life – historically marked by initiatory rituals reserved for the "chosen few" – become exposed and accessible to the experience (and also to the *experimentation*) of any individual, who can publicly reshape, rebuild, and re-signify religious beliefs in connection with other individuals and in accordance with the interfaces and protocols of new digital mediations.

In socio-digital platforms like Facebook, for example, there are numerous cases of public pages linked to Catholicism, created by non-institutional, unofficial, and/or alternative Catholic groups and individuals. Through the performance and practice of their administrators and inter-agents, they not only "talk about," but also "do something" with Catholic beliefs in a public manner. The affordances made possible by digital media, therefore, give these individuals and groups meaningful and powerful means by which to act upon their religion and religiosities, transforming the nature of contemporary Catholic practice.

This autonomization points to a double revolution: on the one hand, the autonomy of taking the floor in public with the whole society, potentially. On the other hand, the autonomy of incorporating private, personal, and intimate meaning constructions into the public space. In this process, an autonomous figure emerges, a hybridization between the "layperson" and the "expert authority," who generates social meanings from its discursive and digital symbolic practice: the "lay-amateur." This subject is also marked by an "in-between-ness," standing "midway between the ordinary man and the professional, between the profane and the virtuous, between the ignorant and the wise, between the citizen and the politician" (Flichy, 2010, p. 11, author's translation), and also, in religious terms, between "authority" and "autonomy;" "doctrine" and "practice;" "individual" and "community," going beyond the control both of social institutions that historically monopolized the process (and the power) of information and knowledge production, as the Catholic Church.

In the religious case, it is not only an "amateur," but also a "layperson," i.e. someone not invested by the religious officialdom nor by the media-corporate institutionality – or, if invested with such powers, someone who acts in the web purposefully devoid of such qualifications, without the need to publicly display his/her know-how recognized by the religious authority. The digital environment brings out precisely the "microbial" actions of these agents, which are not historically new, but socially emergent today, thanks to the internet.

3. *Diversidade Católica*, a "sign of the times" of Brazilian Catholicism

One of the most controversial issues in contemporary Catholicism is the LGBT issue. In the global Catholic context, a new "ecclesial subject" is emerging, one that requires his/her space and recognition in the Church: the homosexual person. One of

the main magazines of Catholic theological-pastoral reflection in Brazil, *Vida Pastoral*, raised the issue of homoaffectivity and Christian faith in its edition of December 2014. In that number, Fr. Luis Correa Lima SI, a Catholic priest and theologian, said, "an *important sign of the times is the visualization of the homosexual population*. [...] Gay people are part of society and, *while visualizing themselves*, they aspire to full citizenship [within the Church], with the same rights and duties of others" (Lima, 2014, p. 29-30, author's translation, emphasis added).

The communicational action of the *Diversidade Católica* (DC) group is part of this context of "visualization," affirmation, and search of recognition from the Catholic gay people. DC was born in 2006 in the city of Rio de Janeiro as "a group of lay Catholics who understands it is possible to live two seemingly antagonistic identities: being Catholic and being gay, in a wide sense of the term, including all sexual diversity (LGBT)" (author's translation).[5] The group also reiterates its fidelity to the Catholic tradition, as "inalienable members of the Roman Catholic Apostolic Church".[6]

It is a case of autonomization and publicization of a specific "socio-ecclesial subject" (the openly gay Catholic), who manifests his/her communicational skills as a "lay-amateur." This subject is marked by a socio-religious "minority," that goes beyond the quantitative inferiority of its members (whether in digital terms, with only 5.500 "likes" on Facebook,[7] whether in socio-ecclesial terms, compared with a Catholic heterosexual "majority"), and involves the struggle to have an active voice in the ecclesial context, to "be heard" by the Church, as they still have a "full voice" in the main spaces of the Catholic life. Catholic gay people can be seen as a minority, in this sense, because they constitute "a place where the flow of transformation an [Catholic] identity or a [ecclesiastical] power relationship is encouraged," promoting "a group positioning within a conflictual dynamic" (Sodré, 2005, p. 12) around gender issues.

Cristiana Serra, psychologist and member of the group since 2008, offers more details about the group's origin:

> Diversidade was born on the internet. In 2006, a group of people, some gay, some not [...], all closely linked to Catholicism, began to talk about how to reconcile these two identities [gay and Catholic]. And they decided to organize a material, *and so a website was created*. [...] And it's funny because, *from the website [...] people began to ask for help, ask questions and ask for guidance. The demand for in-person meetings arose from the divulgation of the website* [...] *A little network began to emerge there, which created the website*. Partly from the website, partly from some acquaintances of those original seven [members], a demand began to arise,

[5] Accessed July 15, 2019, http://www.diversidadecatolica.com.br/quem_somos.php.
[6] Accessed July 15, 2019, https://www.facebook.com/diversidadecatolica/info/?tab=page_info.
[7] Accessed July 15, 2019, https://www.facebook.com/diversidadecatolica.

> and face-to-face meetings began to occur once a month (personal communication, Oct. 16th, 2015, author's translation, emphasis added).

The effort of reconciliation of those two identities by the group was permeated by the possibilities of the socio-digital culture through the creation of a website,[8] which favored a "demand" in terms of help, questions, orientation, presential meetings. The "little [offline] network" generated the online network, with a greater range. What subsisted in a latent mode within the Catholic Church found a communicational "escape point," a digital opening in the "ecclesial closet," an "religious alternative environment" beyond other institutional ones.

On the other hand, by proposing a dissenting discourse, according to certain social readings, or even a heretical one, according to certain Catholic readings, the group situates itself both on the ecclesial frontier and on the social frontier. As Lima (2014) affirms, homosexual people point to what Pope Francis calls "existential peripheries." In the ecclesial sphere, homosexual people, such as DC, are not in the "center" because, in Catholic culture in general, they are still seen – despite all the progress of the ecclesial reflection – as "sinners," "anomalous," "pathologically deviant" (Valle, 2014), far from an alleged Christian ideal. In this context, the "existential peripheries" themselves are, above all, "people and human realities that are marginalized and despised. They are people who perhaps live physically close to the 'centre' but who spiritually are very far away" (Francis, 2013, online). That is why the group acts relatively autonomously within the Church, as a Catholic vanguard or subculture, with a certain independence of ecclesiastical power structures.

When DC completed one year of existence, on July 14th, 2008, the group posted a commemorative text on its website, reaffirming its "pioneering, intense, and enjoyable work in favor of gay inclusion in the Church," through the "apostolate of showing the easy yoke and the light burden of Christ, and so giving relief, alight, and hope to so many hearts" (emphasis added).[9] Commenting on the coincidence of the date with the commemoration of the French Revolution, the note states that as the French event was "a cry for freedom, equality and fraternity", the group also seeks to repeat this gesture in the Church. It is a self-recognition of its communicational action, in the quest to "show" and "shout" a reality that remains hidden, silenced.

For this reason, the presence of DC on the web points to a process of transformation of Catholicism in the contemporary cultural milieu, and demands a deviation and a displacement of its observation, to perceive the circulation of "the Catholic" and the very construction of Catholicism also from alternative, peripheral, and minoritarian communicational actions, not only from the central point of view of the institution on the gay question. That is, within the digital mediatization of

[8] Accessed July 15, 2019, http://www.diversidadecatolica.com.br.
[9] Accessed July 15, 2019, http://www.diversidadecatolica.com.br/diversidade_1ano.php.

Catholicism, the DC page on Facebook is a "symbolic dispositif with an ethical-political intentionality within the counter-hegemonic struggle" (Sodré, 2005, p. 12, author's translation) in the Catholic universe.

3.1. *Diversidade Católica's* page on Facebook

Throughout the history of the group, with the development of the website and the need for more interaction with the interested people, they also started a blog,[10] that made possible a closer contact with its public. The blog, on the other hand, materialized, according to Cristiana Serra, the "desire of expansion" on the part of the group.

> What we saw with the blog and after with Facebook was that *our ability to communicate had expanded to places where it will take a long time to have a group*: people from the North [of Brazil], the Northeast, the Midwest, the peripheries, the countryside, from small places, very small or remote communities. *We saw that what we were talking about, what we were saying, what we were proposing began to reach far, very far* (verbal information, São Leopoldo, October 16th, 2015, author's translation, emphasis added).

This communicational range and reach of the group, according to Serra, gained a catalyzation and an exponentiation with the creation of the page in Facebook:

> Facebook has certainly become an enormous contact channel. *Very big, very big. There are many messages* [that we receive] *a day* […] very painful messages, a lot of people asking for help. *Many people, many people came to the group through Facebook*. [...] In fact, I would venture to say that Facebook today is our main channel of communication (verbal information, São Leopoldo, Oct. 16th, 2015, author's translation, emphasis added).

The page itself, therefore, is born as a result of communicational processes that, in turn, when brought into existence in the digital environment, lead to other processes of face-to-face interaction. That is, a group of people – gay and not gay, clergy and non-clerics – all linked to Catholicism, began to seek ways to reconcile these two identities. It was through these "pre-connections" that the group's website emerged, and, over time, it led to the emergence of the Facebook page.

As Serra explained to us, the group's communicational actions also emerged from other Catholic websites, in which she informed herself on "this multiplicity of discourses within the Catholic, Christian universe" (verbal information, São Leopoldo, Oct. 16th, 2015, author's translation). The idea, according to her, was to seek "a reflection on a more autonomous, less heteronomous catholicity, seeking a pluralism, not only to speak of the gay question, but also a wider Catholic reflection [...] seeking counter-hegemonic discourses, a not so conservative moral." The goal

[10] Accessed July 15, 2019, http://diversidadecatolica.blogspot.com.br.

was to enable people to access Catholic discourses about homoaffectivity not found publicly or even invisibilized. Between the *imperative* of the ecclesiastical institution and the *indicative* of the socio-cultural manifestations of gender, the page "unsettles the singularity of dominant power narratives and opens up new avenues of identification and enunciation" (Hoover & Echchaibi, 2015, p. 23).

Thus, we have a triple network that crosses the communicational networks in which DC is present: homoaffectivity, Catholicism, and digital culture. In turn, users themselves recognize the expertise and the experience of the page administrators as "experts" (or even as "authorities") in their proposal, not just by visiting it, but also by "liking" it and, especially, entering into dialogue with its responsible in the comments of each post.

One of the features of the DC page on Facebook is its own name. The articulation between homoaffectivity and Catholicism, by itself, is quite controversial for much of the common Catholic sense. Therefore, to think of a name that makes this connection explicit is very interesting from a communicational point of view, because it reveals the "clashes" around the construction of an identity that, when thinking and presenting itself publicly, is permeated by communicational processes. Serra explains that other names were suggested, but in the end they came to the present name as it is more comprehensive and less incisive.

> It is interesting, because the name is "Catholic Diversity," but, there in the website, from the beginning, there is a slogan, a subtitle: "For LGBT inclusion in the Church." And we are even changing that slogan. We now work "For LGBT citizenship in the Church," which is a slight shift in focus, because we begin to realize that with "For LGBT inclusion in the Church," it looks like we need an authorization to exist. And, strictly, materially speaking, we do not need authorization to exist: we exist. Whether you like it or not, we exist. There are gay people who are Catholic, and there are Catholic people who are gay. With all their conflicts, with all their difficulties or not. To exist? We exist. To be inside? We are already inside (verbal information, São Leopoldo, Oct. 16th, 2015, author's translation, emphasis added).

The name itself, therefore, as an interface element of the page seeks to promote issues such as dialogue, convergence, recognition of a "diversity" that exists in Catholicism. It is the public expression of something that already exists, as reiterated by Serra, in the Catholic environment, which is re-signified as "diverse." On the other hand, it is not a request for permission to exist (as the word "inclusion" might suggest), for "to exist, we exist." The proposal of the group and the page goes beyond, in search of recognition and full citizenship of gay people in the Church. For this reason, the group seeks to promote an "intermediation" between gays and religious in the Catholic context. The page, in turn, is inserted in this articulation through its communicational actions, which are permeated by this horizon.

Another interfacial specificity of the page is its category, "Community," which falls within the macro-category "Cause or community," among other big categories offered by Facebook to create a page. Thus, the inscription of the page in this category refers to an idea of a socio-communicational Catholic gay "collective". This recognition adds itself to the self-definition of the page in the field "About," where it affirms: "We are a lay *group* that seeks to reconcile Catholic Christian faith and sexual diversity, *promoting dialogue* and reflection, prayer and sharing, understanding that the salvation of Christ and His message *are to all, without distinction*" (author's translation).[11] The very option of building a public page, not a closed group on Facebook (where members should be accepted by the administrators), indicates the search for a greater comprehensiveness and distance from any "ghettoization" around its members and that socio-ecclesial interface, quite tense by itself.

The profile and cover photos, in turn, identify the page in the symbolic economy of the Facebook platform. The main profile photo is the group's own logo, a cross in intertwined curves with the colors of the rainbow. It is a clipping of a larger image, which appears in its cover photo, in which the adjective "catholic" stands out, reinforcing the group's affiliation with this specific religious tradition (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Cover photo of *Diversidade Católica's* page on Facebook (Diversidade Católica, 2015).

Three main symbols – the cross, the rainbow, and the interlaced curves – are thus mixed: the cross refers to Christianity in general and to the Christian identity of the group; the colors of the rainbow remember the LGBT movement and the defense of sexual diversity; the interlaced curves, stylizing the cross, give movement to the logo, allowing a reading of Christianism itself and sexuality as continuous and intertwined processes, which cannot be stopped or stiffened in a certain posture or fixed meaning.

[11] Accessed July 15, 2019, https://www.facebook.com/diversidadecatolica/info?tab=page_info.

On July 14th, 2017, the page published a post regarding the 10 years of existence of DC.[12] With more than 170 "likes" and 90 shares, the post brought the following commemorative image (Figure 2):



Figure 2. Commemorative image for the 10 years of *Diversidade Católica* (Diversidade Católica, 2017).

The image uses the figure of a "lilac sheep" to celebrate the 10 years of struggle "for LGBT citizenship in the Church and in society." This has a symbolism of great strength in Catholicism. For the Catholic Church, the symbol of the sheep refers to the Old Testament, when sacrifices were made to God as a "pleasing offering." Jesus, in the New Testament, also identifies himself as the "good shepherd" and the "door of the sheep" (John 10: 7-18). For the common sense, in an opposite direction, there is the symbol of the "black sheep," an expression used to identify negatively a person who is different from others, who is outside the "normal" standards stipulated by society. But here the sheep is portrayed in lilac, traditionally considered as a feminine coloration, which, precisely for this reason, is assuaged by the feminist and LGBT movements as a social critique of the gender pattern. In this way, the administrators of the page made a specific appropriation of the Facebook platform by converting it into an environment of re-signification of theological-ecclesial meanings, through communicational processualities as an element of religious practice, reconnecting the Catholic religion and the gay question.

[12] Accessed July 15, 2019, https://bit.ly/2JBigfW.

In a long text accompanying the post, the linkage between Catholic-homoaffectivity is discursively constructed in this way:

> Exactly 10 years ago, a silence was broken. On July 14th, 2007, after a few meetings, reunions, sharing and exchanged dreams, *our website, which gave life to Diversidade Católica*, was launched and began the first steps of a beautiful and prophetic apostolate in favor of LGBT citizenship in the Church and in society. The first group of LGBT Catholics from Brazil was born, *with the mission of breaking the silence and announcing that the message of the Gospel is a message of love* that can and should reach all people without distinction, without violence, without exclusion.
>
> […]
>
> On this day, in the celebration of these 10 years, which is so significant for us, we want to thank God for the many steps we have taken in this journey, for the beautiful gift of our members, partners, and allies, who have always been with us, *and especially for those to whom our message has reached*. We pray that our work will firmly continue to build the Kingdom of God and that it will continue to bear fruit! We pray for the intercession of St Camillus of Léllis, founder of the Order of Ministers of the Sick, which is celebrated today. Just he has so much contributed to heal the wounds of the bodies, may we too can continue to heal wounds on bodies and souls hurt by LGBTphobia.
>
> […]
>
> Long live to *Diversidade Católica*! (author's translation, emphasis added).

The text is marked by expressions of affective closeness in relation to its "apostolate," that is, a recognition of its own mission within the framework of the ecclesial mission, which also involves a communicational aspect of "breaking the silence" and announcing the message of the Gospel. The speech is also permeated by a religious and theological (or even "theopolitical") language in defense of the work done by the group in relation to the Church and society.

In general, the comments and messages received on the DC page often bring in strong tensions and criticisms. Even so, such contributions always find a direct and effective response on the part of the page, which, discursively, finds ways to deal with contrariety and conflict. In its public responses, the page seeks to deconstruct, symbolically-discursively, the various tensions around the issue, in the attempt to construct a dialogue that for DC it is not new, to the point of having a section of "Frequently asked questions" on its website,[13] precisely about such criticisms and aggressions.

[13] Accessed July 15, 2019, http://diversidadecatolica.com.br/perguntas_frequentes.php.

In this public debate about "the Catholic" among the various networked agents, the page administrators assume a role of "religious experts" in the meaning economy of that environment. The "mediation" between the "canonically right" and the "canonically wrong," in a sense, passes through these new gatekeepers. Inter-agents in general recognize the page and its administrators as potential specialists endowed with (or lacking of) experience, legitimacy and specific competence in their proposals (hence the need for criticism). The fact that the user enters into dialogue with a given page express and ratifies its legitimacy in the communicational ecosystem: the user writes to the page because recognizes in it (or aims to criticize it for the lack of) a particular competence in this specific theme and because sees in its platform the expression of a specific interactive format; on the other hand, the response of the page to the user ratifies and reinforces this symbolic valorization with its public.

3.2. *First National Meeting of LGBT Catholics*

The Facebook page of the group, analyzed as "third space," can be seen as a liminal and interstitial site "where cultural meaning is not simply reflected but actively produced by subjects who are constantly interpellated to resist the monolithic dominance of hegemonic [religious] power" (Hoover and Echchaibi, 2015, p. 22). Its communicational relevance found a climax in the process of divulgation, organization and evaluation of the *1st National Meeting of LGBT Catholics*, held in the city of Rio de Janeiro, on July 26, 2014.

The meeting was sponsored by DC, along with several other Brazilian Catholic gay groups, as a moment of sharing and exchange of experiences between Brazilian LGBT Catholics. The objective was to discuss "who they are, how they live their religious identity, how they feel the community of which they are part, and how their actuation occurs through the various organized lay groups."[14] According to Serra, "a lot of people arrived at the meeting by the internet, by the event page on Facebook. As a platform, the level of interaction is impressive. […] Without Facebook, the National Meeting would not have happened (personal communication, October 16, 2015, author's translation).

In preparation for the 1st National Meeting of LGBT Catholics, the DC page created an "event" on Facebook with specific information regarding the meeting. According to the Facebook protocols, an event is a feature that allows to organize meetings, respond to invitations, and keep track of what other users are doing. This "event" was a "subpage" linked to the DC page, but that, in turn, acquires a certain autonomy, as an online environment in which administrators and inter-agents can act communicationally.

An event page reports the main data about it, such as its name, its date and an illustrative photo. The DC page, in this case, chose to use a reconfigured image from the poster of the event (Figure 3).

[14] Accessed July 15, 2019, https://goo.gl/gLB3Nf.



Figure 3. Poster of the 1st National Meeting of LGBT Catholics (Diversidade Católica, 2014).

In the poster, the main element is also the sheep. In the image, the pink and lilac sheep are in the midst of a herd of white sheep: their destination is unknown, but a possible reading involves the idea of Jesus as the good shepherd, guiding such a flock. On the other hand, the pink and lilac sheep is "different" from the others, but they are not put away or removed from the herd. They are all together, in the same way, without distinctions or separations. The sun of the image is shining for all of them. Thus, these various meanings of the symbol of the sheep (as the person who follows Jesus; as a "different" person with the same dignity; as a social criticism of given standards) are linked. The title of the meeting ("Your faith has saved you") refers to a phrase from the Gospel, which Jesus said to a woman healed of a hemorrhage (Mark 5: 25-34; Luke 8, 43-48), and it serves as the meeting's motto.

Another fruit was the publication of the *Manifesto of LGBT Catholic Groups in Brazil*.[15] The document points out "the principles that guide our action and our contribution so that LGBT citizenship disseminate throughout the Church." The page, in the posts about the Manifesto, also affirmed: "We invite everyone to read, reflect, share, divulge and debate it". Through the various comments and sharing on Facebook, the Manifesto was inserted into other social and communicational circuits and, in turn, was being symbolically reconstructed in each new context of meaning in which it was inserted.

A second important result of the meeting was the articulation of the *National Network of LGBT Catholics*, composed by several Brazilian LGBT Catholic groups. Such a network, in its very articulation, defined an official Facebook page as its "headquarters."[16] In this sense, the community of shared interest and purpose of this experience of digital Catholicism generate actions that are realized in both online and offline contexts, "passing from the connection to the encounter, and from the encounter to the action" (Martín-Barbero, 2006, p. 69). In this way, given the importance of the meeting, its articulation, and the social and ecclesial tension that it provoked, the communicational process that was unleashed led to several networked interrelations: first, an offline network articulated in person in the city of Rio de Janeiro, which unfolded to the internet as a blog and then, articulating other groups spread throughout Brazil, gave rise to the "institutionalization" of a new national network of gay Catholics, now digitally congregated in an online network on Facebook.

Thus, the Facebook platform, appropriated and redefined by the group, becomes an alternative public space so that the inter-agents – especially the ecclesial minorities and "voiceless" – can also say a "public word" about Catholicism – recognized as "diverse" – offering a socio-techno-symbolic axis of resistance to the doctrinal delimitations of the religious institution, in the flow of mediatic circulation.

Conclusion

On Facebook, *Diversidade Católica*'s page points to the transformational processes of Catholicism in the contemporary cultural melting pot. This phenomenon demands a shift in the point of view of the observer to perceive the circulation of "the Catholic" and the (re)construction of Catholicism itself from alternative, peripheral, minoritarian socio-communicational actions, and not only from the central point of view of the institution on the homosexual issue. Between the hegemonic Catholic authority and a subordinate Catholic gay culture, there is the emergence of a hybridized identity and subjectivity, in which individuals negotiate, subvert and reread the signs and symbols of Catholic tradition.

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[15] Accessed July 15, 2019, https://goo.gl/FO6kO4.
[16] Accessed July 15, 2019, https://www.facebook.com/redenacionalcatolicoslgbt.

Today, new modalities of religious communication begin to arise in the digital environment, thanks to the publicization of religious elements and the accessibility to such elements by numerous inter-agents, everywhere and at any time. In the Catholic case, acting and interacting in a collective cosmos of digital constructs on Catholicism ("the Catholic"), networked individuals subjectively appropriate this reservoir and this historical matrix of symbols and discourses, and reconstruct them in a collective and public manner.

In this complex articulation between networked socialization, digital technicisation and socio-religious symbolization, religious experience is transformed by the interaction among the institution, groups, and individuals, revealing not only a plurality of religious meanings about Catholicism, but also the possibility of its public reconstruction, as an invention/production of something "new" (construction) or as an experimentation/transformation of something already existing (deconstruction) in the Catholic tradition. These actions occur in a *rupture of scale, scope and speed* in relation to the socio-historical processes of constitution of Catholicism.

In these cases, a Catholic know-how traditionally reserved to clerics is now "decentralized," "vulgarized," in a process in which community ties are constituted and supported through the networked communicational action. Thus, it is possible to see a political-ecclesial practice of the lay-amateurs, who develop critical circuits of observation of Catholicism, constituting another Catholic point of view, from where they also can expose their voice and their own theology, which, without such a circuit, could remain invisibilized.

Hence, there is the emergence of a communicational democratization of religious expertise and a multiplication of the contact zones between Church and society. Faithful, not faithful, or even unfaithful inter-agents build the recognition of their credibility within the religious sphere, seeking to deepen or reverse the actual practices of the ecclesiastical institution, and to transform what is negatively perceived as a "fact" in the Catholic space. What is possible to perceive in online communicational networks is precisely the erasing of the boundaries between religious experts and lay-amateurs on the internet. Society re-signifies the socio-digital platforms such as Facebook as alternative spaces for religious active, creative, and inventive agents such as minorities and peripheral groups in the Catholic Church.

As a result, it is possible to say that, in the religious practices on the web, the possibility of the lay-amateurs to publicly say "the Catholic" is also a properly *theological-political action* of publicization, visibilization, recognition and legitimation of ecclesial minorities or of peripheral Catholic beliefs. And it is a theological-political action on two levels: firstly, by inscribing the social perception of "the Catholic" in broader and more public spaces than the traditional religious spaces of practice or formal theological reflection, involving society in general;

secondly, by enabling practices and processes that are not yet fully established and institutionalized in the relations between society and religion.

In this religious polysemy, between contradictions and complementarities, the inter-agents encounter the possibility of nurturing and constructing a communicational-religious system from its own networked religious construction. Among the alleged homogeneity of a religious tradition as Catholicism, there is the emergence and the manifestation of its pluralism in the communicational metamorphosis of beliefs that are reinvented in relation to what is dominant, hegemonic, traditional and conventional in the Catholic historical context.

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