

Aperto per ferie: third spaces meet pastoral contexts

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Abstract

Media education is a cultural framework that can be applied in different contexts: schools, families, informal educational environments, along with pastoral work. With Pope Francis' championing, there is an increasing need to bridge pastoral care and the media, which can become new important forms of proximity and open opportunities to connect and assume responsibility towards others. Our aim is to understand how parishes can think of themselves as third spaces. The paper tackles this question through the exploration of the initiative *Aperto per ferie*. The initiative was created to enable professionals to experience the summer camp activities despite the Covid-19 pandemic, finding new ways of aggregation in pastoral youth clubs and taking advantage of digital community meetings. It developed a digital space to promote a unifying experience. With digital technologies, the boundaries of the community are redrawn. The correspondence with the territory (of the parish and the diocese) is no longer pre-determined. A community with porous edges is making its way and is more open and permeable to contributions coming from outside, and perhaps more accessible, even by those who do not frequent parish environments.

1. Media Education and pastoral contexts: what's new?

Nowadays, media education is broadly involved in different contexts: in school, considering its origin and the strong link with education and the curriculum (the framework for *digital civic education* is a clear reference, in addition to *civic education* in the Italian curricula by the Law n. 92, August 20th, 2019); within families, referring to the presence of media and devices as an actual "family member" and not just as a "guest", involving family education in media and digital culture (CISF, 2017); in informal contexts, referring to the incredible number of projects performed with adolescents in aggregation centres and associations (also because schools are sometimes not fully prepared); and lastly, in pastoral care, considering the growth of a new attention paid to digital issues in this context (Brambilla & Rivoltella, 2018), also linked to a more mature presence of the church in this field.

The expansion of the "territorial" framework of media education is also accompanied by the development of new tasks and purposes. From the first alphabetic attention to the development of a deeper digital competence, from the development of a critical attitude (fundamental in the first phase of media education) to responsibility in content production as advanced by the concept of "prosumers", from mastering the rules of media to media ethics (Silverstone, 2002; Bricchetto, Fiore & Rivoltella, 2014). Communication and media are "cross" elements due to the facts that it is not possible nor useful to distinguish what is not allowed by the media and what is media-permeated. The result is that online and offline dimensions are not so clearly separated, and on life seems to be a good reference to describe the situation we experience every day (Floridi, 2017).

For some time, scholars believed that media education was "just for children". After a long debate, the extended presence of media education is not a novelty anymore, breaking school boundaries and gaining a more robust enlargement in practices and methods, tools and techniques (Ottolini & Rivoltella, 2014). Media Education in pastoral communities is now a clear mark of this change, and this encounter also explains the need for pastoral operators to be trained to gain a

¹ The authors shared the structure of the article. Marco Rondonotti wrote Paragraph 4, Eleonora Mazzotti Paragraph 2, Alessandra Carenzio Paragraph 1, Elisa Farinacci Paragraph 3 and Pier Cesare Rivoltella Paragraph 5.

new perspective on the media system and on digital issues. This shift has been accompanied in many ways, for instance, by the MOOC’s “Digital Education” developed by Catholic University and the Conference of Italian Bishops, by the support of pastoral offices and “WebCattolici” Association to ensure a national training course on the topic. Digital media topics are relevant for everyone, especially for those who work with children, adolescents, families and community members, as it occurs in pastoral environments.

Pastoral care, in this way, is (or should be) very concerned about digital media and digital culture, as Pope Francis is demonstrating, trying to accompany the community and help people to live (in) the present and responding to its challenges.

The Directory on Social Communications in the Mission of the Church (*Comunicazione e missione*, 2004) clearly stated that for evangelisation and to exercise its prophetic role, the community must understand and dialogue with the new culture generated by the growing diffusion of media, considering the media not just as “means” but as a culture (*Comunicazione e missione*, 2004, p. 5). It further stated that more radically, we can say that media carry out a new culture as their functions (e.g., the ability to provide information globally or to establish remote contacts in real time) change the traditional relationship with reality and with other people and as they establish new paradigms and models of existence (*Comunicazione e missione*, 2004, p. 20). Many important formal documents seem to depict the importance to build a new bridge between pastoral care and media, as stated in the Directory on Social Communications: «media can be the architects of a new [form of] proximity, the fruitful result of confrontation and the encounters, an opportunity for continuous self-disclosure to the other, assuming responsibility towards others» (*Comunicazione e missione*, 2004, p. 22). The question is still open: how can we move from documents to real life experiences? The answer seems to be that research and practice, advocacy and sincere testimony are the best ingredients.

Media education can deliver an instrumental idea of media and devices as tools for pastoral communities (as it happens in school contexts), but also as an object/topic of pastoral work when we refer to the idea of communicating and respecting other people, being digitally virtuous (Rivoltella, 2014) and literate. We can surely affirm that media education is a cultural framework for pastoral work, as it means to recognise that media are no longer accessories, but a “connective tissue” (Shirky, 2010), and pastoral care is no exception.

In the course of our research we asked ourselves what changed during the pandemic, if pastoral environments changed practices and perspectives on media and if they were more deeply involved.

For sure, two processes happened: first, every activity designed to be presence-based (i.e., performed in physical places, such as church, parish, etc.) was interrupted during the first lockdown in March 2020. Rituals, events, meetings, training sessions, catechism courses were cancelled or moved online (some very carefully and savvily, while others in a very naive and improvised way); second, the time spent online increased incredibly for every member of the community with two further consequences. The first one is connected to skills and abilities: every member of the pastoral community realised that digital issues were, in fact, very important and necessary, both in terms of infrastructures and in terms of competencies and digital grammars (starting a Zoom session, creating a Padlet, using broadcast channels in WhatsApp, and sending or recording a video). Second, and most important consequence is that everyone realised how fundamental it is to be able to interact with digital media in terms of media education (how to manage online communication, how to reflect and balance media uses, how to write responsibly and orient oneself with so many contents found on websites or media platforms).

As it happened for schools and teachers, pastoral communities also realised that media education was very relevant to foster a better understanding of the media to ensure a more sophisticated use and a more balanced relationship with contents and with people in the community. Social contexts that already invested in media education then experienced a great benefit, and their commitment in media culture was, in fact, a good investment, and not just a loss of time.

To answer the question presented at the beginning of this contribution, we can say that the evidence collected during the pandemic indicates a need to acquire new competences, organisation skills, ideas, and sharing methods in order to build an *on life* community.

2. *Aperto per Ferie* initiative: approaches, levels and aims

Aperto per ferie is an initiative conceived during the summer 2020 for youth pastoral parish professionals across Italy. It enables professionals to experience the summer camp despite the pandemic, finding new ways of aggregation in pastoral youth clubs and taking advantage of digital community meetings.

The initiative has been promoted by the CEI Youth Ministry, the Italian Bishops Conference, with the help of the cultural association Edoomark at Bergamo and CREMIT of the Catholic University of Milan. The aim of the initiative was to train and coach professionals in the implementation of parish activities.

In particular, the initiative was divided into three steps: professionals’ training, a coaching process in the parishes and research. CREMIT actively took part into the research and the monitoring process, in order to investigate how the digital is experienced by the members of the pastoral youth clubs and what kind of representations of digital media do the operators and managers possess.

² The MOOC has been delivered in 2019 in Open Education Platform, with more than 6000 participants. The contents have been created by an interdisciplinary team to meet pastoral specific issues.

For training, in June 2020, teenage educators and supervisors attended five training webinars on digital pastoral care: three webinars were managed by Edoomark and one by CREMIT. For each webinar, CREMIT recorded a videoclip, which was meant to introduce the topic of the day and offer a conceptual framework to start the debate.

The main issue was offering tools and methods to the participants. In addition, people were asked to think of and experience engaging web activities in the perspective of a digital integration. The typical community spirit of Parish summer camps cannot be limited to the physical perception that a small group reaches in presence due to the pandemic.

Community experiences, such as games ranking, praying, the priest’s or the summer camp supervisor’s speeches to all participants together, are fundamental to realise the importance of sharing. Otherwise, the concept of living an “extraordinary” experience would be lost.

“Technology for communities” (Rivoltella, 2017b) is the main paradigm adopted in the process, a paradigm which allows us to consider technologies as opportunities for community relationships.

Referring to the coaching process, a second step was to assist the composition of video narratives of summer experiences. Narration is both our scope and our means. The aim is to use video language in order to show the protagonists’ viewpoint on their digital pastoral care experience.

As for the research attention, the Parish ministries and managers also distributed a survey³ to dioceses nationwide and below follows a report on the results.

These three levels, i.e., training, coaching, research, are part of the same initiative and can be read as a whole. Training is inspired by the research; coaching is directly related to training; research reflects the possibility to inspire and conduct projects, paying attention to the real-life problems and to the feedback shared by the participants involved in the initiative. In this way, *Aperto per ferie* can be a sort of model to innovate and support changes in parish communities. In terms of data, the analyses of perceptions, representations and practices can be a very good start for modification and new actions to be implemented, especially if we consider the role of representations.

The first interesting fact that emerges from the questionnaire is the perception of technologies by those who coordinated pastoral activities in the summer months, as digital media can develop creative unconventional thinking and support the development of personal skills effectively.

The questionnaire consists of 33 items divided into five sections. The first section is dedicated to the collection of personal data of the pastoral worker and is followed by the second section, which features a few items dedicated to defining the representations of technologies in reference to a scale that moves between the waterproof position and that of the enthusiast. The third section focuses on the personal use of technologies to understand the competence of digital content production as well as their consumption; the fourth wishes to investigate the presence of technologies in the pastoral action of the parish community of reference, noting in particular how much they are used to inform, collaborate or involve parishioners in community life. The last section of the questionnaire is dedicated to understand how much the parish uses digital technologies to create and nurture links within the network formed with other educational agencies in the area.

The survey showed that technologies are considered as great tools to “build something together”, which plays a central role for all communities. Those who participated in our research do not have a naive attitude towards digital and social media. Despite limitations and critical issues, digital technologies are positively perceived (even though 64% of the answers stated that, before the pandemic, digital technology had not been used to communicate with families or with the Parish community).

Another aspect that was investigated through the survey concerned the use of digital technology in parish communities.

Regarding the use of digital technologies by parish communities, less than half of the investigated realities have a website, whereas a much larger majority communicates through social media. For example, 84% of the interviewed participants declare to have a Facebook page and uses it more than once a week.

This survey has, therefore, shown that operating on “digital markets” is essential, not only as far as visibility is concerned, but also to reach users more effectively. However, media literacy skills are lacking in the digital markets (Rivoltella, 2020). The social networks used by young people still have not been introduced into the Parish communication system. In fact, 66.7% of the interviewed realities, for example, do not use TikTok.

However, we have also noticed a few similarities in the data reported by the operators’ surveys. In each Parish, different digital communication methods can be found. The highest percentage uses WhatsApp open groups (73%), whereas a lower percentage uses TikTok and/or Instagram social profiles.

The website and the official Facebook page of the Church Youth Club as well as the WhatsApp groups are useful to provide information regarding the club.

The interviewed operators have been asked to share a suggestion on how social media can be used in pastoral care during the summer experience.

A number of suggestions were given. For instance, media education workshops were encouraged, such as “video-journalism workshop: hunting for fake news” or “social workshops”. In addition, storytelling was highlighted as a tool to recount children’s summer experiences to be posted on social media. The function of social media has also been brought to attention. In fact, social networks might be utilised as a communication tool that children and teenagers could take

³ Questionnaires were circulated throughout the month of July 2020. CEI’s Youth Ministry Office administered the questionnaires to participants in the “Open for Vacation” initiative. The two questionnaires were completed by 80 pastoral workers and 25 parish leaders (URL: https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1gpC02uSAwS0SF_OUs0Cu1o63qk-J_mUg?usp=sharing)

advantage of as valuable relational instruments. From this general context, it is clear how Parishes have been trying to inhabit the digital world. Making an instrumental use of technology is a typical mark of a so-called pastoral care 1.0 (Rivoltella, 2018). On the other hand, turning technology into an integrated immersive tool for Church operators will prepare them for a genuine Christian announcement, which meets the aim of this initiative.

3. The Website as a Lived Laboratory to Build an Extended Digital Christian Community

The initiative *Aperto per ferie*, in its objective to support and assist communities in rethinking the way to coordinate youth summer activities during the pandemic, developed a dynamic online portal. *Aperto per ferie* has developed a website that is much more than a static repository of information. This digital space was created as a unifying experience accessible nationwide by all those dioceses eager to resume some of the traditional summer activities while abiding to the precautions and restrictions imposed by the government. In this creative arena, people of different trades and positions within the Italian Christian Catholic communities and the education field were invited to contribute. It brought together professionals, operators, and volunteers from different areas of expertise, such as actors, media educators, schoolteachers, researchers, and parish operators to share their knowledge and experience with a broader community.

This portal tries to answer the needs of a multiplicity of interlocutors without taking for granted that just because we live in a digital age everyone possesses the same skills and familiarity with the languages and formats that are most efficient and effective online. For this reason, it mixes a variety of media, from the more familiar and traditional written texts and downloadable and printable materials, with which the older generations have more familiarity, such as the decades-long use of printed guidebooks (*sussidi*), to the more contemporary format of the video tutorials.

Thus, the portal website serves a variety of purposes. On the one hand, it wishes to offer support to all those communities that wished to initiate their summer activities through the communication of updated information on health-related norms and their application to the parish context. On the other hand, this online portal becomes a laboratory, where users are offered the opportunity to contribute and engage with a type of communication that might be far from their comfort zone. Working in the first direction, the website presents the sections “documents” (*documenti*) and “safety” (*sicurezza*), which are not solely handbooks offering explanations on the national health regulations, but translating these norms in practices that are context-appropriate and easily implementable by community operators. Specifically, the safety section shares numerous activities that translate the governmental regulations in activities that can be proposed during the interactions with children. Additionally, the creators of the website demonstrate to be aware of the needs of the parish communities nationwide, that are not solely connected to the Covid-19 pandemic but are related to the empowerment of the digital skills of the parishes’ operators. The section “digital tutorial” attends to this necessity by featuring a series of video tutorials that range from, “How to create a google account?”, “How to open a YouTube channel?”, “How to live-stream on OBS?”, etc.

The topics posted in this section demonstrate the level of media literacy of the communities and how the difficulties that arose due to the pandemic are not only connected to the numerous safety regulations that must be followed, but also to the lack of knowledge on basic digital skills. Furthermore, in trying to address users of different age groups, the website also features videoclips clearly wishing to engage with a younger generation of educators and parish operators who are used to acquiring knowledge through video tutorials on YouTube. For those users, the information discussed on the tutorials shifts from the acquisition of more technical skills (e.g., creating a group on WhatsApp, add a member to a pre-existing chat group, etc.) which are reduced to a mere checklist stating to online mediation skills and netiquette; these clips indirectly highlight the digital divide that the pandemic forced everyone to face and actively address.

Another interesting section of the website is the “support” (*accompagnamento*) section, which offers a space of dialogue for the different communities that have tried to organise their activities following the many suggestions found on this portal. Communities were invited to share the challenges they faced and the solutions that they tried to find while organising their summer activities. Clearly, the experience of communicating one’s experiences through digital storytelling can be particularly challenging for communities that started to experiment a variety of new tools and forms of communications, as not everyone is comfortable speaking in front of a camera or being effective and clear communicators in a short video format. Creating a video is not just a matter of mastering editing tools, choosing the appropriate subjects, music and locations. It further requires the acquisition of the languages of these forms of expression and communication justifying the choice to offer tutorials on video making and video sharing.

The *Aperto per ferie* initiative gave the possibility to find a space for the construction of meaning and experience, and its website acts as an arena, where users are able to experiment, test themselves and act as real protagonists, in a controlled context and with the supervision of professionals, namely educators. This portal translates the traditional concept of “courtyard” endorsed by Saint Giovanni Bosco into the digital world, offering a space where the emphasis is not on “things to do”, but where priority was given to building a sense of extended community. In this sense, the website works as a community technology (Rivoltella, 2017b), allowing to construct and consolidate nationwide community bonds.

4. Third spaces and parish communities

The initiative *Aperto per ferie* made it possible to respond to the needs dictated by the health emergency by trying to rethink the forms of pastoral action that are traditionally offered to children by pastoral youth clubs during the summer months. The digital environments set up by pastoral youth clubs for these purposes, in addition to responding to the need to reach and involve children in activities, also suggested an opportunity to reflect on the educational spaces offered by parish communities.

These youth clubs, in their daily activities, express a pastoral action addressed both to people who already identify with and adhere to the ecclesial community and to the inhabitants of the local territory in which it is inserted. Our reflection wishes to take into consideration precisely the pedagogy of faith expressed in pastoral care following the perspective suggested by Potter and McDougall (2017). Our aim is to understand how parishes can think of themselves as third spaces. The question that this research sets out to answer is: can parishes think of themselves as third spaces?

The concept of “third space” immediately evokes the choice of living in a hybrid space as it neither shares the characteristics of the institutional spaces where formal learning usually takes place, nor those of the free construction typical of informal spaces, in which peers can interact spontaneously among themselves. In such a hybrid space, the negotiation of both meanings and roles is very relevant. For this reason, the ability to implement a pedagogy of the contract (Meirieu, 1997) is fundamental in order to support the educational action aimed towards the youngest and to give substance to the dimension of co-responsibility of the laity in ecclesial life. If, on the one hand, this calls into question the hierarchical structure of the ecclesiastical institution, which in some ways also represents a model of verticality with which a certain pastoral proposal is constructed (for example, when the diocesan offices incorporate the guidelines handed down from the national offices and try to propose them to the parishes), on the other hand, the social practices of knowledge-building and the negotiation of meanings also imply the redefinition of power relations within the community (Fabbro, 2018). Although it is a topic that has long since acquired a certain relevance in theology (Congar, 1953) and in the magisterium, finding ways to support the formation of a “Christian witness” (Vergottini, 2017) remains a complex operation. A parish conceived as a third space could be helpful, precisely because of its ability to model the management of power and redistribution within the ecclesial community in a more balanced way.

One of the characteristics of communication in the digital age is de-mediation (Missika, 2006). This also requires the ecclesial community to ask itself some profound questions. The role of mediation of knowledge played by the Church for several centuries is, in fact, in crisis, and this implies having to find new forms to accompany people in the process of translation of theological knowledge into faith-based practices. An example is the theme of the function of ecclesial tradition in the correct understanding of God’s Revelation, which has been provided by the Scriptures. Thinking of the parish as a third space means setting up an opportunity to participate in the flow of cultural production and, above all, opening this possibility to every person. This way of thinking about the community best interprets the choice that is at the heart of every evangelising action, namely the inculturation of the evangelical message. To date, participating in the production of culture means implementing missionary strategies, which become most efficient when they begin from individual local territories.

In third spaces, the space reserved for current events is very relevant. Indeed, attention to current affairs has always characterised the pastoral action, advocating for the implementation of a “Good Press” through the creation of diocesan and parish newspapers facilitated the train of people through information. Conversely, third space allows us to pay attention to media consumption, which conveys not only the knowledge but also values and suggests attitudes and behaviours to be followed. Attention to socio-materiality is important to understand the cultural references that must be considered to translate the message of the Gospel and to stimulate a community discernment (Costa, 2018).

The sociocultural approach suggests a change not only in learning practices, which allows for a greater participation of all those involved, but also in the possibility of experiencing multiple identities by different languages. The role of social media within these processes at the time of the information society becomes even particularly apparent. If this is true for anyone who experiences the more personal dimension of digital media, namely their ability to open to infinite possibilities to creatively express their resources and feed their interests, it is even more so for the youngest who, while engaged in the process of identity construction, can initiate with digital a continuous experimentation of attitudes and behaviours (Rivoltella, 2019).

Considering parish communities as third spaces also means considering the possibility of redistributing cultural capital (Bourdieu, 2015; Potter & McDougall, 2019) to the whole territory. It enables the maturation of an inclusive attitude and of a pastoral action that is consistent with an experience of Church that is “leaven” for its members, that can truly be of service to the others by embodying the awareness of being *Fratelli tutti* (Francesco, 2020).

5. Ritual, liminoidity, new forms of community

The timing of the pandemic can be thought of in liminoid terms. The liminoid, in the anthropological perspective of Victor Turner (1982), has all the characteristics of liminality, typical of the ritual: the fact of being a time of suspension, of containing a transformative experience for people, of being characterised by a pre-phase of detachment from the belonging community, and by a post-phase into which people come back to his/her community. Therefore, in this liminoid

experience that the pandemic has represented and is still representing nowadays, we will no longer be the same, regardless of whether we live this time as a condemnation or as an opportunity.

The digital world releases space and abolishes the sense of time. It releases space as it breaks down distances, coagulates places, replaces the experience of physical places – which, in any case, remains perceptible even if we are sitting in front of our computer screen – with that of social places (Meyrowitz, 1985). As in the case of time, space collapses. The digital world makes it dense, layered, polychronic and available. The density of time depends on the fact that simultaneously, we are called to do more things at ever greater speed. The acceleration category (Rosa, 2013) marked the lockdown by configuring smart working as an (often) alienating experience.

This structurally redefines the meaning of the ritual, at least in four directions.

First of all, there is an amplification of the event. As it already happened at the time of television for media events (Dayan and Katz, 1994), telepresence allows the faithful to participate in the ritual even without being materially present, increasing the number of those who are allowed to attend particularly strong moments from the pastoral point of view.

Secondly, the expansion and availability of time must be highlighted. The availability of the ritual resembles the offer of digital content platforms. The time of the ritual, which requires us to be present in the place and time in which the event occurs, configures a real situation of on demand liturgy.

The result is a personalisation of faith and a consequent shift from experience to content. This was one of the main aspects that were highlighted at the level of pastoral practice: a focus on the content that produced a mere transmissive configuration of the activities in the video communication platforms. The word has become even more a protagonist, but the experience of meeting each other has failed (Terrin, 2014).

Lastly, this trend towards personalisation has caused in the production of real domestication of the sacred, perhaps intimate as an experience, but certainly capable of impacting the sense of community.

We have, thus, come to the theme around which the entire article is built and on which the experience of *Aperto per ferie* was developed. Once again, a redefinition of the community experience must be registered, and once again, we organise this redefinition around four indications.

The boundaries of the community are redrawn. The correspondence with the territory (of the parish and the diocese) is no longer easily determined. A community with porous edges is making its way, becoming more open and permeable to contributions coming from outside, and perhaps more accessible even by those who do not frequent parish environments, as discussed earlier.

The modes of participation also vary. Of course, the perception of being together, in front of a Zoom screen populated with a lot of talking heads, occurs, but simultaneously, people are aware of being together in telepresence and alone in their homes. It really seems that today we can fully appreciate Sherry Turkle's idea (2011), according to which life on the screen means to be alone together.

Again, it seems that community experience is that of a push-community, a community of purpose and of interest, which, perhaps, does not have all the features that communities usually have on the web from the point of view of forms and freedom of aggregation. From this perspective, the interesting hypothesis of thinking about the online pastoral community in terms of a “third space” must be stressed from the point of view of the research.

Finally, what seems to be emerging is a community of meaning rather than one of sharing and experience. If it is true that the experience of faith always passes through an encounter, a theme to reflect on is: “They recognised him in the breaking of the bread”.

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