

# **EVANGELIZATION AND NEW MEDIA. COMPARISON OF YOUTUBE CHANNELS “ASCENSION” AND “NOVA EVA”**

*Jerko Valković – Mirta Fekeža*

Hrvatsko katoličko sveučilište Zagreb  
jerko.valkovic@unicath.hr  
Mirtafek@gmail.com

UDK 272-766:004.738.5  
<https://doi.org/10.34075/cs.58.4.7>  
Izvorni znanstveni rad  
Rad zaprimljen 6/2023.

## *Abstract*

*Several times throughout history, the Church faced new cultures, different languages, and new ways of communication. The transmission of the Gospel, within the new cultural context, meant a constant questioning of the possibilities of evangelization, in accordance with the special nature of new media and new communication patterns. This request becomes particularly relevant in last decades with the world of the Internet, recognizing the importance of presence in virtual spaces, but also noticing that the proclamation of the Gospel presupposes the use of a different language in a new digital environment.*

*In this study, the authors analyze the evangelization activity of the Church in the virtual world, in particular the YouTube channels of two evangelization platforms: Ascension Presents (USA) and the Nova Eva (Croatia). Analyzing the frequency of publication of video contents, the methods of transmission, location of recording, the intended audience, the topics and the protagonists, the authors delineate the basic characteristics of such evangelization, and new possible paths for further action.*

*Keywords: Evangelization, New media, Evangelization via YouTube channel, Nova Eva, Ascension Presents.*

## INTRODUCTION

The strong development of communication and information technology at the end of the 20th century introduced rapid changes in the entire media environment, which will have consequences for the entire cultural context.<sup>1</sup> In addition to television and radio

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<sup>1</sup> This text is a shortened and adapted version of the graduation thesis of student Mirta Fekeža, entitled “Evangelization and New Media”, that compares the

broadcasting, and the printed media – that marked the past century – new media are rapidly spreading, influencing the development of a whole range of new media technologies, practices and shapes.<sup>2</sup> Digital media, due to its mode of action or characteristics, cross the boundaries of space and time, so some will talk about the existence of a “seventh continent.”<sup>3</sup> They enable the exchange of information, becoming “an environment in which hundreds of millions of people around the world live on a daily basis.”<sup>4</sup> The term “new media” was firstly used in the 1960s, and was intended to cover an even wider and more diverse set of applied communication technologies<sup>5</sup>. These media are not just means of transmission but change the paradigm of traditional communication enabling new forms of communication activity. Integrating different codes, the new media are not limited by the possibilities of individual media, which was not the case in the older media.

Mass media communication is a process of transmitting information from the center to the audience,<sup>6</sup> however, the emergence of new media changes the prospective. Instead of “one way” transmission (*broadcasting*), media content is now available to everyone. The focus is no longer on transmission, but on exchange and participation. Interactivity replaces one-way communication, and communication takes place in different ways (*one-to-one; one-to-many; many-to-many*). Interactivity means that the classic differences between those who create the media content (the authors) and those who consume it (the audiences) disappear. Everyone can now become an author of a text since anyone can influence the shaping of the text. In such a context, communication is seen primarily as a dialogue, exchange, way of achieving communion and establishing relationships. The metaphor of the network itself illustrates how

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YouTube channel of the USA based evangelization platform “Ascension” and the Croatian “Nova Eva”, directed by the prof. Ph.D. Jerko Valković, from the Department of Communication at the Croatian Catholic University in Zagreb, 2022.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Krunoslav Novak - Ivan Uldrijan, Digitalni svijet kao područje novog (evanđeoskog) naviještanja, *Bogoslovska smotra*, 90 (2020), 3,700.

<sup>3</sup> Jure Strujić, Internet i evangelizacija – izazovi i mogućnosti, *Crkva u svijetu*, 52 (2017), 3. 62.

<sup>4</sup> Jerko Valković, *Crkva i svijet medija. Mogućnost susreta i različitost perspektiva*, Glas Koncila, Zagreb, 2013, 83.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Dennis McQuail, *McQuail's Mass Communication Theory*, SAGE Publications Ltd, London, 2010., 39.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Giovanni Ciophalo - Silvia Leonzi, *Homo communicans. Una specie di/in evoluzione*, Armandi, Roma, 2013, 70-73.

communication is organized in internet spaces. Namely, the network provides countless modalities of connection, it has no “center”, and within the network a “horizontal” communication develops, not favoring the “hierarchy”.<sup>7</sup>

Today’s communication is marked by a hyperproduction of messages and media content, a fast and easy availability of information and by a possibility of processing and directly influencing the contents itself. Here Pascagnella and Vellar detect one of the main characteristics of the information society: “digitalization has made it possible to multiply in enormous ways the possibilities of storing, using, collecting and processing the information we possess.”<sup>8</sup>

Changes have occurred in the structure of the text itself. Within the virtual space, when it comes to the text, the dimension of linearity disappears, and another logic is adopted - the hyper-textuality. This is a significant cultural change because Western culture has developed an argumentative-logical way of thinking, while now content is organized according to the logic of hypertext. The way of reading and “moving” within the new context is determined not only by the author of the text, but also by the reader because it depends on the “direction” of the movement, the selection of links for switching to other texts.

Although this is a huge revolution, the president of the Pontifical Council for Social communications, Archbishop Claudio M. Celli, points out that “the most significant change is not technological, but cultural: it is a real challenge to see how much is changing in a world where people, especially young people, gather information, educate themselves, express themselves and build relationships and togetherness.”<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> As noted by Italian scientist Ruggiero Doronzo, the form of communication that has developed for centuries within Western culture and that has marked the communication of the Church for centuries is different from the communication of the former media. This fact presents a great challenge for the rethinking of ecclesial communication either to the world, but also to internal communication. Cf. Ruggiero Doronzo, *Chiesa e mezzi di comunicazione: un rapporto da approfondire*, Ed. Insieme, Terlizzi (Ba), 2010., 134-135.

<sup>8</sup> Luciano Pascagnella - Agnese Vellar, *Vivere online. Identità, relazioni, conoscenza*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 2016., 125.

<sup>9</sup> Claudio M. Celli, *Growing Presence of Church in Digital World*, *Crkva u svijetu*, 52 (2017), 3, 381.

## 1. CHURCH AND EVANGELIZATION THROUGH NEW MEDIA

The teaching of the Church will follow these developments, and Pope John Paul II, introducing the Church into the new millennium, will say: "For the Church the new world of cyberspace is a summons to the great adventure of using its potential to proclaim the Gospel message. This challenge is at the heart of what it means at the beginning of the millennium to follow the Lord's command to 'put out into the deep': *Duc in altum!* (Luke 5,4)."<sup>10</sup> From the very beginning, the Church accepted the new media, recognizing significant possibilities for spreading the Gospel, and the contribution for evangelization, as an important means in catechesis, education, news and information, and some forms of spiritual and pastoral guidance.<sup>11</sup> Some aspects of this evangelization are discussed in the document "The Church and Internet": "The Internet is relevant to many activities and programs of the Church - evangelization, including both re-evangelization and new evangelization and the traditional missionary work *ad gentes*, catechesis and other kinds of education, news and information, apologetics, governance and administration, and some forms of pastoral counseling and spiritual direction. Although the virtual reality of cyberspace cannot substitute for real interpersonal community, the incarnational reality of the sacraments and the liturgy, or the immediate and direct proclamation of the Gospel, it can complement them, attract people to a fuller experience of the life of faith, and enrich the religious lives of users. It also provides the Church with a means for communicating with particular groups - young people and young adults, the elderly and home-bound, persons living in remote are-

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<sup>10</sup> John Paul II, Internet: a New Forum for Proclaiming the Gospel, Message of Pope John Paul for the 36<sup>th</sup> World Day of Social Communication, 2002, in: Krunoslav Novak – Nedjeljko Pintarić – Jerko Valković, (ed.), *Crkva i mediji – Antologija tekstova o sredstvima društvenih komunikacija 1936. – 2021.*, Zagreb, 2021, no. 1739.

<sup>11</sup> Among significant investigations of the various aspects of evangelization in the virtual space, we indicate some of the important titles: Daniel Arasa, Lorenzo Cantoni, Lucio A. Ruiz (ed.), *Religious Internet Communication. Facts, trends and experiences in the catholic church*, Uduse, 2010.; Enrico Pace, *La comunicazione invisibile. Le religioni in Internet*, San Paolo, Cinisello Balsamo, 2013., Lorne Dawson — Douglas Cowan (ed.), *Religion Online: Finding Faith on the Internet*, Routledge, Routledge, New York 2004.; Heidi Campbell, *Digital Religion. Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds*, Routledge, London - New York, 2013.

as, the members of other religious bodies - who otherwise may be difficult to reach."<sup>12</sup>

However, the new media for the Church are not just a new means of communication. The Church, as stated in the aforementioned document, invites to enter the virtual spaces: "Church-related groups that have not yet taken steps to enter cyberspace are encouraged to look into the possibility of doing so at an early date. We strongly recommend the exchange of ideas and information about the Internet among those with experience in the field and those who are newcomers."<sup>13</sup> The Church should accept the language, the way of argument and the "grammar" of that space, so that the contemporary man can understand its annunciation. That means that the Church must face the challenge of evaluating its own communication.

Novak and Valković stress that entering virtual spaces means entering a different socio-symbolic context, of considerable importance for the activity of evangelization. "Virtual space has no sacrality and such an environment – starting from iconography, design, and the overall context – is in better accordance with the logic of the market, rather than with a sacral space. This space/environment is available to everyone, at the disposal to those who believe as well as to those who do not. It is not even necessary to leave the house in order to reach a sacred space, because faith can be 'practiced' from one's own house through new technologies. In this area, every experience, including a religious one, is 'dematerialized' in a certain way, and made accessible by the means of a keyboard."<sup>14</sup>

The life of believers as well as the evangelization itself can not be imagined without a community. Important changes occur in the new virtual space. Namely, within virtual spaces, communities (and communion) are formed in a different way. This issue is particularly relevant when it comes to the possibilities of participation in liturgical celebrations broadcasted by the media.<sup>15</sup> However, these, as well as some other questions or difficulties, cannot be the reason to give up entering these spaces. Reflections on ways of evangeliza-

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Pontifical Council for the Social Communication, Church and the Internet, Krunoslav Novak – Nedjeljko Pintarić – Jerko Valković, (ed.), *Crkva i mediji*, no. 1167.

<sup>13</sup> *Idem*, no. 1168.

<sup>14</sup> Krunoslav Novak - Jerko Valković, *Religija i internet – novi izazovi življenja vjere, Obnovljeni Život*, 71 (2016), 3, 395.

<sup>15</sup> See more: Jerko Valković, *Radijski i televizijski prijenos euharistijskoga slavlja – mogućnosti i načini sudjelovanja, Obnovljeni život*, 68 (2013), 1, 81–91.

tion in a virtual context are closely linked to how the term “virtual” was understood in relation to “real”. In general, we can say that today the terms “virtually” or “realistically” are not perceived as two separate or opposing spaces, but rather in their complementarity, where interaction is emphasized.<sup>16</sup>

Evangelization – as a permanent mission of the Church should be considered in the light of this new (media) environment. On the one hand, it is an invitation to a constant monitoring of various possibilities, and on the other hand, an invitation to fidelity in respect to the basic principles of evangelization. We shall mention some principles or features in the interaction of the media and evangelization. In contrast to the media, evangelization favors personal relationship and direct contact between persons, and emphasizes fidelity to the message of the Gospel, which is always perceived as a gift. The media message lacks direct and personal contact, therefore it is not that straightforward.<sup>17</sup>

Evangelization cannot be narrowed to the task of “spreading” the Good news to distant parts of the World. Pope Paul VI already spoke of this challenge: “for the Church it is a question not only of preaching the Gospel in ever wider geographic areas or to ever greater numbers of people, but also of affecting and as it were upsetting, through the power of the Gospel, mankind’s criteria of judgment, determining values, points of interest, lines of thought, sources of inspiration and models of life, which are in contrast with the Word of God and the plan of salvation” (EN 19)<sup>18</sup>. In other words, evangelization must affect the man in his essence and produce concrete fruits (of conversion). To accomplish this, bearing witness is of crucial importance.

Bearing witness to the Gospel is possible in virtual spaces. Pope Benedict XVI will stress the connection of evangelization with bearing witness: “It follows that there exists a Christian way of being present in the digital world: this takes the form of a communication which is honest and open, responsible, and respectful of others. To proclaim the Gospel through the new media means not only

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<sup>16</sup> The Italian philosopher Floridi says that we are “probably the last generation capable to feel a clear difference between offline and online spaces. Many already spend most of their time *onlife*.” Cf. Luciano Floridi, *La quarta rivoluzione. Come l'infosfera sta trasformando il mondo*, Raffaello Cortina, Milan, 2017., 107.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Jerko Valković, *Evangelizacija u eri medija: mogućnosti i problemi komuniciranja*, *Bogoslovska smotra*, 81 (2011), 3, 678.

<sup>18</sup> Paul IV, *Evangelii Nuntiandi. Apostolic Exhortation on Evangelization in the Contemporary World*, Christian Present, Zagreb, 1975, no. 19. [hereinafter EN]

to insert expressly religious content into different media platforms, but also to witness consistently, in one's own digital profile and in the way one communicates choices, preferences and judgements that are fully consistent with the Gospel, even when it is not spoken of specifically.<sup>19</sup> Such a witness can be expressed in various ways: through presence; through the diversity of those who announce; through the selection of content or topics to be announced.

A significant novelty in the evangelization through new media, as Jesuit Antonio Spadaro will point out, stems from the very nature of the media, i.e. from the fact that they enable the conveyance of content, but also the establishment of relations, relationships.<sup>20</sup> Therefore, the focus of such action, as already mentioned, will be the "sharing" of content, i.e., when it comes to evangelization – sharing the experiences of faith. This fact is important in modelling the message transmitted in virtual spaces. That is why mons. Celli says that "if our message does not include people who then begin to share it, comment or research it, it loses the audience, and we are in danger of talking to ourselves."<sup>21</sup> It is important, therefore, that the proclamation of the Church in the age of digital media remains understandable to contemporary man, knowing their characteristics, possibilities but also their limitations.

## 2. EVANGELIZATION ON YOUTUBE

YouTube as a digital platform developed in February 2005, and only a year later saw its biggest growth. In the first half of 2006, it increased from 4.9 million to 19.6 million users (an increase of almost 300%).<sup>22</sup> Because of such rapid expansion in October 2006 Google took over the platform. The crucial year was 2011, when the platform allowed live video streaming. According to data from January 2022, YouTube ranked second with around 2.6 billion users per month and, after Google, was the second largest search engine

<sup>19</sup> Benedict XVI, Truth, Proclamation and Authenticity of Life in the Digital Age, Message for the 45<sup>th</sup> World Day of Social Communication, Krunoslav Novak – Nedjeljko Pintarić – Jerko Valković, (ed.), *Church and media*, no. 1839.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Antonio Spadaro, *Cyberteologia. Pensare il cristianesimo al tempo della rete*, Vita e pensiero, Milan, 2012, 69.

<sup>21</sup> Claudio M. Celli, *The Growing Presence of the Church in the Digital World*, 385.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. *History of YouTube: When did YouTube start? YouTube's original story*. 2021., <https://explainedideas.com/brief-history-of-youtube/> (last accessed 3 April 2022).

in the world.<sup>23</sup> YouTube has over 122 million active users per day, 1 billion hours of content, and 500 hours of new content being transferred every minute: this illustrates the intensity of its online traffic.<sup>24</sup>

Henceforth, the important position YouTube has taken within the virtual world, is not surprising, and from the very beginning, its possibilities of evangelization were considered, and implemented.<sup>25</sup>

However, despite the increasing prevalence of digital media in general, and YouTube channels in particular, there is little scientific literature about evangelization on these channels or digital platforms. Nevertheless, there are several examples of using YouTube in evangelization. Among the most popular evangelizers and evangelizing YouTube channels in the English language are *Word on Fire*, *Ascension Presents*, *Breaking In The Habit*, bishop Robert Barron's channel, and *the Catholic talk Show*. There are various channels in Croatian language, i.e. YouTube channels such as *Nova Eva*, *Pod smokvom*, Franciscan channel by Josip Vlašić *Mali Joško* and channel *budiFRAjer*.

Since YouTube is very easy to use, it is not surprising that it quickly became very popular, interesting, and influential. Entertainment, informative, educational contents are easily found and shared. It is important to point out that the possibility of feedback or comments is also offered. In addition to the aforementioned, YouTube offers religious, educational, and catechistic content, and enables the use of materials or videos that can be a very suitable tool, helpful in religious and liturgical meetings. Furthermore, lectures, round tables, interviews, etc. can be published and transmitted. Jure Strujić says YouTube is an ideal area for the engagement of believers and their better interconnection, as well as a space for witnessing and offering good content<sup>26</sup>. Similarly, communities can also be formed within YouTube, whose members most often connect because of common interests.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Cf. *Distribution of global social media users 2022, by region*. 2022, in: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/295619/regional-distribution-of-social-media-users-worldwide/> (last accessed 5 July 2022).

<sup>24</sup> Cf. *YouTube user statistics. Global media insight*, 2022, <https://www.globalmediainsight.com/blog/youtube-users-statistics/> (last accessed 28 April 2023).

<sup>25</sup> The Magisterium of the Church's strongly emphasizes the necessity of presence and (evangelistic) activity within digital media in the texts dedicated to the media, but the term "YouTube" is not specifically mentioned anywhere.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Jure Strujić, *Internet and evangelization - challenges and opportunities*, 486.

<sup>27</sup> *Idem*, 452-453.



American bishop Robert Barron, one of the originators of YouTube evangelization and the famous YouTube evangelizer, highlights in his book *The New Evangelization and the New Media* some positive aspects of YouTube such as availability and real-time transmission... "I like the fact that I can make a video comment about culture, and within ten minutes I can get emails from Nepal, the Philippines, and an American sailor off the coast of Japan." Although he delighted in evangelizing on YouTube, he is aware of some shortcomings, such as comments that can be very negative, mocking, and often offensive.<sup>28</sup>

Speaking of evangelization on YouTube, scientist Michael Rossmann points out a particularly important fact. Digital video is a particularly valuable tool that can reach many young people who do not identify with any religious institution, or with believers. A survey conducted in 2010 by Dankasa, among 302 young Catholics between the ages of 12 and 24 in the diocese of St. Cloud, Minnesota, showed that young Catholics mostly use Facebook and YouTube social networks. Although the survey was conducted exclusively on a sample of young Catholics, given the characteristics of the digital generation the result would probably be the same among young people who do not profess to be believers.<sup>29</sup>

When it comes to evangelizing through digital media, church documents say that evangelizing can and should be done by everyone because every believer is invited to evangelize. Rossmann points out that laymen should be the primary digital evangelizers. In that regard, YouTube offers "particularly powerful opportunities for laypersons to give an evangelizing testimony available to their peers".<sup>30</sup>

This conclusion is understandable given that young people today are growing with new media from the very beginning and are much closer to this technological development, and its symbolic world, way of expression, dynamics as well as the communication they support.

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<sup>28</sup> Cf. Robert Barron, *The New Evangelization and the New Media*, Minnesota, Liturgical Press, 2014.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Michael Rossmann, *Evangelization by You(Tube)*, Boston, 2017., 4.

<sup>30</sup> *Idem*.

### 3. RESEARCH ON EVANGELIZATION ON *ASCENSION PRESENTS* AND *NOVA EVA* PLATFORMS

#### 3.1. Research methodology

The research was conducted on evangelization on YouTube by analyzing two evangelization platforms – the USA based *Ascension presents* and the Croatian *Nova Eva (New Eve)*. The analysis of these platforms researched the basic characteristics of YouTube evangelization, providing a comparison of the two platforms. The survey covered videos posted on these channels over a period of one liturgical year, from the first Sunday of Advent in 2020 (November 29, 2020) until the Solemnity of Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe, 2021 (21 November 2021). The aim was to gain insight into the entire course of one liturgical year. With our research, we wanted to answer the following questions:

- How many videos have been published on research platforms in the selected period?
- Are the contents offered intended for a wide audience or do they have specific categories/ages in mind?
- Does the platform offer thematically diverse content?
- Who are the protagonists, and does their choice make a difference on these platforms?

The hypotheses that were intended to verify, confirm, or refute through the research stem from the presumed answers to the above research questions:

H1: *The Ascension Presents* platform posted much more videos than the *Nova Eva* platform.

H2: Videos on the *Nova Eva* platform mostly target young people.

H3: Video themes are more diverse on *Ascension presents* than on *Nova Eva*.

H4: There are more protagonists in *Ascension presents* videos than on *Nova Eva*.

As already mentioned, the research analyses two platforms: USA based *Ascension* and Croatian *Nova Eva*. The USA platform *Ascension presents* was selected for its popularity and distribution not only in USA but worldwide. The Croatian platform *Nova Eva*, which is in its own way equivalent to the USA platform, is the most popular evangelization platform and YouTube channel in Croatia in terms of number of followers. The mission of *the Ascension Press*

platform, according to its official website, is to implement the apostolate in the form of a formation for religious life.<sup>31</sup> In this regard, the aim is to provide Catholic parishes, schools, organizations and individuals with effective and attractive study programs, books, free videos, and other resources. The *Ascension Press* platform gathers a group of motivated Catholics who want to actively participate in evangelization. Within *The Ascension Press* there is *Ascension Presents*, an evangelization program that wants to present the truth and beauty of the Catholic faith through the media. The YouTube *Ascension presents* channel opened on 17th of September 2014, and now has 703 thousand subscribers, and approximately 111 million views.

The multimedia studio, i.e., the *Nova Eva* evangelization platform, was founded by the Croatian Salesian Province and started operating in 2011. Twenty young people who create media content to promote Christian values are active in this studio, according to the official website.<sup>32</sup> They distribute contents mainly via the *Nova Eva* mobile app, but also via social media. The *Nova Eva* YouTube channel started on 1<sup>st</sup> of December 2012, and has 43 700 subscribers and to this day approximately 12 million views.

In conducting the research, we used the method of content analysis with a quantitative and qualitative approach, focusing on comparative analysis within the sample. Content analysis is a research method by which content is classified or presented and described according to predefined categories.<sup>33</sup> When it comes to the quantitative approach to analysis, we count the categories of analysis, which provides the frequency of the required elements as well as numerical presentation of results.<sup>34</sup> The qualitative approach denotes the process by which a “systematic description of the meaning of qualitative data” is carried out in a given context. Such an approach enables an in-depth understanding of the presentation of the topics discussed.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Cf. <https://ascensionpress.com/pages/who-is-ascension> (last accessed 10 May 2023).

<sup>32</sup> Cf. <http://novaeva.com/web/o-nama/> (last accessed 28 May 2023).

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Arthur Asa Berger, *Media and Communication Research: An Introduction to Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*, Los Angeles, 2000, 173.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Željka Manić, Izvođenje kvalitativne analize sadržaja, *Sociologija*, 62 (2020) 1, 108.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Margrit Schreier, Qualitative Content Analysis, Uwe Fli, *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Data Analysis*, London, 2014., 170.

### 3.2. Research results

#### 3.2.1. Number of videos

During the period of research on the American platform *Ascension presents*, 535 videos were published, while during the same period 520 were published on the Croatian platform *Nova Eva* (Table 1). Within the published videos on both channels, there were broadcasts of Eucharistic celebrations. *Nova Eva* broadcasted 359, and *Ascension presents* 56 such broadcasts. Since broadcasts of Eucharistic celebrations require a different methodological approach, we excluded these videos from our research. Thus, 479 videos published by *Ascension presents* and 161 videos published by *Nova Eva* were analyzed, in total 640 (Table 2).

Table 1: Total number of videos on both YouTube Channels

YouTube channel	Total number of videos
<i>Ascension Presents</i>	535
<i>Nova Eva</i>	520
Total	1055

Table 2: Total number of videos (without transmission of Mass)

YouTube channel	Total number of videos without mass transmission
<i>Ascension Presents</i>	479
<i>Nova Eva</i>	161
Total	640

No video was released on *Nova Eva* during the period from 4<sup>th</sup> of July to 9<sup>th</sup> of October (in total 86 days) except for the Mass broadcast. During the period of active publishing, *Nova Eva* published on average every other day. Table 3 shows that both channels used mostly pre-recorded videos, while live broadcasts took only 14% of *Nova Eva's* content and only 1% of *Ascension Present's* published videos.

A *Lectio Divina* was broadcasted live from a church on *Nova Eva* channel as *Ascension Presents* used live transmissions as an

introduction to some series of videos. One of the special series on the *Ascension Presents* channel is the podcast *Bible in a Year With Father Mike Schmitz*, which actually accounts for two thirds of the videos posted on the channel. The podcast started broadcasting on 1<sup>st</sup> of January in 2021, and was primarily published on other platforms. In June episodes of the podcast were transferred to the YouTube channel to make them as accessible as possible to as many people as possible.<sup>36</sup>

Table 3: Method of transmission

METHOD OF TRANSMISSION	YOUTUBE CHANNEL			
	<i>Nova Eva</i>		<i>Ascension Presents</i>	
Live broadcast	23	14%	7	1%
Previously recorded	138	86%	472	99%
Total	161	100%	479	100%
*of which 310 <i>Bible in a Year</i> podcast				

On *Nova Eva* there is a small difference in rate between audiovisual and audio material, while on *Ascension Presents* audio material predominates. All 309 videos refer to the podcast *Bible in a Year* (Table 4). *Nova Eva* released 74 videos (45.96%) containing audio only (for the most part these are spiritual exercises and reflections by Jesuit Slavko Pavin broadcasted on Radio Maria, which *Nova Eva* re-published on its channel).

Table 4: Visual expression

VISUAL EXPRESSION	YOUTUBE CHANNEL			
	<i>Nova Eva</i>		<i>Ascension Presents</i>	
Audiovisual	87	54,04%	170	35,49%
Audio	74	45,96%	309	64,51%
Total	161	100%	479	100%
*of which 310 <i>Bible in a Year</i> podcast				

The locations in which videos are recorded are of great importance given their symbolic function and meaning, especially when it comes to communicating ideas to viewers and audiences or interpreting certain topics. The place chosen (as well as the time of the

<sup>36</sup> The first 170 videos were released within four days, and subsequently was published one video a day.

day during which the video is made) may affect the atmosphere generated by such a video. In this research, we did not analyze every element shaping or influencing the context of filming, but we limited ourselves to four categories: church, home, nature, and studio. Table 5 shows that most videos were recorded in the studio.<sup>37</sup> On both platforms, podcasts were recorded in the studio (of which nearly 310 on *the Ascension presents* channel are *Bible in a Bible in a Year* podcast). *Nova Eva* recorded 30 videos in the church, and *Ascension presents* only 3 videos. The American evangelization platform recorded 157 videos in a home (32.78%), while the Croatian platform recorded only 21 videos in the same location (13.04%). While *Nova Eva* did not record any video in nature or open space, *Ascension presents* has 7 such videos (1.46%).

Table 5: Recording location

RECORDING LOCATION	YOUTUBE CHANNEL			
	<i>Nova Eva</i>		<i>Ascension Presents</i>	
Church	30	18,63%	3	0,63%
House	21	13,04%	157	32,78%
Nature	0	0%	7	1,46%
Studio	110	68,32%	312	65,14%
Total	161	100%	479	100%
*of which 310 <i>Bible in a Year</i> podcast				

Starting from the presented video numbers (Table 1), the method of transmission, visual expression, and the location of the recording, thus answering the first question, the first hypothesis of a larger number of published contributions on the *Ascension presents* platform is confirmed. The reasons can be manifold. The higher number of subscribers and the number of views of the American platform, which is nearly ten times higher than that of the Croatian platform, shows a demand for the publication of new content.

It is surprising to see a small number of live broadcasts and the fact that the possibility of recording contributions in different locations was not used (e.g., *Nova Eva* did not record any contributions outdoors, in nature).

<sup>37</sup> All the music videos published on the *Nova Eva* channel are discussed as recorded in a studio because each video clip was recorded in several different locations, i.e. recording contexts, so it was not possible to classify the music videos in these categories.

### 3.2.2. Targeted audience

Gregory the Great already said in the *Regola Pastorale* (written around 591) that communication principles are an essential part of the pastoral work and that access to the audience should be different, starting from its needs and possibilities of understanding. It lists 40 different categories (listeners) to which the speaker can address<sup>38</sup>, and this will also affect the design of the content of the message itself.<sup>39</sup>

Table 6: Targeted audience

TARGETED AUDIENCE	YOUTUBE CHANNEL			
	<i>Nova Eva</i>		<i>Ascension Presents</i>	
Children	0	0%	0	0%
Youth	77	47,83%	0	0%
Unspecified/all	84	52,17%	472	98,54%
Middle age	0	0%	7	1,46%
Elderly people	0	0%	0	0%
Ukupno	161	100%	479	100%
*of which 310 <i>Bible in a Year</i> podcast				

Since children and young people are those who use social media daily, it was expected that they would be the “targeted audience” of both platforms. In this regard, it was a great surprise when we found no contribution to these young audiences on the YouTube channel *Ascension presents*. Videos published on *Nova Eva* channel were also not intended for children but are largely intended for young people (77 videos, 47.73%). One reason is that several videos

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Gregorio Magno, *Regola Pastorale*, PL 77 coll. 49 – 50.

<sup>39</sup> The evangelization activity of the Church in the virtual space is faced with the fact that it no longer operates within the territorially determined framework of the parish. In fact, the spatial-geographic dimension no longer has the importance it had for the Church over the centuries. We are talking about much deeper changes that are reflected in the new possibilities of establishing relationships within virtual spaces, affecting the way of experiencing belonging, which also calls into question the very identity of people. We list only some works that deal with this topic in more detail: Rita Marchetti, *La Chiesa e internet. La sfida dei media digitali*, Carocci editore, Roma, 2015, 67-96; Luciano Paccagnella, Agnese Vellar, *Vivere online. Identità, relazioni, conoscenza*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 2016, 65-122.; Brandon Vogt, *The Digital Continent*, Brandon Vogt (ed.), *The Church and New Media. Blogging Converts, Online Activists and Bishops Who Tweet*, Huntington, USA, Our Sunday Visitor, 2011; Daniel Arasa, *Church Communications through Diocesan Websites. A Model of Analysis*, EDUSC, Rome, 2007.

are recordings of catechesis and religious encounters that Damir Stojić, as a student chaplain, held for young people. On the *Ascension presents* channel 7 videos are intended for middle-aged people, while there were no specific materials for older people. In fact, the majority of the contributions of both channels are not directed at any (specific) group and therefore we classified them as “unspecified / all”. This fact is particularly evident on the *Ascension presents* channel.

From these results, it can be said that the second hypothesis is only partially confirmed (less than half of the contributions to young people). Namely, the hypothesis assumed that most videos, apart from catechesis and meetings promoted by Damir Stojić, would be dedicated to young people, since the *Nova Eva* platform was founded by the Croatian Salesian Province, which is particularly dedicated to pastoral service of the youth.

### 3.2.3. Variety of topics

A believer today faces many questions, and if he wants faith to permeate and inspire all areas of his life, he searches for the answers. Therefore, evangelization should strive to provide guidance, incentives for reflection, and concrete examples that will enable believers to live their faith deeper, confronted with various challenges in life. New media are a very good means in accomplishing this task because they provide the opportunity to talk about various subjects, in everyday life. That is why the presentation of individual topics on the channels we analyzed speaks not only of the inventiveness of those who create the content, but also of the determination and willingness to face issues in different areas of life.

The analyzed videos can be arranged in 14 categories according to the discussed topics. On the *Nova Eva* channel, most videos (68 or 42.24%) are devoted to topics related to spiritual life. Within this thematic category, videos dedicated to prayer, spiritual exercises and spiritual reflections, virtues and acts of charity were published. The largest number of videos on the *Ascension presents* channel (312 or 65.14%) is dedicated to the Bible. It should be noted that this number includes 310 podcast videos devoted exclusively to the Bible, its reading and interpretation. *Ascension presents* devoted 56 videos to topics about living the faith in everyday life. The *Nova Eva* channel devoted nearly 30 contributions to issues discussing the relationship between science and faith, while the American Channel devoted only 1 contribution to this subject. Under the category “several different themes”, are included episodes of podcasts



*Riječ tijelom postade* (*The Word became flesh*) published on the *Nova Eva* channel, where don Damir Stojić answered three thematically different questions in each episode. In this context, it was not possible to classify a single video under only one of these themes and therefore a category of “several different themes” was chosen. The discussed subjects are also various: discerning a spiritual call, sexuality, the relationship between Church and politics, Christ’s second coming, being a godmother/godfather, the Bible, transgender persons, suffering, topics from Catholic doctrine and sacraments. According to the number of contributions, the theme of saints follows, with 10 dedicated videos. *Ascension presents* dedicated 38 videos to topics dealing with spiritual life, making this topic the third most frequent on the channel (7.93%). Most often, prayer or spiritual life and a relationship with God were discussed. Similar attention on the channel of the American Evangelization Platform is dedicated to current topics from social life (e.g., *burn-out* syndrome, influencers, cancel culture and mental health).

Table 7: Variety of topics

THEME	YOUTUBE CHANNEL			
	<i>Nova Eva</i>		<i>Ascension Presents</i>	
Bible	7	4,35%	312	65,14%
Bioethical topics	0	0%	1	0,21%
Social topics	0	0%	15	3,13%
Spiritual life	68	42,24%	62	12,94%
Music	7	4,35%	0	0%
Lent	7	4,35%	0	0%
Culture and religion	0	0%	1	0,21%
Doctrine of the Catholic Church	7	4,35%	14	2,92%
Family	0	0%	7	1,46%
Sacraments	8	4,97%	6	1,25%
Saints	10	6,21%	4	0,84%
More different topics	16	9,94%	0	0%
Religious life in everyday life	1	0,62%	56	11,69%
Science and faith	30	18,63%	1	0,21%
Total	161	100%	479	100%
*of which 310 <i>Bible in a Year</i> podcast				

While the *Ascension* platform gave considerable attention to the Bible (the podcast with a total of 312 videos), *Nova Eva* gave less attention to the Bible (only 7 videos). *Ascension Presents* talks about the teachings of the Catholic Church in a slightly larger number of videos (14), and about the family in 7 videos. In contrast, *Nova Eva* did not publish a single video on topics relating to family. *Nova Eva* dedicated only one video to topics that touch the daily life of believers, while the least represented topics (with 1 video) on the channel of the American evangelization platform were: abortion, culture and faith, sacraments, science and faith.

*Ascension Presents* covers a wider range of topic than *Nova Eva*, thus confirming the third hypothesis. While *Ascension Presents* gives more emphasis on topics from everyday life (11.69 %), *Nova Eva* emphasizes the spiritual life (68 contributions, 42.24 %), although some topics from everyday life will be discussed in the podcast *Riječ tijelom postade*.

#### 3.2.4. Protagonists of the videos

Evangelization through platforms, as well as evangelization through the media, not only presupposes the involvement of laypersons, especially young people, but this area should be a privileged place for their religious-evangelization activities. The pope John Paul II, in the post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Pastores gregis*, says: “The laity have special responsibility – and here they need encouragement – for evangelizing culture, making the power of the Gospel part of the life of the family, the workplace, the mass media, sports and leisure, and for promoting Christian values in society and public life, both national and international. By the fact that they are in the world, the lay faithful are in a position to exercise great influence on their environment and to offer great numbers of men and women broader horizons of hope. On the other hand, committed as they are by their vocation to living amid temporal realities, the lay faithful are called, in accordance with their specific secular character, to give an account of their hope (cf. *1 Peter* 3,15) wherever they work and to cultivate in their hearts ‘the expectation of a new earth.’”<sup>40</sup>

Although we expected that the protagonists of the videos will be mostly young and lay people, the survey shows that in the videos

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<sup>40</sup> John Paul II, *Pastores gregis*, Post-synodal apostolic exhortation, no. 51, Krunoslav Novak – Nedjeljko Pintarić – Jerko Valković, (ed.), *Crkva i mediji*, no. 2215.

of *Nova Eva* and *Ascension presents* were mostly priests (Table 8). On the *Nova Eva* channel, these are priests belonging to the Society of Jesus, or priests of the Society of St. Francis of Sales. On the *Ascension presents* channel, these are mostly diocesan priests and Franciscans. Laymen can be seen in 37 videos on *Nova Eva* (23%) and in only 26 videos on *Ascension presents* (5.43%). Interestingly, on the *Nova Eva* channel, a priest and a layman appear together in 16 videos (10%). In 11 videos on the *Ascension presents* channel, the protagonists are a married couple, in 10 videos two priests appear and in 9 videos a priest and layman appear. In 6 videos, the protagonists were two lay people and a priest and a nun. The least number of videos has one or two nuns as protagonist (1 video). It is noticeable, on the *Nova Eva* channel, a small number of videos in which protagonists include a group of people.

Table 8: The protagonists of the videos

THE PROTAGONIST	YOUTUBE CHANNEL			
	<i>Nova Eva</i>		<i>Ascension Presents</i>	
Married couple	0	0%	11	2,30%
Two nuns	0	0%	1	0,21%
Two lay people	0	0%	6	1,25%
Two priests	0	0%	10	2,09%
Lay person	37	23%	26	5,43%
Nun	0	0%	1	0,21%
A priest	108	67%	407	84,97%
A priest and a lay person	16	10%	9	1,88%
Priest and nun	0	0%	6	1,25%
Priest and several lay people	0	0%	2	0,42%
Total	161	100%	479	100%
*of which 310 <i>Bible in a Year</i> podcast				

The biggest and most significant difference between the channels we researched was in the choice of protagonists that appear in the videos. While the protagonists on *Nova Eva* are only priests or lay people (they appear together in only 16 videos), on the *Ascension Presents* channel almost all categories are present (priests, male and female religious people, lay people, including men and women, married couples, and there are also videos in which more than one protagonist appears, which is very rare on *Nova Eva*). This

confirmed the fourth hypothesis that *Ascension presents* has a wide range of protagonists in its videos, compared to *Nova Eva* which is more restricted.

## CONCLUSION

The aim of the research was to gain insight into the basic features of evangelization on the YouTube platform, on the example of the Croatian channel *Nova Eva* and the USA based *Ascension presents*. We are well aware of the limits of this research, for in order to obtain a complete picture, it would be necessary to investigate also to what extent this evangelizing activity of the Church fulfils the expectations and needs of contemporary man.

It is important to notice that the Church in Croatia has firmly entered the virtual continent, initially led by the enthusiasm of individuals who willingly embarked on this challenging “adventure”. Today it is not possible to determine precisely how many evangelizing videos can be found on different platforms in Croatian language. However, it is somewhat surprising that, as far as we know, there are no more detailed studies or papers dedicated to evangelization on YouTube. Such research is valuable because it contributes to and facilitates reflection on these aspects of evangelization activity, promoting a better organization, exchange of experiences and discovering possible new ways of action. In this context, aware of all the limitations and almost “pioneering” attempt, we can hope that this work could serve as an incentive for further research.

Just as when entering the world of electronic media (radio and television), the Church and the devoted pastoral workers now must face the challenge, logic, and language of digital media. This includes speaking out and using the opportunities that new media offer, which is not an easy task. Let us just mention some of the elements that we focused upon during our research. Evangelization through new media assumes constant listening to life, a prompt action, not waiting for the word to be delivered on some occasions, celebrations, or holidays. The number of posts alone is not decisive but speaks of active evangelization. Digital media and evangelization are not necessarily connected to sacred space, but even prefer another environment, which provides the possibility of a more complete “embodiment” of the message into concrete living reality. The world of digital media, and YouTube in particular, is in front of the call that Pope John Paul II already had expressed, by saying “It is also necessary to integrate that (Christian) message into the

'new culture' created by modern communications. This is a complex issue, since the 'new culture' originates not just from whatever content is eventually expressed, but from the very fact that there exist new ways of communicating, with new languages, new techniques, and a new psychology."<sup>41</sup>

It is true that videos on YouTube (and their production, viewing or commenting) are generally available to everyone, in a very simple way. However, a focus on certain categories (which does not mean the exclusion of other categories) would allow an adaptation of the language, making it more concrete, and probably more efficient for a certain category of users. Young people, who mostly visit YouTube channels, would discover the message through these channels as close and reachable.

Faced with a variety of questions, contemporary man could benefit greatly from relatively short videos, with a simple language, which, based on everyday experience, would help understanding reality, or perhaps would even offer answers. That is why thematically very diverse videos are very suitable for a realization of such a discourse, or maybe even a dialogue.

Such videos remain, they are easily shared, being accessible to everyone, both believers and non-believers. This last category - persons who do not believe or who perhaps are in the "entrance hall" of Christianity - should be given much more attention (also through the choice of themes). Evangelization through YouTube channels a kind of bridge towards those who look upon the Church, religion, and religious life with "approval" or who want to learn something more about religion itself. The next step should be, and these media enable us to do that, the dialogue, interactivity, a step forward from the top-down level of communication.

The diversity of protagonists will contribute to a better and more authentic expression and understanding of what is wanted to be said, especially when it comes to bearing witness, communicated to others. The appearance of a doctor who speaks competently about a medical or bioethical problem should mean more, or even leave a deeper mark in respect to a priest or another "official" of the Church, which speaks about it with the same competence! Moreover, as mentioned in the text, this is a very important area of lay people's activity.

The fact that there are more than two billion YouTube users in the world today is a reason for serious consideration of evangeliza-

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<sup>41</sup> John Paul II, *Redemptoris mission*, Encyclical, no. 37., *Idem*, no. 2147.

tion through this media. As Pope Francis pointed out in his 2014 World media day message, “if a choice has to be made between a bruised Church which goes out to the streets and a Church suffering from self-absorption, I certainly prefer the first. Those ‘streets’ are the world where people live and where they can be reached, both effectively and affectively. The digital highway is one of them, a street teeming with people who are often hurting, men and women looking for salvation or hope. By means of the internet, the Christian message can reach ‘to the ends of the earth’ (Acts 1,8).”<sup>42</sup> If contemporary people often will not go to Church on their own, do not these media offer a possibility for the Church to go towards them? Therefore, we could ask whether the digital media and communication platforms in general, in their own way, might offer a future for the Church.

Evangelization via YouTube is filled with challenges, and its users should be aware that the success of evangelization will not primarily depend on the number of likes or the number of followers (although they may indicate something). Furthermore, the Church should always be attentive to the uniqueness of its mission since it is proclaiming an ineffable Mystery that can never be fully communicated. The media environment or media logic, therefore should never absorb or disrespect the message of this Mystery.

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<sup>42</sup> Pope Francis, *Communication in the Service of a True Culture of Encounter*, Message of the 48<sup>th</sup> World Day of Social Communication, 2014, *Idem*, no. 1870.