

# **A SYNODAL CHURCH IN THE CYBERSPACE: LISTENING BEYOND BORDERS**

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*This paper examines the transformative role of digital platforms in fostering synodality, enabling the Church to listen, accompany, and engage with diverse voices, particularly migrant workers. Digital tools help transcend geographical and cultural boundaries, amplifying marginalized voices and fostering a more participatory Church. Integrating technology into pastoral care allows the Church to cultivate a more inclusive, dynamic, and mission-oriented faith community. The findings highlight the need for continued innovation in ecclesial practices, advocating for a synodal approach that harnesses digital connectivity to create a truly listening Church responsive to the spiritual and social needs of people on the move.*

Keywords: Synodal Church, Religious Coping of OFW (Overseas Filipino Workers), Pastoral Initiatives in Cyberspace

## **INTRODUCTION**

The study explores how the Catholic Church, through synodality, listens, accompanies, and engages with the faithful, particularly in the digital sphere. The Church must adapt its mission to new technological frontiers in a world where physical boundaries no longer confine human interaction. However, while digital spaces have expanded opportunities for connection, a critical question arises: How effectively does the Church respond to the spiritual and pastoral needs of the faithful— especially migrant communities— who primarily engage with it online?

The core elements of synodality— communion, participation, and mission— must be embodied in the digital world.

However, despite the Church's growing presence in cyberspace, there remains a gap in understanding how online religious engagement fosters meaningful participation and formation, particularly for Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs), who often struggle with displacement, isolation, and limited access to traditional parish life. Bauman's "liquid modernity" underscores this challenge, describing a world where societal structures are fluid and constantly shifting. The institutional Church, too, must navigate this fluidity, where faith expressions increasingly occur online. This shift has given rise to the "Cyber Church," a virtual extension of the Church that offers worship, evangelization, and support networks beyond geographical constraints.

The departure point for this reflection is the shared experiences of select OFWs who have become part of the online Church of the Shrine of Our Lady of Perpetual Help in Baclaran. Qualitative data from ten respondents provide a crucial glimpse into the common concerns of migrant workers seeking spiritual support online, but it also acknowledges its limitations in generalizability. The preliminary findings suggest that spiritual and religious education remains underdeveloped, although the Baclaran Church's online ministry has assisted OFWs with repatriation, legal aid, and financial support. This enhances an important concern: How can the digital Church enhance its role in providing sustained faith formation, beyond transactional assistance, to those engaging with it in cyberspace? This study addresses this gap by listening to OFWs' expressed spiritual and catechetical needs and proposing concrete ways to enhance their religious education in digital spaces. Towards the end of the study, online materials were developed and made accessible through the social media platforms of the Baclaran Church, offering prayer guides, reflection resources, and faith-based educational content.

Scholars such as Heidi Campbell argue that digital spaces hold transformative potential, allowing dispersed communities to

thrive as integral parts of ecclesial life. Yet, a theological and pastoral challenge remains— to what extent can digital synodality move beyond mere presence to active participation, formation, and evangelization? This study, therefore, seeks to explore how the Church, in embracing digital spaces, fosters inclusion, listens actively to diverse voices, and provides sustained pastoral care for migrant workers. By examining the intersection of technology, synodality, and mission, this article sheds light on how digital frontiers become spaces of grace, fostering solidarity and communion beyond traditional parish boundaries.

This call to expand digitally aligns with Pope Francis' vision of a synodal Church—one that is participative, less centralized, and deeply attuned to the needs and voices of the marginalized. In his address during the Synod on Youth, Pope Francis emphasized the importance of reaching people in “existential peripheries,” which include digital spaces where individuals seek meaning, guidance, and a sense of belonging. The phrase describes individuals and communities who experience social, economic, cultural, or spiritual marginalization. These peripheries are not merely geographical but existential, encompassing people who feel abandoned, disconnected, or excluded from society and the Church.<sup>1</sup>

Pope Francis emphasizes that the Church must go beyond its traditional centers of power and security to reach those at the margins, including the poor, migrants, the oppressed, and those struggling with faith or meaning in life. He calls for a missionary Church that listens to and accompanies those at the peripheries, embodying Christ's presence wherever they are. This engagement is particularly significant for migrant communities, who increasingly rely on online resources for spiritual nourishment and community. The Church's foray into digital platforms addresses the practical challenges of geographical separation and reflects a

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<sup>1</sup> Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 20

theological commitment to accompany people physically or digitally.

### **CONSIDERING THE FRAMEWORK OF HEIDI CAMPBELL TOWARD A SYNODAL DIGITAL CHURCH**

Heidi A. Campbell suggests that online religious practice transforms religion and reflects broader cultural shifts within Western society. Studying religion online offers valuable insights into shared characteristics of digital religious practices and current religious trends. Campbell introduces the concept of *networked religion* through five key traits: (1) Networked Community, (2) Storied Identities, (3) Shifting Authority, (4) Convergent Practice, and (5) Multisite Reality.<sup>2</sup> She argues that religious practice online is shaped by the networked structure and functionality of information and communication technologies, creating a dynamic interplay between online and offline contexts. This relationship necessitates examining how offline practices influence online beliefs and behaviors.

The first trait, *networked community*, emphasizes how religious networks online operate as loose, unbounded social structures that include diverse affiliations and levels of commitment. Researchers in the 1990s observed a “new sense of community” emerging within online groups, framing them as “congregations of the disembodied.”<sup>3</sup> While studies confirm that online Christian communities connect to offline practices, Campbell notes that online community serves primarily as a *supplement* rather than a substitute for offline Church engagement.

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<sup>2</sup> Heidi A. Campbell, *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds*, (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2013), 24.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

The second trait, *storied identities*, highlights how the internet enables individuals to construct and perform identities in response to the fluidity of online spaces. Unlike traditional identity formation, which relies on integration and control within institutional structures, storied identities develop through engagement with digital tools, adding complexity to identity construction. For Campbell, this is clear in the practices of religious bloggers, who use online platforms as spaces to "live out the religious self." The internet serves as a "rich reservoir of resources," providing opportunities for reflection and faith expression, particularly for individuals who lack such avenues in their local contexts.<sup>4</sup>

The third trait, *shifting authority*, explores how the internet affects religious roles, structures, and systems of authority. Campbell explains that understanding online authority requires investigating specific aspects of religious power—such as the roles of leaders, decision-making processes, or disseminating doctrine. She identifies four levels of authority at play in online contexts: hierarchy, structure, ideology, and text. For example, her qualitative analysis of Christian, Muslim, and Jewish communities revealed that religious leaders are affirmed as interpreters of tradition in some faiths (e.g., Judaism and Islam) but questioned or redefined in others (e.g., certain Christian denominations). The internet's capacity to enhance transparency and foster dialogue has shifted the focus from traditional organizational structures to more fluid and relational authority networks.<sup>5</sup>

The fourth trait, *convergent practice*, describes how the internet serves as a spiritual hub where users combine traditional and modern resources to personalize their religious practices.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 37.

<sup>5</sup> Heidi A. Campbell, "Who's Got the Power? Religious Authority and the Internet," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 12, no. 3 (2007): 1043–1062, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1083-6101.2007.00362.x>.

Campbell refers to this as a "blending process" that encourages individuals to draw from diverse rituals and beliefs. Online environments allow for both the adaptation of traditional religious practices (e.g., prayer, chanting, and meditation) and the creation of new forms of worship (e.g., cyber-altars, online ceremonies). This convergence transforms religious expression and fosters innovative forms of spiritual engagement.<sup>6</sup>

The fifth trait, *multisite reality*, highlights the interconnectedness of online and offline religious practices. Campbell explains that people's online activities— such as participation in Facebook groups, blogs, or forums, deeply intertwine with their offline experiences. This "multisite reality" often reflects significant ideological overlap between online communities and offline institutions, particularly in diverse faith traditions. For example, religious practices and cultural customs mediated through digital platforms often influence members' workplaces, local communities, and global networks.<sup>7</sup>

Campbell's framework of networked religion underscores the dynamic relationship between online and offline religious practices. Rather than replacing traditional faith communities, the digital environment complements and enriches them, offering new opportunities for identity formation, authority negotiation, and spiritual engagement in a networked society. Her framework on digital religion provides valuable insights for envisioning a synodal digital Church. She emphasizes the interplay between technology, community, and religious practice, asserting that digital spaces are not merely tools for dissemination but environments to express, negotiate, and transform the faith. For a Synodal Church, which prioritizes listening, inclusion, and shared responsibility, her framework underscores the need to approach digital platforms as

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<sup>6</sup> Campbell, (2013), 77-78.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 40-43.

spaces where authentic ecclesial encounters can occur. This perspective aligns with the Church's mission to "listen beyond borders," embracing the diverse voices of the People of God in both physical and virtual spaces. As Campbell observes, "Religious groups have long shaped technology to meet their needs while simultaneously being shaped by it," highlighting the reciprocal influence of faith and digital culture on one another.<sup>8</sup>

Campbell's "religious-social shaping of technology" concept is particularly relevant to synodality in the digital age. This principle suggests that religious communities shape technology to reflect their values and goals while technology, in turn, influences how communities understand and practice their faith.<sup>9</sup> This interplay calls for intentional engagement with digital tools that facilitate dialogue, collaboration, and inclusivity for a Synodal Digital Church. Platforms such as social media, virtual meeting spaces, and online liturgies can serve as avenues for synodal processes, enabling the Church to listen and respond to marginalized voices, including migrants, the youth, and those excluded from traditional ecclesial structures.

## **HARNESSING THE CYBERSPACE FOR THE CHURCH'S MISSION**

The Catholic Church has a long history of engaging in missionary activity, adapting to new contexts to proclaim the Gospel to different sets of people worldwide.<sup>10</sup> As the contemporary frontier, cyberspace paves the way for more efficient missionary efforts. The internet is a global and interconnected

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<sup>8</sup> Heidi Campbell, *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in Digital Media* (London: Routledge, 2012), 12.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>10</sup> Stephen, Bevans & Roger, Schroeder, *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today*. (Maryknoll, New York: ASM Orbis Books, 2004).

digital space where communications, relationships, and communities emerge notwithstanding customary boundaries of geography, time zones, or physical presence. Pope Francis acknowledges the pivotal role of digital technology in the Church's mission. He reiterates that we live in a “highly digitalized culture that has had a profound impact on ideas of time and space, our self-understanding, our understanding of others and the world, and our ability to communicate, learn, be informed and enter into relationships with others.”<sup>11</sup>

This aligns with the New Evangelization efforts to re-propose the Gospel to those in regions where Christianity has lost its relevance. Pope John Paul II highlighted “the positive capacities of the Internet to carry religious information and teaching beyond all barriers and frontiers.”<sup>12</sup> The Internet allows the Church to reach individuals disconnected from their local faith communities, such as the OFWs (Overseas Filipino Workers), through social media and other digital platforms. Utilizing digital frontiers challenges the Church to enter these online spaces, explore digital culture, and welcome those seeking spiritual nourishment, accompaniment, and support from the faith communities. If the Church can ascertain a safe space amidst the cancel culture and deceptive schemes that proliferate online, the call to be sacraments of God's love becomes visible and palpable.

In the context of cyberspace, participation takes on new forms. Online discussions, forums, and digital platforms have created a new theological dialogue and catechesis space. The Synod of Bishops on Young People, the Faith, and Vocational

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<sup>11</sup> Pope Francis, *Christus Vivit*, 86. [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20190325\\_christus-vivit.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20190325_christus-vivit.html).

<sup>12</sup> Pontifical Council for Social Communications, *The Church and Internet*, (February 22, 2002), 4. [https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/pccs/documents/rc\\_pc\\_pccs\\_doc\\_20020228\\_church-internet\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/pccs/documents/rc_pc_pccs_doc_20020228_church-internet_en.html)



Discernment in 2018 demonstrated the power of online consultation. Youth worldwide contributed to the conversation through digital surveys, highlighting the importance of listening to diverse voices. "Listening is an encounter in freedom, which calls for humility, patience, readiness to understand, and an effort to respond in new ways. Listening transforms the hearts of those who do it, especially when it takes place with an inner disposition of harmony and obedience to the Spirit."<sup>13</sup>

While some perceive cyber-Churches as inauthentic, others argue that these virtual communities provide intimate and flexible spaces for religious engagement. Participants can practice their faith at their own pace, share personal experiences, and access spiritual resources anytime, making these platforms an accessible complement to traditional Church communities. Rather than replacing offline gatherings, cyber-Churches can enrich them by fostering connections that extend beyond physical boundaries.<sup>14</sup> Digital tools also democratize access to catechesis and religious formation, empowering laypeople to engage actively in their faith journeys. Online platforms enable individuals to share stories, ask questions, and seek guidance, fostering a shared community. This potential was highlighted during the 2021 Synod process, which introduced the *Digital Synod* initiative through the pilot project *The Church Listens to You*. This effort encouraged reflection and participation in digital spaces, culminating in a synthesis report that identified "Mission in the Digital Environment" as a crucial area

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<sup>13</sup> Synod of Bishops, *Young People, the Faith and Vocational Discernment*. (Vatican City, Rome, 27 October 2018), 6. [https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/synod/documents/rc\\_synod\\_doc\\_20181027\\_doc-final-instrumentum-xvassembl-ea-giovani\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20181027_doc-final-instrumentum-xvassembl-ea-giovani_en.html)

<sup>14</sup> Agnes Brazal and Randy Odchigue, "Cyberchurch and Filipin@ Migrants in the Middle East" in Susanna Snyder, Joshua Ralston, Agnes M. Brazal, eds. *Church in an Age of Global Migration*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 187-199.

for exploration.<sup>15</sup> The digital world challenges the Church to reimagine its language and methods for evangelization. Its interconnected nature resonates with Pope Francis' vision of the Church as a "network of communion," offering new opportunities to build relationships and strengthen the Church's mission in today's ever-evolving landscape.<sup>16</sup>

Synodality indicates communion: a unity in diversity within the Church. Digital tools provide new ways to foster this communion by connecting individuals and communities across vast distances. Social media platforms, digital conferences, and online forums allow the Church to gather people separated by geography. This is particularly relevant for Catholics in the diaspora, for whom digital engagement becomes a lifeline to their faith communities. The Church's mission extends to proclaiming the Gospel to all people, and this mission is now taking place in the digital realm. Digital platforms offer a chance to reimagine traditional methods of evangelization. Podcasts, YouTube channels, and social media accounts have become modern-day pulpits from which the Church can preach the Gospel. However, evangelizing in these spaces also requires careful attention. The digital world is fast-paced, information-saturated, and often driven by divisive conversations. To be effective in this space, the Church must be a voice of reason, mercy, and compassion. This echoes Pope Francis' call for the Church to engage with others through dialogue and encounter rather than judgment and condemnation.

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<sup>15</sup> *The Church listens to you*, report of the Digital Synod that was carried out with 244 influencers from around the world. ([www.vaticannews.va/pt/igreja/news/2022-09/a-igreja-te-escuta.html](http://www.vaticannews.va/pt/igreja/news/2022-09/a-igreja-te-escuta.html)).

<sup>16</sup> General Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops, *A Synodal Church in Mission*, Summary Report of the First Session of the Sixteenth Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, October 28, 2023, <https://www.synod.va/en/news/a-synodal-church-in-mission.html>.

## LISTENING TO THE VOICES OF OFWs

The theme of synodality, emphasized by Pope Francis, invites the Church to “listen” so that she is deeply attuned to the faithful’s needs, struggles, and hopes. The etymology of the word synod comes from the Greek *syn* (“together”) and *hodos* (“way” or “journey”), indicating a journey together as the people of God.<sup>17</sup> This concept applies more to the digital world as the physical one. In the digital age, listening and dialogue are not bound to physical spaces. The online sphere allows the Church to open its ears to the joys and sufferings of people beyond traditional boundaries. For migrant communities, for example, digital spaces provide a means to maintain their connection to the Church despite being far from their home parishes. Filipino migrant workers, a group with a strong Catholic identity, have found online communities, live-streamed Masses, and virtual prayer groups to be crucial for maintaining their spiritual life while abroad.<sup>18</sup>

A thematic synthesis of interviews with select respondents reveals key areas where OFWs seek deeper engagement from the Church. Their verbatim reflections highlight urgent concerns—ranging from the intersection of faith and mental well-being to the need for catechesis, resilience building, and advocacy for human rights:

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<sup>17</sup> Matthew Bunson, “Synods through the Ages in the Catholic Church,” *National Catholic Register*, 15 September 2023, <https://www.ncregister.com/commentaries/church-synods-through-the-ages>.

<sup>18</sup> Minami O. Iwayama, “Personal Religious Practices of Christian Overseas Filipino Workers in an Islamic Host Country,” *Social Sciences and Development Review*, (Manila: Polytechnic University of the Philippines, 2021): 1-22. [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/372477655\\_Personal\\_Religious\\_Practices\\_of\\_Christian\\_Overseas\\_Filipino\\_Workers\\_in\\_an\\_Islamic\\_Host\\_Country](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/372477655_Personal_Religious_Practices_of_Christian_Overseas_Filipino_Workers_in_an_Islamic_Host_Country)

| Respondents' Verbatim Remarks  | Themes for Designing Religious Materials |
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| <p><i>Tungkol sa depresyon sana kasi di po biro ang aming mga dinadaanang pagsubok.</i></p> <p><i>Karamihan sa ibang bansa pag na depress nagpapakamatay na kasi kulang na sila sa pananalig sa Panginoon.</i></p>   | <p>Faith and Mental Well-being</p>       |
| <p><i>Ang sina-suggest ko sana na magkaroon ng spiritual formation ng mga OFW na magkaroon ng prayer time or catechism.</i></p> <p><i>Ang tema siguro ay para sa aming mga OFW na humaharap sa napakaraming pagsubok na kailangan lakasan ang loob at pananampalataya sa Panginoon.</i></p>                          | <p>Catechism and Prayer Life</p>         |
| <p><i>Pagdating sa mga paksa o tema siguro mga dagdag na kaalaman na dapat pagtuunan ng pansin lalo na siguro sa pagharap sa mga problema.</i></p> <p><i>Para sa akin ang tema siguro ay yong susubukan ka man ng panahon hinding-hindi ka naman pababayaan ng Panginoon...manalig ka lang at manampalataya.</i></p> | <p>Faith and Resilience</p>              |
| <p><i>Mag paksa tungkol sa paghihirap ng mga OFW at tungkol sa mga di nakakakuha ng mga pansariling benepisyo. Tungkol din sa mga kaso ng</i></p>  | <p>Human Rights and Justice</p>          |

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| <p><i>pagmamaltrato, mga pinakulong na wala namang kasalanan.</i></p> <p><i>Yung pagtugon at pagtulong sa kapwa, yun siguro ang mahalagang paksa o tema.</i></p> |  |
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The experiences of Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) highlight the Church's mission of accompaniment, as emphasized by Pope Francis' vision of a synodal Church— one that listens, walks with, and supports the faithful wherever they are, even in digital spaces. The pastoral responses derived from the interviews align with the Church's call to be a field hospital<sup>19</sup> offering spiritual care and moral guidance to those facing hardships.

The digital transformation of religious practice, as explored in Heidi Campbell's concept of networked religion, provides a framework for understanding how faith communities adapt, negotiate authority, and sustain spiritual engagement in online spaces. Her five key traits— networked community, storied identities, shifting authority, convergent practice, and multisite reality— offer insights into how the digital Church can embody synodal listening, shared discernment, and co-responsibility in ministering to migrant workers.

## 1. Networked Community: A Borderless Church

Campbell describes networked communities as fluid, decentralized, and inclusive social structures that resonate with a synodal vision of the Church. Filipino migrants, often physically separated from their parish, turn to online faith communities— such as Facebook prayer groups, live-streamed Masses, and digital

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<sup>19</sup> Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 49.

novena devotions— to remain spiritually connected. These digital networks do not replace traditional Church structures but extend them, making faith more accessible to those unable to participate in on-site parish life.

As described in Acts 2:42-47, the early Church thrived as a networked community, united in faith, prayer, and mutual support despite geographical distances. Likewise, the Church in digital spaces fosters communal spirituality or faith through shared prayer, storytelling, and solidarity across borders. It reminds us that the Church must be “permanently in a state of mission”<sup>20</sup> and actively reach out to those at the margins— including migrants in digital spaces.

OFWs endure loneliness, depression, and emotional distress, making their faith a source of inner healing and resilience. In its pastoral role, the Church is a refuge for those in existential peripheries who suffer in silence, often away from their families and parish communities. The Psalms, particularly Psalm 34:18, “The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit,” remind us of God’s nearness to those who struggle. Christ as the Good Shepherd (Jn 10:11) embodies the Church’s mission to care for the lost and weary. Digital platforms allow the Church to extend this pastoral care, ensuring no one feels abandoned in their suffering.

## **2. Storied Identities: Digital Faith as a Journey**

For Campbell, storied identities highlight how individuals construct and express their religious selves through digital engagement. OFWs use social media and online platforms for worship and personal testimonies, reflections, and expressions of faith. Digital spaces allow migrants to share their struggles, seek

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., no. 24.

encouragement, and integrate faith into their daily challenges. Christian identity is relational and narrative-based – rooted in the biblical tradition of salvation history and personal encounters with God. In Luke 24:13-35, the disciples on the road to Emmaus recognize Christ in their shared journey and storytelling. Similarly, OFWs in digital communities shape their faith through online narratives of suffering, hope, and resilience. The New Directory for Catechesis affirms that digital culture is not just a means of communication but a space of evangelization where faith is lived, questioned, and deepened.<sup>21</sup>

The respondents articulated a structured faith formation, revealing a need for accessible catechesis and prayer life. In Bauman's liquid modernity, the traditional religious structures seem less stable; the Church must creatively transmit the faith through digital means. It underscores the importance of re-evangelization through modern platforms, ensuring that believers, especially those in diaspora, remain rooted in the core teachings of Christianity. When used effectively, the digital realm can mirror this early ecclesial model, forming virtual faith communities that engage in prayer, Scripture reflection, and theological learning.

### 3. Shifting Authority: Synodality and Digital Leadership

Campbell's shifting authority concept reflects how digital spaces redefine religious leadership and decision-making. In traditional settings, religious authority limits power to the parish priest or bishop, but authority becomes relational and participatory in digital spaces. OFWs often turn to peer-led prayer groups, digital catechesis, and lay ministers for guidance rather than relying solely on clerical figures.

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<sup>21</sup> New Directory for Catechesis (2020)

This shift aligns with the Second Vatican Council's teaching on the People of God, which emphasizes co-responsibility in the mission of the Church.<sup>22</sup> Pope Francis also warns against clericalism, urging the Church to listen to the laity and marginalized voices. Digital synodality invites new forms of ecclesial leadership, where migrant workers, lay leaders, and women's voices contribute to faith formation and pastoral care.

#### **4. Convergent Practice: Blending Traditional and Digital Worship**

Campbell's convergent practice describes how believers integrate traditional and digital religious rituals. OFWs unable to attend Mass in person often participate in live-streamed Eucharistic celebrations, virtual rosary groups, or digital novenas. In some cases where Christianity is restricted, migrants pray in online spaces as an alternative to public worship.

This reflects the incarnational nature of Catholic worship, where faith is embodied and mediated through both physical and digital experiences. St. Paul reminds the faithful in his first letter to the Corinthians that the Church is one Body in Christ,<sup>23</sup> transcending space and time. This affirms that faith must be lived in new cultural contexts, including the digital age.<sup>24</sup> A Synodal Church must recognize these convergent practices as valid expressions of faith, ensuring that online worship nurtures authentic ecclesial participation rather than passive consumption.

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<sup>22</sup> *Lumen Gentium*, no. 31

<sup>23</sup> 1 Corinthians 12:12-27

<sup>24</sup> Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, no. 297.



## 5. Multisite Reality: Online and Offline Faith Integration

Campbell's multisite reality emphasizes that digital and offline faith practices are interconnected. OFWs' virtual faith engagements—such as online recollections, scripture sharing, or advocacy discussions—often influence their workplace ethics, family relationships, and local Church participation.

This interplay echoes Catholic sacramentality, where grace permeates visible and invisible realities.<sup>25</sup> A synodal approach to digital ministry must ensure that online faith initiatives encourage real-world engagement—whether in justice advocacy, community-building, or personal holiness. Pope Benedict XVI stressed that technology must serve authentic human development, calling for digital evangelization that transforms lives, not just screens.<sup>26</sup>

Campbell's religious-social technology shaping aligns with the Church's call for intentional engagement in digital synodality. Rather than seeing digital spaces merely as tools for outreach, the Church must recognize them as sacred environments where authentic ecclesial encounters happen. In other words, digital synodality challenges the Church to listen and hear the voices of migrants, to encourage migrant workers, lay leaders, and digital missionaries to co-create faith content, to use online spaces not just for prayer but also for advocacy on migrant rights and social justice, and to ensure that digital faith engagement leads to real-world transformation and mission. Pope Francis reminds us that “the digital world can be an environment rich in humanity; a network not of wires, but of people.”<sup>27</sup> A Synodal Digital Church must embrace the networked, participatory, and evolving nature of faith in the digital era, ensuring that technology enhances, rather than replaces, the Church's mission.

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<sup>25</sup> *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, no. 7

<sup>26</sup> *Caritas in Veritate*, no. 73

<sup>27</sup> *Christus Vivit*, no. 87

## PASTORAL RESPONSE: CRAFTING RELIGIOUS MATERIALS ONLINE

The development of online materials to address the respondents' expressed needs initially led to the creation of eight Christian Faith themes, all presented in the Filipino language. This approach aligns with the Church's mission to engage deeply with local cultures in articulating the Faith, making it more intelligible and relevant to those we serve.<sup>28</sup> Using the Filipino language is a linguistic choice and a pastoral one, allowing for more transparent and heartfelt communication of core Christian beliefs. As the Ecclesia in Asia emphasizes, the Church's call for inculturation entails that every culture finds a home in the Gospel, reflecting the belief that "the mystery of Christ can be reflected and lived in every culture."<sup>29</sup> This initiative is grounded in the understanding that cultural context is essential in conveying the Gospel meaningfully. By integrating the Filipino language and values into these online faith materials, we respond to Pope Francis' encouragement to foster "a Church with an Indigenous face" that resonates with the lived experiences of the faithful.<sup>30</sup> For migrant workers who may feel culturally or geographically distant from traditional ecclesial structures, this approach serves as a bridge, fostering a sense of belonging to the faith and broader Church community even while abroad. The cultural nuances of language and tradition help them see their stories within the Gospel narrative, affirming the dignity of their experiences and reinforcing the presence of Christ in their lives.

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<sup>28</sup> Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC). *FABC Documents from 1992*. Hong Kong: Claretian Publications.

<sup>29</sup> John Paul II. *Ecclesia in Asia*, (Vatican City, Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1999).

<sup>30</sup> Pope Francis. *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home*, (Vatican City, Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2015).

By meeting people in their linguistic and cultural context, we participate in the work of a Church that does not merely evangelize from a distance but engages intimately with each person's reality.<sup>31</sup> This culturally sensitive approach not only helps migrant workers navigate the challenges of displacement but also reinforces the universal nature of the Church as a home for all. Every language and culture contribute to a richer, more diverse understanding of the Christian message.

The titles of the materials are as follows:

| <i>Mga Aral</i> (Lessons)  | <i>Maikling Paliwanag</i> (Short Description)   |
|--|---|
| <i>Unang Aral: Ang Pagpapadama ng Kagan-dahang-Loob ng Diyos</i> (Experiencing God's Benevolent Love)                  | This theme invites believers to recognize and experience God's unconditional love, a cornerstone of Christian faith that sustains individuals in moments of uncertainty and displacement. |
| <i>Pangalawang Aral: Ang Ginawang Kaloob ng Diyos sa pamamagitan ni Hesus</i> (God's Offer of Salvation through Jesus) | It emphasizes Jesus as the central figure of salvation, offering comfort and hope, especially to those struggling with life's burdens.  |
| <i>Pangatlong Aral: Ang Malasakit ng Diyos sa mga Nagdurusa</i> (God's Compassion for Those Who Suffer)                | This theme reflects God's profound concern for the suffering, resonating with migrant workers facing physical, emotional, and spiritual challenges abroad.                                |

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<sup>31</sup> Vatican II. *Gaudium et Spes: Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, (Vatican City, Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1965).

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| <i>Pang-apat na Aral: Ang Pagsasaloob at Pangangatawan ng Ating Pananampalataya</i> (Embodying Authentic and Faith in God) | This lesson encourages individuals to live out their faith genuinely in everyday life, reflecting the virtues of Christian discipleship, even in unfamiliar and challenging environments.     |
| <i>Panglimang Aral: Mga Paraan Upang Sumigla ang Pananampalataya</i> (Revitalizing and Enlivening Faith in God)            | This theme offers practical ways to keep one's faith vibrant, helping migrants to stay spiritually alive and connected despite being far from their home communities.                         |
| <i>Panganim na Aral: Ang Maganda sa Samahan</i> (Beauty-Oriented Fellowship)   | Focusing on the value of fellowship, this theme underscores the importance of maintaining relationships that nurture spiritual growth and solidarity among migrants, both online and offline. |
| <i>Pang-pitong Aral: Ako, ang Aking Dangal at mga Karapatan</i> (Dignity, Honor, and Rights of the Human Person)           | It stresses the inherent dignity of every individual, encouraging migrants to stand up for their rights and recognize their self-worth in the face of exploitation or abuse.                  |
| <i>Pangwalong Aral: Ang Ating Misyon: Pakikiisa at Pakikipagkapwa</i> (Responding to Our Social Mission)                   | This lesson connects faith to action, inviting believers to participate in social justice, solidarity, and community care, especially as it pertains to the migrant experience                |

Faith becomes a vital anchor for migrants, enabling them to remain resilient amidst their many adversities—such as isolation, homesickness, or unjust working conditions. Many turn to

available online materials to maintain a sense of community with fellow believers and to nourish their spirituality. The digital environment, which connects migrants to their Faith in real time, becomes not just a space for spiritual support but also for sharing stories, offering solace, and building resilience. Many turn to available online materials to maintain a sense of community with their fellow believers and to nourish their spirituality. This digital engagement is essential to the broader vision of synodality, where the Church is present in physical spaces and cyberspace—attentive, listening, and journeying with individuals in their unique circumstances. Indeed, the online sphere offers a new frontier for amplifying traditionally unheard or marginalized voices. The digital Church must transcend the boundaries of clerical hierarchy, recognizing the value of the voices of laypeople, women, youth, and those experiencing distress, such as OFWs. The Church must ensure that its presence in the digital realm is not merely a replication of its hierarchical structures but a true expression of its Synodal mission—walking with and listening to its members, particularly the most vulnerable.

Cyber Churches have emerged in response to diverse challenges, including the alienation felt by some members of traditional faith communities, the unique needs of migrant populations, and the restrictions on physical gatherings imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. These digital spaces provide alternative platforms for worship, fellowship, and spiritual formation, redefining how people experience and participate in religious life. As Heidi Campbell notes, online and offline religious practices exist on a continuum, with offline beliefs, values, and rituals shaping online interactions and expressions of faith.<sup>32</sup> This continuum suggests that the digital Church is not a departure from

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<sup>32</sup> Heidi A. Campbell, "Understanding the Relationship between Religion Online and Offline in a Networked Society," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 80, no. 1 (2012): 64-93. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41348770>.

traditional ecclesial life but an adaptive extension, honoring established traditions while reimagining their application in a virtual context.

Moreover, they engender new dimensions of leadership, authority, and community. Digital spaces decentralize authority, allowing for collaborative leadership and participatory engagement that resonates with diverse, dispersed audiences. Digital communities enable broader participation, empowering the laity to take active roles in ministry and offering them a voice in shaping communal practices. These cyberspaces also facilitate meaningful relationships that transcend geographic and cultural boundaries, fostering a sense of belonging and support among members who might otherwise remain isolated. By embracing digital platforms, the cyber-Church responds creatively to the needs of today's faithful, especially those unable to engage fully in traditional structures due to distance, personal circumstances, or institutional alienation. This digital shift opens new possibilities for a synodal Church—one that listens, engages, and builds community through a blend of online and offline presences, creating a Church that is more inclusive and adaptable to contemporary realities.<sup>33</sup>

### **CHALLENGES OF BECOMING A CYBER CHURCH THAT LISTENS**

Despite its transformative potential, engaging with digital frontiers presents significant challenges. One of the foremost concerns is the digital divide—the uneven access to digital technologies that often leaves the most marginalized without the means to participate. While digital platforms create new pathways for inclusion, they can also reinforce existing inequalities,

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<sup>33</sup> Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium: The Joy of the Gospel*. (Vatican City, Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2021).

excluding those who lack access due to poverty, inadequate infrastructure, or limited digital literacy. The Church must be vigilant in addressing these disparities, ensuring that efforts to foster synodality in the digital realm do not deepen existing social and economic divides.

Another challenge is the risk of superficiality in online interactions. Although digital communication offers immediacy and global reach, it can sometimes fall short of the depth, empathy, and personal connection that face-to-face encounters provide. Virtual spaces may inadvertently create transactional rather than relational experiences, diluting the richness of community life. For the Church, the task is to cultivate a digital presence that fosters meaningful relationships and deepens spiritual engagement, ensuring that these platforms complement, rather than substitute for, embodied community and sacramental life.

A further obstacle is the pervasive rise of misinformation and hostility in digital spaces, which seriously threatens the Church's mission of truth, reconciliation, and peace. The anonymity of the internet can fuel divisive rhetoric, foster misunderstanding, and spread falsehoods. In response, the Church must actively promote an online culture of respect, understanding, and dialogue, shaping digital spaces to become arenas for truth-seeking and mutual respect, aligned with the Gospel's message of unity and love.

While digital platforms offer avenues to foster inclusivity, dialogue, and engagement, they also demand a rethinking of ecclesial structures, authority, and methods of evangelization. As the Church seeks to embody synodality in the digital sphere, it must navigate tensions between online and offline practices, ensuring that virtual spaces supplement rather than supplant embodied communities. Moreover, the Church must critically assess the potential for digital environments to reinforce existing inequalities,

requiring deliberate efforts to prioritize marginalized voices and uphold the principles of communion and mission.

A synodal Church in cyberspace must balance the opportunities of digital platforms with the irreplaceable value of face-to-face interaction. Overreliance on digital means risks creating a disembodied ecclesial experience while neglecting the sacramental and incarnational aspects of the Church's life. The challenge lies in integrating online initiatives with the Church's offline mission to maintain a holistic and inclusive approach to synodality. Likewise, the proliferation of online content risks drowning out meaningful contributions, making it difficult to discern the most important insights and voices in a synodal process. To ensure brevity, it challenges digital platforms to facilitate thoughtful theological and pastoral dialogue.

The Church that listens across and beyond borders necessitates a commitment to authenticity, adaptability, and co-responsibility. This involves embracing technological tools as instruments for spiritual formation, dialogue, and pastoral care while remaining rooted in the sacramental and communal life of the Church. By addressing these challenges with courage and creativity, the Church can fully integrate its synodal identity into the digital age, fostering meaningful connections and evangelizing in an increasingly interconnected world.<sup>34</sup>

## **CONCLUSION**

Using digital space as a Synodal Church underscores the combination of opportunity and responsibility to exemplify the mission of communion, participation, and evangelization using digital space. Through the new avenues for spiritual outreach, the

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<sup>34</sup> Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium: The Joy of the Gospel*, (Vatican City, Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2013), no. 87.



Church can embody its call to be a “field hospital,” offering healing and guidance to those often distanced by geography, social marginalization, or cultural divides.<sup>35</sup> Engaging thoughtfully and compassionately in these spaces allows the Church to foster a connected community where all voices—especially those at the peripheries—are heard and valued. In this way, digital engagement becomes a means of upholding the dignity and worth of each person in alignment with the Church’s mission of universal outreach and solidarity.<sup>36</sup>

This shift toward virtual spaces reflects a pivotal moment in ecclesial life. Faggioli refers to this phenomenon as the “forced virtualization of liturgical space,” a concept highlighting the Church’s need to adapt its ministry and sacramental presence to the online world, especially as physical participation remains limited for many.<sup>37</sup> Similarly, Karl Rahner’s insights into the Church’s evolution suggest that this digital era may be a transitional phase, calling for deeper theological reflection and adaptation.<sup>38</sup> By expanding beyond traditional Western-centric structures, the Church can authentically engage with a globally diverse audience, responding to the distinct experiences of a post-modern world shaped by shifting values, cultural pluralism, and an increasing quest for authenticity and connection.<sup>39</sup>

Applying Campbell’s framework in practice invites the Church to evaluate critically its digital initiatives. Are these tools fostering genuine communion and co-responsibility? Are they

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Yves Congar, *True and False Reform in the Church*. New York: Harper & Row, 1967.

<sup>37</sup> Massimo Faggioli, *Church in a Digital Age: Liturgical and Sacramental Implications*, *Contemporary Catholic Issues*, (2020): 53-69.

<sup>38</sup> Karl, Rahner. *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*. (New York: Crossroad, 1983).

<sup>39</sup> Heidi A. Campbell and Ruth, Tsuria. *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in Digital Media*. (New York: Routledge, 2021).

creating spaces for spiritual accompaniment and discernment? A Synodal Digital Church, informed by Campbell's insights, must navigate these questions thoughtfully, ensuring its digital presence amplifies its mission and embodies its commitment to journeying together as one Body of Christ. By integrating her framework, the Church can transform cyberspace into a vibrant synodal engagement and evangelization locus.<sup>40</sup>

As a Synodal Church, we reflect on how best to use these digital tools to hear and respond to the cries of the poor, the marginalized, and those beyond reach. Digital frontiers are not a separate mission field; they extend the Church's universal call to journey with humanity across every boundary, fostering a more just, loving, and inclusive world. In these virtual spaces, the Church can be a beacon of hope and accompaniment, fulfilling its mission to walk alongside all people as they seek meaning, connection, and spiritual sustenance in an increasingly digital world.

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 128.