

THE POSSIBILITY OF DIGITAL DIOCESES AND ONLINE PARISHES: TOWARDS A DIGITALLY INTEGRATED ECCLESIAL MODEL

Ferdinand Chukwunwike Okigbo

Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University, Igbariam

chinwikeokigbo@yahoo.com

08035817908

Abstract

The rapid expansion of digital technologies has transformed religious communication, worship, community formation, and pastoral engagement, raising important questions about the future of ecclesial structures in contemporary Christianity. While significant scholarship exists on digital religion and online worship, limited attention has been given to the possibility of digital dioceses and online parishes within Catholic ecclesiology. This study examines whether digitally mediated communities can legitimately function as ecclesial jurisdictions and explores the theological, canonical, and pastoral implications of such developments. Using the critical-analytic method, the study engages Catholic ecclesiology, canon law, digital religion scholarship, and selected philosophical perspectives, particularly the works of Heidegger, Feenberg, and Plantinga. The central argument is that neither an uncritical acceptance of fully digital ecclesial structures nor a complete rejection of digital participation adequately addresses contemporary pastoral realities. The study finds that digital communities provide meaningful opportunities for evangelisation, faith formation, pastoral accompaniment, and community building. However, the incarnational, sacramental, communal, and hierarchical dimensions of Catholic ecclesiology place significant limits on proposals for entirely virtual dioceses and parishes. The research therefore proposes the Digitally Integrated Ecclesial Model (DIEM), which understands digital spaces as legitimate environments for ecclesial engagement while remaining accountable to existing sacramental and ecclesiastical structures. The principal contribution of the study is the development of DIEM as an original framework that bridges digital innovation and ecclesial continuity. The study recommends greater theological reflection on digital presence, expanded digital pastoral ministries, and the integration of digital participation into diocesan and parish life without compromising the Church's sacramental identity and ecclesial communion.

Keywords:

Digital Ecclesiology, Digital Dioceses, Online Parishes, Sacramental Ecclesiology, Digitally Integrated Ecclesial Model (DIEM).

Introduction

The relationship between Christianity (Catholic Church) and communication technology has never been static. Throughout history, the Church has adopted emerging technologies- from manuscripts

and the printing press to radio and television- in support of evangelisation and pastoral ministry. The digital age, however, presents a distinctive challenge. Unlike earlier technologies that primarily extended communication, digital technologies increasingly shape the social environments within which people form relationships, construct identities, and participate in communities. Whether good or bad, religion has inevitably become part of this transformation.

Over the last two decades, digital platforms have become important spaces for religious activity. Worship services are livestreamed across continents, prayer groups meet online, and believers engage in theological discussions through social media and other digital platforms. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated this development, compelling churches worldwide to depend in one way or the other on digital technologies for worship and pastoral care. What began as an emergency response has since become a significant feature of contemporary ecclesial life.

These developments have generated growing scholarly interest. Studies in digital religion have explored the impact of online environments on religious authority, identity formation, community building, and ritual participation (Campbell & Tsuria, 2021; Evolvi, 2022). Such studies demonstrate that digital technologies do more than provide new tools for religious practice; they influence how religious life is experienced and organised. Consequently, discussions of digital worship and online ministry have become one of the central themes in contemporary theological reflections.

Despite this growing literature, one important question remains insufficiently explored: can there be digital dioceses or online parishes? While scholars have devoted considerable attention to digital worship and virtual faith communities, less attention has been given to the possibility of digital ecclesial structures. The issue raises fundamental questions about the nature of the Church, ecclesial authority, community, and sacramental life.

Traditionally, Catholic ecclesiology understands dioceses and parishes as stable communities gathered within identifiable territories. Canon 369 defines a diocese as a portion of the People of God entrusted to a bishop, while Canon 515 §1 describes a parish as a stable community entrusted to a parish priest. However, contemporary religious life increasingly transcends geographical boundaries. Many believers participate actively in online communities that extend far beyond their local parishes, challenging traditional assumptions about ecclesial belonging.

Advocates of digital ecclesial structures argue that online communities can foster genuine relationships, facilitate evangelisation, and provide pastoral care across geographical distances. Critics, however, emphasise the incarnational and sacramental character of Christianity. The Church is not simply a network of communication but a visible communion expressed through worship, sacramental participation, and embodied community. Consequently, questions arise concerning whether digital interaction alone can sustain the realities traditionally associated with dioceses and parishes.

This work examines the possibility of digital dioceses and online parishes through a critical engagement with Catholic ecclesiology, canon law, and contemporary scholarship on digital religion. It argues that neither a complete embrace of digital ecclesial structures nor a total rejection of digital innovation adequately addresses contemporary pastoral realities. Instead, it proposes the ***Digitally Integrated Ecclesial Model (DIEM)*** as a framework for incorporating digital

participation into ecclesial life while preserving the Church's sacramental, communal, and hierarchical identity. Ultimately, the debate over digital dioceses and online parishes concerns not merely technology but the future shape of ecclesial life in an increasingly digital world.

Conceptual and Theoretical Foundations

Digital Religion

Digital religion emerged from efforts to understand how contemporary communication technologies are reshaping religious life. Earlier studies often treated religion and technology as separate domains, assuming that religious institutions simply used technological tools to communicate existing beliefs and practices. More recent scholarship has challenged this view by demonstrating that digital technologies increasingly influence how religious identities are formed, communities are sustained, and beliefs are expressed (Campbell & Tsuria, 2021). Zaluchu (2024) argues that the emergence of digital theology reflects broader efforts to reinterpret religious life within a digitally mediated society, indicating that technological change is now a significant theological as well as social concern.

Digital religion therefore refers to more than religion on the internet. It describes the interaction between religious practice and digital culture in a world where believers move constantly between online and offline environments. Religious activities that once occurred primarily within physical spaces now extend into digital networks. Prayer requests are shared through messaging platforms, devotional materials circulate on social media, and worship services reach participants across geographical boundaries.

An important contribution to this discussion is Campbell's concept of "networked religion." According to Campbell and Tsuria (2021), digital environments foster new forms of religious participation characterised by networked communities, shifting authority, convergent practices, and multisite engagement. Religious belonging increasingly occurs within interconnected networks that transcend traditional territorial boundaries.

Digital Ecclesiology

Ecclesiology is the theological study of the nature, mission, and structure of the Church. Digital ecclesiology extends this discussion by examining how digital technologies influence ecclesial life and self-understanding. It asks not merely how the Church uses technology but how technology affects the meaning of community, authority, ministry, participation, and communion.

The emergence of digital ecclesiology reflects the recognition that technological change raises questions that are fundamentally theological rather than merely practical. Online worship, virtual prayer communities, digital pastoral care, and internet-based evangelisation all invite reflection on the nature of ecclesial presence. When believers participate in religious activities through digital platforms, what kind of ecclesial relationship is established? Can digital participation constitute genuine communion, or does it remain dependent upon physical ecclesial structures?

These questions became particularly urgent during the COVID-19 pandemic when churches across the world relied heavily on digital platforms to maintain worship and pastoral communication. For many believers, digital participation became the primary means of ecclesial involvement. This

experience compelled theologians and church leaders to rethink assumptions that had long shaped ecclesial practice.

Digital ecclesiology remains a contested field. Some scholars view digital technologies as opportunities for renewal, inclusion, and expanded participation. Others fear that excessive reliance on digital mediation may weaken the communal and sacramental dimensions of Christian life. The challenge is therefore to determine how the Church can engage digital culture while remaining faithful to its theological identity.

Diocese and Parish in Catholic Ecclesiology

Within Catholic ecclesiology, the diocese is a fundamental expression of the Church's visible structure. The Second Vatican Council describes it as a portion of the People of God entrusted to a bishop who shepherds it in communion with priests, deacons, and the faithful (*Lumen Gentium*, no. 23). A diocese is therefore more than an administrative unit; it is a concrete manifestation of ecclesial life, mission, and communion.

The Code of Canon Law reinforces this understanding. Canon 369 defines a diocese as a portion of the People of God entrusted to a bishop, while Canon 372 generally associates diocesan organisation with territorial boundaries. *Territoriality has historically ensured pastoral accountability, sacramental care, and the stability necessary for ecclesial life to flourish.*

The parish functions within this wider diocesan structure. Canon 515 §1 defines a parish as a stable community of the faithful entrusted to a parish priest under the authority of the diocesan bishop. Traditionally, parishes have also been organised territorially. However, the Church recognises certain exceptions. Canon 518 permits the establishment of personal parishes based on language, nationality, rite, or other pastoral considerations.

These canonical provisions demonstrate that territoriality, although important, has never been absolute. The existence of military ordinariates, personal ordinariates, and ethnic parishes reveals a degree of flexibility within ecclesiastical structures. The question raised by digital culture is whether this flexibility can be extended to communities formed primarily through digital interaction.

Community and Communion in Christian Theology

Any discussion of digital dioceses and online parishes depends largely on how community and communion are understood within Christian theology. The Catholic Church does not view herself merely as a social organisation but as a communion rooted in the life of the Trinity and realised through union with Christ. The Second Vatican Council describes the Church as "a people made one with the unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit" (*Lumen Gentium*, no. 4). Ecclesial communion therefore possesses both spiritual and visible dimensions, encompassing faith, worship, sacraments, and ecclesiastical governance.

Communion involves more than shared beliefs or common interests. According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1992), the unity of the Church is expressed through a common profession of faith, participation in the sacraments, and bonds of charity (nos. 815-816). Christian unity is

therefore both spiritual and communal, finding expression in worship, service, and participation in the visible life of the Church.

The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith further teaches that communion with God is inseparable from communion with the members of the Church and her hierarchical structure (*Communiois Notio*, no. 4). Consequently, the Church exists not simply as a network of relationships but as a sacramental community gathered around Word, Sacrament, and pastoral leadership.

Digital technologies have created new possibilities for interaction that transcend geographical boundaries. Through online platforms, believers can form relationships, exchange spiritual support, and participate in various religious activities. While these developments challenge the assumption that community always requires physical proximity, they also raise questions about whether digital interaction can fully sustain the depth of communion envisioned by Catholic theology, particularly in relation to sacramental participation and embodied ecclesial life.

The crucial issue is therefore not whether digital communities are real, but whether they can *adequately embody the sacramental, visible, and communal dimensions that constitute the Church as communion*.

Theoretical Framework

Networked Religion

Campbell's concept of networked religion provides an important framework for understanding religion in digital culture. Rather than treating online religious activity as separate from traditional religious life, it emphasises how digital technologies create interconnected forms of participation that transcend geographical and institutional boundaries (Campbell & Tsuria, 2021). Believers increasingly engage in religious life across multiple platforms, participating in online prayer groups, following religious leaders on social media, and accessing spiritual resources beyond their local communities.

Networked religion is characterised by features such as networked community, shifting authority, convergent practices, and multisite participation. Religious belonging is therefore no longer confined to a single physical location but is distributed across interconnected spaces.

This framework is significant because it demonstrates that meaningful religious interaction can occur within digital environments. However, it does not fully address questions of sacramental life, ecclesial governance, and pastoral accountability. Participation in a digital network is not necessarily equivalent to membership in an ecclesial community. Consequently, while networked religion helps explain the emergence of digitally mediated religious communities, it cannot by itself determine whether such communities can function as dioceses or parishes.

Communion Ecclesiology

Communion ecclesiology understands the Church primarily as a communion of believers united in Christ. Strongly affirmed by the Second Vatican Council, it presents the Church as both visible and spiritual, institutional and mystical (*Lumen Gentium*, nos. 1-8). Christian communion therefore

involves more than shared beliefs; it is expressed through worship, sacramental life, fellowship, and mutual responsibility.

From this perspective, the key issue is not whether digital technologies can facilitate interaction among believers but whether digital participation alone can sustain the depth of communion associated with ecclesial life. Communion is relational, sacramental, and communal. It requires forms of belonging and participation that extend beyond the exchange of information.

This perspective raises reservations about fully digital dioceses and online parishes. While digital communities may foster meaningful relationships and spiritual growth, communion ecclesiology suggests that ecclesial life ultimately depends on shared worship and communal practices. Nevertheless, digital technologies can support communion through catechesis, pastoral accompaniment, and communication. The challenge is ensuring that digital engagement strengthens rather than replaces ecclesial communion.

Sacramental Ecclesiology

Sacramental ecclesiology views the Church as a visible sign and instrument of God's saving presence in the world. This sacramental identity is expressed most fully through liturgical worship and the celebration of the sacraments, especially the Eucharist. In Catholic theology, sacraments involve material signs- such as water, bread, wine, oil, and bodily actions- through which divine grace is communicated.

This perspective highlights the embodied nature of Christian worship. While digital technologies can transmit information, facilitate communication, and support faith formation, they cannot fully reproduce sacramental presence. A livestreamed Mass may encourage prayer and reflection, but it cannot provide sacramental reception of the Eucharist. Similarly, baptism, reconciliation, and anointing require personal and embodied encounters.

For this reason, sacramental ecclesiology presents one of the strongest objections to fully digital dioceses and online parishes. Nevertheless, it does not reject digital technologies altogether. Online catechesis, pastoral communication, and spiritual support can complement sacramental life and prepare believers for deeper participation in the Church.

Digital Religion and the Transformation of Ecclesial Life

The growth of digital religion has transformed ecclesial life in ways that extend beyond the adoption of new communication technologies. Digital platforms have become spaces where believers worship, learn, communicate, and form communities. As a result, the distinction between online and offline religious life is increasingly blurred, with both realities continually shaping one another. This is a reality the contemporary Catholic Church must face as one of the signs of the time.

Initially, the internet served mainly as a source of religious information through church websites and online resources. Over time, however, digital platforms evolved into interactive environments that enabled participation rather than mere observation. Social media, livestreaming services, messaging applications, and virtual meeting spaces created new opportunities for religious engagement and community formation. Unlike traditional congregations, these communities are

often geographically dispersed and organised around shared beliefs, devotional practices, or spiritual interests. Many believers now participate in virtual prayer groups, online retreats, digital Bible studies, and other forms of religious engagement that transcend territorial boundaries. Campbell (2010) observes that religious communities actively negotiate the adoption of technology in ways that reflect their beliefs and traditions. The growth of digital ministry therefore represents not merely technological adaptation but a process through which ecclesial communities reinterpret their mission within changing cultural conditions.

Digital religion has also expanded access to religious education and evangelisation. Through podcasts, online courses, social media, and livestreams, believers can access theological resources and engage with faith communities across the globe. At the same time, these developments raise concerns regarding authority, accountability, and theological reliability. Digital environments may encourage fragmented forms of participation, weaken traditional structures of oversight, and promote individualised approaches to religious life.

The transformation of ecclesial life through digital religion therefore presents both opportunities and challenges. While digital technologies have expanded access to worship, learning, and community, they have also raised important questions concerning belonging, authority, and ecclesial identity. These questions provide the context within which the debate over digital dioceses and online parishes must be understood.

Arguments in Favour of Digital Dioceses and Online Parishes

1. Digital Community as Genuine Community

One of the strongest arguments for digital dioceses and online parishes is the claim that digital communities can foster genuine human relationships. While early critics viewed online interaction as superficial, contemporary experience suggests otherwise. People now form lasting friendships, support networks, and communities through digital platforms, and religious life has followed a similar pattern.

Digital faith communities often exhibit characteristics traditionally associated with communal life. Members pray together, share spiritual experiences, provide encouragement, and participate in collective activities. For many believers, especially those with limited access to local faith communities, online networks provide meaningful spiritual companionship and support.

Advocates argue that community should not be defined solely by geographical proximity. Throughout history, religious relationships have extended beyond local boundaries through correspondence, pilgrimage, and missionary activity. Digital technologies expand these possibilities. If community is grounded in shared commitment, interaction, and common purpose, then many online religious groups meet these criteria. Consequently, supporters contend that ecclesial structures should adapt to contemporary patterns of association and belonging.

2. Mission and Evangelisation in the Digital Age

A second argument is rooted in the Church's missionary mandate. Throughout history, Christianity has embraced new means of communication to spread the Gospel. From the printing press to radio

and television, technological developments have repeatedly expanded the Church's evangelising mission. Digital technology represents the latest stage in this process.

The Second Vatican Council recognised the importance of modern means of social communication. It affirmed the Church's responsibility to employ them in proclaiming the Gospel and advancing pastoral ministry (*Inter Mirifica*, nos. 2, 3, 13). More recently, Pope Francis (2014) has described the digital environment as a genuine mission territory where people seek meaning, build relationships, and encounter ideas.

Supporters argue that ecclesial structures should reflect these missionary realities. If much of contemporary life now unfolds online, then the Church's pastoral presence should extend into digital spaces. Digital communities frequently unite believers across national and cultural boundaries around shared spiritual interests. In this context, digital parishes or similar structures may be viewed not as a break with tradition but as an extension of the Church's ongoing commitment to evangelisation and pastoral outreach as envisioned in the Church's documents.

3. Canonical Possibilities Beyond Territory

Supporters of digital dioceses often point to existing canonical structures that are not strictly territorial. Although geography remains an important organising principle within Catholic ecclesiology, canon law already provides exceptions. Military ordinariates, personal ordinariates, and personal parishes are examples of ecclesiastical structures organised around groups of persons rather than specific territories.

Canon 372 §2 permits particular Churches to be established on non-territorial grounds when pastoral circumstances warrant such arrangements. At the same time, Canon 518 allows personal parishes based on language, nationality, rite, or other pastoral considerations. These provisions demonstrate that ecclesiastical organisation possesses a degree of flexibility. Advocates therefore argue that digital communities may represent another pastoral reality requiring canonical adaptation. If ecclesiastical jurisdictions can be organised around military service, culture, or liturgical tradition, then digitally connected communities should not be excluded in principle.

4. Accessibility and Inclusion

Accessibility provides another important argument in favour of digital ecclesial structures. Many Christians face obstacles that limit participation in traditional parish life, including illness, disability, geographical isolation, migration, insecurity, and demanding work schedules. As a result, access to regular worship and pastoral care may be restricted. Digital technologies have reduced some of these barriers by enabling participation in worship, faith formation, and pastoral accompaniment through online platforms. For many individuals, digital engagement is not merely convenient but necessary for maintaining a connection with ecclesial life.

This argument is rooted in the Church's commitment to inclusion and pastoral care. Christian ministry has long sought to reach those who find themselves on the margins of religious and social life. Digital structures could extend this mission by supporting believers who remain underserved by traditional territorial arrangements. The argument is especially relevant in mission territories and regions experiencing priest shortages. While digital participation cannot replace sacramental

ministry, it can enhance pastoral presence, promote inclusion, and strengthen connections between believers and the wider Church.

5. Historical Adaptability of Ecclesial Structures

A final argument draws on the Church's history of institutional adaptation. Ecclesiastical structures have never remained completely unchanged. Throughout Christian history, forms of governance, pastoral organisation, and community life have developed in response to changing circumstances. The parish system itself evolved gradually as pastoral needs expanded. This history demonstrates that continuity and adaptation have often existed side by side. While core theological principles remain constant, ecclesial structures have repeatedly been modified to serve the Church's mission more effectively. Supporters of digital dioceses argue that digital culture may represent another moment requiring such adaptation.

From this perspective, proposals for digital dioceses and online parishes should not be dismissed simply because they depart from traditional models. Many structures now considered normal were once innovations. The central question is therefore not whether digital ecclesial structures are new, but whether they can contribute to the Church's mission while remaining faithful to its theological identity.

Arguments against Digital Dioceses and Online Parishes

The proposal for digital dioceses and online parishes is not without significant difficulties. While digital technologies have undoubtedly transformed religious communication and participation, many theologians, canonists, and ecclesiastical leaders remain cautious about extending digital innovation to the level of formal ecclesial structures. Their concerns are not simply technological but theological. At stake is the question of whether digital communities can adequately embody the essential characteristics of ecclesial life.

1. The Incarnational Nature of Christianity

One of the strongest objections to digital dioceses and online parishes arises from the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation. Christianity is founded on the belief that the Word became flesh and dwelt among humanity (Jn 1:14). This affirms the importance of embodied existence and suggests that God's self-revelation occurs through concrete human presence rather than through abstract communication alone. Rahner (1978) emphasises that Christian faith is rooted in the historical and bodily realities through which divine grace is encountered. Irlenborn (2023) similarly identifies authenticity, embodiment, and presence as continuing challenges for online liturgy, arguing that digital worship cannot entirely overcome the tensions created by physical separation.

This incarnational vision shapes the Church's understanding of herself as a visible communion expressed through worship, fellowship, service, and sacramental life. Ratzinger (1996) argues that ecclesial communion cannot be reduced to purely virtual forms of association. John Paul II (2005) similarly emphasised that modern communication technologies should serve human communion rather than replace the interpersonal relationships through which authentic community is formed. While digital technologies facilitate communication and pastoral outreach, they cannot fully reproduce the depth of personal encounter and shared presence that characterise Christian community. Consequently, many theologians maintain that digital platforms may support ecclesial

life but cannot replace the embodied relationships that remain central to Christian identity and communion.

2. Sacramental Realism and the Limits of Digital Worship

A second objection arises from sacramental theology. Catholic tradition understands the Church as a sacramental reality through which God's grace is communicated by means of visible signs. The sacraments involve material elements such as water, bread, wine, oil, spoken words, and bodily actions, making Christian worship fundamentally embodied. As Schillebeeckx (1963) argues, the sacraments are not merely symbolic acts but concrete encounters with divine grace mediated through physical realities.

This sacramental vision places important limits on digital ecclesial structures. While digital technologies can support prayer, catechesis, and spiritual formation, they cannot fully mediate sacramental participation. A livestreamed Mass may foster devotion and reflection, but it cannot provide sacramental reception of the Eucharist. Similarly, the celebration of other sacraments requires forms of personal and bodily encounter that cannot be replicated online.

The Vatican's document *The Church and Internet* (2002) therefore maintains that virtual experiences cannot replace authentic participation in sacramental life. Ratzinger (1996) likewise emphasises that ecclesial communion is inseparable from sacramental worship. Consequently, many theologians maintain that digital engagement may enrich faith, but it cannot substitute for the sacramental encounters that remain central to Catholic ecclesial life.

3. Communion Ecclesiology and Shared Ecclesial Life

A further objection to digital dioceses and online parishes emerges from communion ecclesiology. Catholic theology understands the Church not simply as a collection of individuals but as a communion of believers united in Christ through faith, worship, sacraments, and ecclesial fellowship. The Second Vatican Council presents the Church as a communion whose unity is both visible and spiritual (*Lumen Gentium*, nos. 1-8). Communion therefore involves more than connection; it entails belonging, mutual responsibility, and participation in a shared ecclesial life.

While digital communities can facilitate interaction, support, and collaboration among believers, many theologians caution against equating connectivity with communion. Ratzinger (1996) argues that ecclesial communion is grounded not merely in communication but in participation in the sacramental life of the Church. Similarly, de Lubac (1988) maintains that the Church is constituted through a communion that finds its fullest expression in the Eucharist and shared ecclesial existence.

From this perspective, digital communities may foster meaningful relationships, yet they remain incomplete expressions of ecclesial communion. Dioceses and parishes are more than communication networks; they are communities shaped by worship, sacramental participation, and common pastoral life.

4. Canonical and Juridical Challenges

Canon law presents another obstacle to the establishment of digital dioceses and online parishes. Existing ecclesiastical structures are built upon stable communities entrusted to identifiable authorities. A diocese is entrusted to a bishop (Canon 369), while a parish is entrusted to a parish priest under episcopal authority (Canon 515 §1).

Digital communities complicate these arrangements. Membership is often fluid, voluntary, and constantly changing. Individuals may belong to multiple online communities simultaneously or move between platforms without any formal process of affiliation. Such realities make questions of jurisdiction, accountability, and pastoral responsibility difficult to define.

The challenge therefore extends beyond technological feasibility. It concerns whether digital communities possess the stability required for formal ecclesiastical recognition. Although canon law has shown flexibility through non-territorial structures, applying these principles to digital populations remains uncertain. For this reason, many canonists remain cautious about extending existing juridical models to entirely digital ecclesial communities.

5. Authority, Governance, and Ecclesial Accountability

Questions of authority present another challenge to digital dioceses and online parishes. Digital culture often decentralises authority by giving individuals access to multiple sources of religious teaching and interpretation. While this may encourage participation, it can also weaken structures of accountability.

Within Catholic ecclesiology, authority is more than administration. Bishops and priests exercise responsibilities of teaching, governance, and sacramental ministry within stable pastoral relationships. Ratzinger (1996) emphasises that ecclesial communion is sustained through unity with legitimate ecclesiastical authority, while Avery Dulles (2002) argues that the Church's institutional structure remains essential for preserving order, continuity, and doctrinal integrity.

Critics therefore contend that the fluid nature of digital communities may make pastoral oversight and accountability more difficult to sustain. Digital participation can foster engagement, but it may also encourage individualised forms of religious belonging detached from ecclesial authority. Consequently, digital dioceses risk promoting fragmentation and weakening the communal and hierarchical dimensions that remain central to Catholic ecclesial life.

6. The Risk of Ecclesial Fragmentation

A final concern involves the risk of ecclesial fragmentation. Throughout its history, the Church has sought to preserve unity while embracing cultural, linguistic, and spiritual diversity. De Lubac (1988) argues that the Church is a communion that gathers diverse peoples into one Body of Christ, preventing faith from becoming isolated within particular interests or groups.

Digital culture introduces new challenges to this unity. Online communities often form around specific theological preferences, devotional practices, or charismatic personalities. While such communities may encourage participation and spiritual growth, they can also foster forms of belonging that remain disconnected from the wider ecclesial community. Ratzinger (1996) warns

that Christian communion cannot be reduced to voluntary associations formed around personal preferences but must remain rooted in the unity of the universal Church.

Therefore, digital dioceses and online parishes could unintentionally weaken ties with local churches and sacramental life. For this reason, many theologians maintain that digital technologies should complement existing ecclesial structures rather than replace them. The goal should be integration, ensuring that digital innovation strengthens rather than fragments ecclesial communion.

Critical Evaluation and Synthesis

The debate surrounding digital dioceses and online parishes cannot be resolved through either an uncritical embrace of technology or a complete rejection of digital culture. Both perspectives identify important realities of contemporary ecclesial life. On the one hand, digital technologies have transformed communication, community formation, catechesis, and pastoral engagement. On the other hand, the Church remains a sacramental communion grounded in worship, embodied relationships, and ecclesial authority.

Proponents of digital ecclesial structures rightly observe that digital communities have become significant spaces of religious participation. Millions of believers receive spiritual guidance, engage in prayer, access religious education, and maintain ecclesial relationships through digital platforms. For many people affected by illness, migration, disability, or geographical isolation, digital participation is no longer optional but an essential aspect of religious life. Ignoring these developments risks creating an ecclesiology disconnected from contemporary pastoral realities.

Nevertheless, the strongest critiques remind us that the Church cannot be reduced to a communication network. De Lubac (1988) argues that the Church is a communion brought into being through participation in Christ, while Ratzinger (1996) emphasises that ecclesial unity is sustained through sacramental life and visible communion. Schillebeeckx (1963) similarly maintains that Christian faith is mediated through concrete and embodied realities. From this perspective, digital interaction can support ecclesial life but cannot fully replace sacramental participation, communal worship, or pastoral presence.

The limitations of existing scholarship become evident at this point. Campbell's theory of networked religion explains how digital technologies reshape community and authority, while Evolvi's work highlights the role of digital environments in contemporary religious experience. However, these approaches remain largely descriptive. Heidegger (1977) reminds us that technology is not merely an instrument but a way of revealing reality that shapes how human beings encounter and interpret the world. Applied to ecclesial life, this suggests that digital environments do more than facilitate participation; they influence the very conditions under which community, authority, and belonging are experienced.

A similar limitation appears in discussions of religious knowledge. Plantinga's (2000) theory of warranted belief argues that beliefs are justified when formed within appropriate epistemic environments. This insight raises an important question for digital ecclesiology: can digitally mediated environments provide the conditions necessary for the formation and sustenance of mature Christian faith? The issue is no longer simply whether believers can access religious

content online but whether digital participation can nurture the forms of understanding and communion central to ecclesial life.

A more balanced approach is therefore required. Such an approach must acknowledge the pastoral significance of digital participation while preserving the Church's sacramental, communal, and hierarchical identity. The challenge is not whether the Church should engage digital culture, but how digital engagement can be integrated into ecclesial life without undermining its theological foundations. This points towards a middle position that rejects both fully virtual ecclesial structures and the dismissal of digital participation. It is from this need for integration rather than replacement that the present research proposes the ***Digitally Integrated Ecclesial Model*** (DIEM) as a constructive framework for engaging the opportunities and limitations of contemporary digital culture.

Beyond Existing Frameworks: Towards a More Adequate Understanding of Digital Ecclesial Life

While the contributions of Campbell, communion ecclesiology, and canon law remain indispensable, each reveals important limitations when applied to digital ecclesial life.

Campbell's theory of networked religion provides valuable insight into how digital technologies reshape religious participation, authority, and community. However, the framework remains largely sociological. It explains how religious communities function in digital environments but offers limited guidance on whether such communities can sustain the forms of communion, sacramentality, and belonging central to Catholic ecclesiology. As a result, the ecclesial status of digitally mediated communities remains unresolved.

A similar limitation appears in communion ecclesiology. By emphasising sacramental communion, embodied participation, and visible unity, it safeguards the Church from being reduced to a communication network. Nevertheless, it often assumes forms of community rooted primarily in stable territorial settings. In an age where believers participate simultaneously in physical and digital communities, communion ecclesiology provides important theological principles. However, it offers less clarity on how these principles should be expressed within technologically mediated environments.

Canon law faces a related challenge. Existing ecclesiastical structures were largely developed within territorial frameworks where membership, jurisdiction, and pastoral responsibility were closely tied to geography. Although canon law allows certain non-territorial arrangements, it has not fully addressed communities formed primarily through digital interaction. The issue is not a lack of flexibility but the emergence of new forms of association that traditional juridical categories were not designed to accommodate.

These limitations suggest that digital ecclesiology requires more than sociological description, theological preservation, or canonical adaptation considered separately. What is needed is an integrative framework capable of bringing together technological change, ecclesial communion, sacramental life, and institutional accountability. It is this gap that the Digitally Integrated Ecclesial Model (DIEM) seeks to address.

The Digitally Integrated Ecclesial Model (DIEM): An Original Proposal

The debate over digital dioceses and online parishes is often presented as a choice between two extremes. One position views digital technology as creating the possibility of entirely virtual ecclesial structures, while the other regards digital participation as merely supplementary to "real" church life. Both perspectives contain elements of truth, yet neither adequately reflects the realities of contemporary religious experience. This study therefore proposes the Digitally Integrated Ecclesial Model (DIEM) as a middle path that combines technological innovation with ecclesial continuity.

DIEM begins with the recognition that digital culture has become a permanent feature of contemporary life. Believers increasingly learn, communicate, form relationships, and practice their faith within digital environments. However, as Feenberg (2002) argues, technology is not an autonomous force that determines human behaviour. Rather, technological systems are continually shaped by the values, priorities, and practices of the communities that use them. Applied to ecclesial life, this means that digital technologies should not be allowed to redefine the Church's identity; instead, they should be shaped by the Church's theological mission and pastoral responsibilities.

The first principle of DIEM is *ecclesial continuity*. Digital communities should strengthen rather than replace dioceses and parishes. The local Church remains the primary context of Christian life because it provides the sacramental, pastoral, and canonical structures through which believers participate in ecclesial communion. Digital ministries therefore function as extensions of existing ecclesial communities rather than independent jurisdictions.

A second principle is *sacramental centrality*. Catholic theologians such as de Lubac (1988), Ratzinger (1996), and Schillebeeckx (1963) emphasise that Christian life is fundamentally sacramental and embodied. While digital platforms can support prayer, catechesis, evangelisation, and pastoral communication, they cannot replace sacramental encounters. The Eucharist, baptism, reconciliation, and other sacraments continue to require forms of embodied participation that remain central to ecclesial identity.

The third principle is *digital pastoral presence*. Many aspects of ministry can be effectively carried out through digital means. Online catechesis, virtual prayer groups, livestreamed liturgies, spiritual accompaniment, and digital evangelisation can expand pastoral outreach and strengthen community life. In this sense, digital technologies become instruments of pastoral care without replacing the physical and sacramental dimensions of ecclesial existence.

A fourth principle is *hierarchical accountability*. Digital ministries and online communities must remain connected to legitimate ecclesiastical authority. Bishops and priests continue to exercise responsibilities of teaching, governance, and pastoral leadership within both physical and digital contexts. This prevents the emergence of parallel structures of authority detached from the wider life of the Church.

Finally, DIEM recognises the reality of *networked participation*. Contemporary Catholics often belong to multiple religious networks while remaining members of a local Church. Digital

engagement can enrich faith and foster wider participation, but it should complement rather than replace ecclesial belonging.

The strength of DIEM lies in its balance. It acknowledges the opportunities created by digital culture while preserving the Church's sacramental, communal, and hierarchical identity. Consistent with Feenberg's insight that technologies should be shaped by human values rather than allowed to shape them uncritically, DIEM proposes a model in which digital participation is integrated into existing ecclesial structures and directed toward the service of Christian communion and mission.

Future Directions for Ecclesial Digitalisation

The future of ecclesial digitalisation raises important questions about the relationship between the Church and digital culture. Digital technologies increasingly shape worship, community life, pastoral ministry, and faith formation, making their influence on ecclesial life unavoidable. The challenge is therefore not whether the Church should engage digital culture, but how such engagement can remain faithful to its mission and identity.

Digital pastoral ministry, online catechesis, and virtual faith communities have expanded access to religious formation and pastoral care, particularly for those affected by illness, migration, disability, or geographical isolation. Emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence may further enhance communication and administration, but they cannot replace the human dimensions of pastoral care, spiritual discernment, and sacramental ministry. As Pope Francis (2024) notes, technology must remain at the service of human wisdom and authentic relationships.

At a deeper level, ecclesial digitalisation raises questions about presence, communion, identity, and belonging in a networked world. The future is unlikely to belong either to entirely virtual churches or exclusively physical forms of ecclesial life. Rather, it will require a thoughtful integration of digital engagement and embodied communion, ensuring that technology strengthens rather than replaces the sacramental and communal foundations of the Church.

Conclusion

The rise of digital culture has raised important questions about the nature of ecclesial life, community, and Church structures. Digital technologies have expanded opportunities for worship, evangelisation, faith formation, and pastoral engagement, enabling believers to participate in religious life beyond traditional geographical boundaries. These developments have prompted renewed discussion about the possibility of digital dioceses and online parishes.

This study has shown that the issue cannot be resolved through either uncritical acceptance or outright rejection. While digital communities offer significant pastoral benefits, including accessibility, missionary outreach, and new forms of participation, important theological concerns remain. Incarnational theology, sacramental realism, communion ecclesiology, and canon law all suggest that ecclesial life cannot be fully transferred into digital space without losing essential dimensions of Christian identity.

The principal contribution of this work is the proposal of the *Digitally Integrated Ecclesial Model* (DIEM). Rather than advocating fully digital dioceses or virtual parishes, DIEM proposes

integrating digital participation within existing ecclesial structures. Digital platforms can serve as valuable spaces for catechesis, evangelisation, pastoral accompaniment, and community-building, while remaining connected to the sacramental, territorial, and hierarchical realities of the Church.

Ultimately, the future of ecclesial life will include an increasingly digital dimension, but the Church cannot become a purely virtual reality. The challenge is to integrate technological innovation with the enduring principles of Christian communion, sacramentality, and pastoral responsibility. In this way, digital technologies can enhance the Church's mission without displacing the embodied and communal foundations upon which ecclesial life continues to rest.

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