

## **Marketing Communication of the Catholic Church – a Sign of the Times or Profanation of the Sacred?**

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### *Abstract:*

The Catholic Church – though in popular opinion it is sometimes treated as a stronghold of conservatism, traditionalism, suspicion of progress and novelty, it changed significantly in the second half of the 20th century and continues to change its attitudes, especially in terms of the use of social communication and attitude to the media mass. The Church's growing openness to media relations and the use of a rich instrumentation of social communication has become one of the reasons for the growing popularity of market orientation among the clergy and active believers, which opens opportunities for the development of the concept of a specific sectoral marketing formula of church marketing. In this article the authors search for the causes of the progressive phenomenon of the marketization of religion, present examples of the activities of the Polish Catholic church, inscribed in the church marketing trend, as well as define the negative consequences resulting from its dissemination. The applied research method is based on the literature analysis and case studies analysis.

*Keywords:* Church marketing, marketing communication, Catholic Church.

## **1. Introduction**

The reform of the Second Vatican Council greatly changed the attitude of the Church to the surrounding reality, opened it to changes and accepted a number of activities that had not been approved by the Holy See and church hierarchs until then. Since the Second Vatican Council there has been a dynamic transformation of the Church supported by an ever greater openness to the world of progress and adaptation to the conditions in which its believers live. The Second Vatican Council is indicated as one of the key events that influenced the change of the Catholic Church's

attitude towards mass media and the acceptance of an attitude of openness towards the public. However, its initial experiences did not fully confirm the pastoral character and openness to the world, as evidenced by the requirement of secrecy by the Council fathers and complaints by journalists and even bishops about too scant information from the Council's Press Office [13, p. 108].

## **2. Media Evolution and the Internet Revolution in the Church**

There are many indications that the Internet, the IT revolution and social transformations leading to the emergence and consolidation of the knowledge society will have an even stronger impact on the dynamics of these transformations. The Internet soon lost the privilege of describing it as a new medium, it became popular and reached almost all kinds of human activity. The expanding virtualization of reality where a modern man lives has even entered the subtle corners of spirituality and faith. The argument confirming the revolutionary and innovativeness of the Internet's influence is, among other things, the fact that the Church uses its possibilities which, it might seem, remained immune to its influence for the longest time due to its traditionalism and deeply rooted conservatism of functioning. Józef Kloch, who draws attention to it, writes that

at first glance, modern technologies and more than two-thousand-year-old religious community do not match each other. However, if one looks closely, it is possible to see many points of contact – from the use of the Web in the fulfillment of the Church's mission, to ethical and moral principles, forming a solid axiological foundation for Internet users [10, p. 11].

Meanwhile, the engine of many changes in the Church, leading also to the development of a specific form of sectoral marketing, which is church marketing, is the Internet with new information technologies, more effective and more professional use of mass media in missionary activity and the adoption of a specific market orientation – specific, but nevertheless, it is oriented towards the needs, desires, habits and preferences of the believer [6, pp. 47-59]. The road to the effective use of mass communication and evangelization based on mass communication, with the time also using marketing techniques and tools, was long and free of resistance within the Church. The nineteenth-century birth of mass media, related to the development of printing technology and the emergence of high-circulation press, including the daily press, met with great resistance and even opposition from the Church. The first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was the rejection by the Catholic Church of the freedom of the press through open criticism of articles and the content contained in newspapers polemicizing the Church's teaching, presenting different views and spreading different doctrines. Deprived of the effects of the struggle against the press, in the mid-nineteenth century, the Church took over the methods of its former ideological opponents. In 1861 the first issue of “L'Osservatore Romano” appeared, and in 1884 the first Polish Catholic magazine – “Przegląd Powszechny” was published. After some time, more and more Catholic titles appeared, mainly due to the support of Pope Leo XIII, a keen advocate of using the press to propagate Christian values. It took the Church almost half a century to accept the press, it took a little time to “get accustomed” to the cinema. Initial distrust was so great that from 1918 the ban on visiting cinemas and watching films by the clergy was in force for over ten years. The rapid development of mass communication media in the twentieth century forced the acceleration of activities related to the response and acceptance of the presence of radio and television in the social life of the Church. In 1925 conceptual work began on the launch of Vatican Radio, which began broadcasting in February 1931, in a short time becoming an important tool for the communication of the Pope and the Church with the world. Currently, Vatican Radio broadcasts its programs in over thirty languages using still traditional radio waves, as well as satellite platforms and the Internet.

In 1957 an encyclical dedicated to the mass media appeared, and as a result of the above mentioned works of the Second Vatican Council a decree was made about means of social

transmission of thought, which are the first church document of this rank defining the Church's attitude to the development of communication methods and evolving mass media. The importance of the Church at the time when the media influenced the society was confirmed by the fact that in 1964 the Pontifical Council for Social Communications was established, which was entrusted with the post-conciliar continuation of the mission of observing the development of mass media and using them in evangelization. Three years later for the first time the World Communications Day was celebrated and later on it was continued annually. The following years are the increasingly violent evolution of the media and the attempts of the Church to adapt to the changing reality. In addition to the development of the Catholic press, more and more Catholic radio and television stations are being created, and Christian cinematography is also growing rapidly [15]. The attitude of the Catholic Church to the mass media is revolutionizing the teaching of John Paul II [12], while in Poland the primate Stefan Wyszyński initiates his reflections on the relations of the Church with the means of mass communication [23].

The birth and development of pop culture at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century led, in a short time, to its entry into churches. Father Marcel Rossi, a Brazilian priest evangelizing in an unconventional way, drawing patterns from pop culture, claims that if Christ lived today, he would be a media star. Rossi adds that only by speaking in the language of pop culture the modern Church is able to reach young people and promote its evangelizing work. Polish priests follow his example by implementing activities that are part of the church marketing area, confirming that reaching young people who are the future of the Church is possible only by using their language and entering their world [8]. Perhaps that is why the Church, despite its stereotypical traditionalism and abstinence towards novelty and progress, in a relatively short time broke the barrier of access to the Internet and its use in the work of evangelization. What took fifty years in the case of the press, cinema, radio and television – a dozen or so, in the case of the Internet and new media was realized in a much shorter time.

### **3. Marketing in the Church – the Requirement of Contemporary Times**

Considerations regarding the attitude of the Catholic Church to mass media and the use of marketing methods of building relationships with the believer should be confronted with experiences in this area of other Christian churches and other religions. In the United States and some Western European countries, mainly Protestant ones, a few decades ago a new area of marketing activity emerged which was related to faith, religion, church functioning and parish activities. The terms *church marketing* and *religious marketing* still sound like blasphemy in Polish reality, although they have become a fact and are implemented in practice, even if they are not so. Meanwhile, in countries where Protestantism dominates among Christian religions, church marketing (German *Kirchenmarketing*) is treated as one of many sectoral marketing concepts, allowing the development of missionary activities, strengthening the relationship between the clergy and the believer, reflecting the social expectations of people believers, and thus creating opportunities to limit the progressive secularization of societies. Also in Poland, Protestant clerics seem to better understand the essence of market orientation and the possibility of using strategies and marketing tools for evangelization purposes. This results from several reasons, from the natural adaptation of activities already used in Protestant churches around the world, through the very nature of Protestantism [21], to an important factor in the Polish reality – the need to intensify loud and media marketing and promotional impacts that give the opportunity to exist in the country dominated by the “monopoly” of Catholicism. This area of activity has already been quite well known and described in American conditions and has received a significant number of scientific publications and practical guides for the clergy. In Polish conditions, however, it is still a novelty, while in the sphere of research and scientific observation it is a total *terra incognita*. The reasons for this state of affairs should be sought in the sphere of manners and on the side of the conservative character of a significant part of the Polish clergy, as well as the believer. The treatment of God, faith and religion in terms of marketing is still not fitting, constituting an unwelcome confusion of

*sacrum* and *profanum*. Meanwhile, the Church is doomed to promote its activity and is increasingly aware of it. It is the duty of the Church to spread the Good News, to teach about God, to convince unbelievers and to strengthen believers in faith – basically based on information, persuasion and communication, which in essence means using promotional techniques and tools characteristic of marketing communication. Effective fulfillment of these obligations is increasingly difficult in the modern world without using the achievements of marketing, its strategies and techniques.

Church marketing, treated as one of the areas of sectoral marketing, has its specificity, which in an incomparably greater way than in any other area distinguishes it from general marketing. However, it has some features in common with it, causing that using the term *church marketing* makes sense. Apart from the simplified visions of strict church relations with marketing, such as those formulated by Bruno Ballardini, it should be recognized that within the Church there is a place for marketing. Treating the Church as a corporation, God and faith – as a product, religion and its rituals as a product service [1] is exaggerated (probably premeditated), and the claim that the Church *de facto* created marketing exaggeratedly simplified, if not even crude. Nevertheless, it is possible to indicate the factors enabling defining and describing church marketing. First of all, one can indicate readable products present within it. Even if we call them ministries, their character indicates similarity to services, and therefore enters church marketing in the sphere of service marketing. Both masses and other services or the administration of sacraments meet in principle the criteria specific to the product-service involved in the marketing of services. They are intangible, inseparable, diverse, cannot be stored, and thus fit into the Kotler's definition of service marketing as a specific marketing approach to exchange, as intangible and not leading to any action property that one side can offer to another [11, pp. 426-434]. The Church's marketing activity, however, is not limited to the market-oriented management of a range of services provided, but also concerns the shaping and promotion of the image of the Church as an organization. From this point of view, this activity can be comparable to the standards developed by institutions and associations within the marketing of non-profit organizations.

The starting point for treating the Church's activities from a marketing perspective are, of course, human needs – in this case related to the needs of faith in God, the sense of human existence and presence on earth, faith in the afterlife and the fact that death is a term, but only temporal. The diversity of religious doctrines, the multiplicity of denominations and churches is in its own way a competitive range of possibilities that a person can use to satisfy their spiritual needs, and thus there is a market, a free choice and competitive competition. The market is also present within a particular denomination, because the believers usually have at their disposal a multitude of "offers" shaped by particular parishes more or less distant from their place of residence. The specific formula of the exchange on which Church marketing is based can be treated through the prism of the voluntary donations of the believers, but one cannot forget that even by rejecting this mechanism, it remains possible to consider exchange in spiritual categories. The Church satisfies the religious needs of people and even without paying for it, treating them as voluntary, requires them to pay a spiritual payment – an attitude based on participation in religious practices and compliance with the orders and prohibitions resulting from religious doctrine. The concept of marketing mix in relation to church marketing may coincide with the classic 4P model. The product in this case are church services (ministries), but also religious products (candles, wafers, rosaries and other devotional articles), religious magazines and books, as well as preaching homilies (retreats), pastoral visits in the homes of the believers, visiting the sick. The price factor is present – largely discretionary and voluntary, for certain products – specifically defined. The distribution of church services may take on a diverse character, thanks to which the presence of specific distribution channels within church marketing may be determined. The structure of distribution understood in this way is determined by the geographical and territorial structure of the institutionalized church, but one can also point to modern distribution methods related to the use of traditional mass media (radio and television broadcasts of mass) or the Internet. The promotional element of the church marketing mix may be, as in other forms of marketing, extremely rich and diverse. Personal tools (personal contact, opinion leaders, *word-of-mouth* communication) and

impersonal (advertising media, cooperation with mass media, the Internet), organization of events and special actions create enormous possibilities, depending on the needs and commitment of the implementers. The development of church marketing has several causes. The most important of them are undoubtedly:

- development of new communication technologies, forcing a change in the way of evangelization and adapting it to the expectations and habits of the believers;
- changing the lifestyle of the believers, forcing the Church to adapt to some of its aspects;
- economizing an increasing part of social life;
- religious competition between religions, movements and religious associations;
- competition for the believers between particular parishes (churches) within a given denomination;
- social expansion of marketing and perceiving the benefits of adapting general marketing solutions in various areas of social life;
- secularization of societies.

Especially the last of these factors contributes to the growing importance of church marketing. The loss of the believers, devastating churches and the decreasing number of vocations are a real problem in many countries, which the church hierarchs and the clergy try to face. Their adoption of market orientation and the related use of marketing techniques for better institutional church management become a necessity and hope for many to improve the deteriorating situation. Church marketing, especially in the Catholic Church, has, however, a large group of opponents pointing to the adverse effects of its use, resulting in the desacralization of God and religion and further weakening faith among the believers. George Barna, one of the advocates and promoters of the concept of political marketing in the United States treats the adoption of marketing vision of church management as the only one that can restore the strong competitive position of faith, religion and the Church in competition with secular elements of culture. Back in the nineties he claimed that the loss of the Church's influence on society can only be reversed by changes in the factors that shape the church's marketing mix. It is, therefore, about raising the quality of the product (services), strengthening price competitiveness by optimizing the time of the believers, as well as improving the distribution and promotion of the church offer, especially thanks to the use of techniques and tools used by modern Christians, that is the media they are vulnerable to and from and which they willingly use [2, pp. 44, 47, 60]. As the author of one of the most frequently quoted church marketing definitions in the United States, Barna describes it as the implementation of pastoral and business tasks directed at target groups – the believers, serving their spiritual, social, emotional and physical needs, while meeting the Church's pastoral goals [3, p. 41]. Church popularizers in the United States treat it as a way to ensure the growth of the Church's importance in the US. His contemporary goal is to transform the old model of religiosity, developed and cultivated by past generations, into religious practice – dynamic, exciting, fulfilling life and constituting a form of entertainment. Thanks to church marketing, it would replace the socially rejected, doctrine – boring and overly moralizing formula of religiosity, satisfying the spiritual needs of Christians and leading to religious stimulation and a new wave of Christianisation [22, p. 31]. In the subject literature, one can also find attempts to explain the essence of the concept of church marketing in the market character of parishes and religious places, according to which churches play the role of specific service agencies. Norman Shawchuck et al. [17, p. 31] even argue that religious organizations, parishes and churches exist to respond to the needs of their members and social needs, and make every effort to recognize and meet the needs and desires of the believers, and also serve them within their own budget limits. The market-based concept of faith and religion and the church marketing that is understood in this way seem to be in exaggeratedly liberal, modern and too bold theories in Polish conditions. We did not use to think in this way about the functioning of the Church, the activities of the parish and the activity of the clergy. Because the Catholic doctrine assumes that the Church is made up of its believers, who should care for its greatness and development, it is difficult to accept the claim that the only task of the Church is to recognize spiritual needs, satisfy them, adore the believers and constantly compete for their interest with religious and secular alternative social activities. However, it does not change the fact that, just as Jesus and the apostles evangelized

using various social communication techniques, although they did not call it marketing, so today's Church (also in Poland), even if it defends itself against using the marketing-like nomenclature, has significantly developed its skills in marketing.

The presence of marketing in the Church's activity can also be derived from the well-known economic theory of religion of Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge. They introduced the economic paradigm to the theory of religion, resulting in a completely different view of the sphere of religion and religious movements from the previous ones. The church is treated by them as a religious organization, a social enterprise whose primary purpose is to create, maintain and exchange general compensators with supernatural provenance. According to the authors, human action in every sphere, also within religion and spirituality, is based on a rational search for rewards and avoidance of penalties. People try to look for optimal – favorable exchange rates, based on the excess of prizes over costs. In the absence of real prizes, they are able to accept their promises for the future, and thus compensators. Compensators are, therefore, announcements of the prize, presented to people based on explanations that are not subject to unambiguous evaluation [20, p. 195]. Since religions, churches and religious movements function today in conditions of religious freedom and religious tolerance, there are secularization processes in societies understood as the loss of power over the believers by religious organizations, which leads to the transformation of traditional and ineffective institutions, reduces their social significance and creates access conditions to the religious market of new religious movements [20, p. 148]. The factors conducive to the development of competition on the religious market are: progressive secularization, as well as observable processes of individualization (privatization) of religion, weakening its public representation and institutional context, conditioning the existence of religious communities. This phenomenon takes into account the concept of "invisible religion" by Thomas Luckmann, stressing the depreciation of church religiosity, "shaped in conditions in which Christian churches lose their" interpretive monopoly and temporal systems of meaning interpretation take their place" [14, p. 191]. This situation enables the dynamics of religious life, allows creative adaptation of religious organizations' offerings to the religious needs of consumers, stimulates and creates conditions for natural competition where the better win, and the weaker are doomed to lose [18]. The phenomenon of growing competitiveness within religion favors the tendency to use marketing tools that enable building a specific competitive advantage and market position by religious organizations. The competitiveness of religion is a derivative of the progressive secularization of the contemporary world. As Jörg Splett observes, "Christians are not only between them – the religious panorama extends widely, from the great Churches to the so-called Churches «free» and sects (...).

Ecological, scientific, alternative medicine, psychological, feminist, occult and satanic trends appear [19, p. 9]. In the face of the presented concepts, it is possible to state that in the modern world we are dealing with a specific religious market in which people become consumers of religious content. The features of this market – its freedom and pluralism cause that these consumers in the sphere of faith and religion become similar to the consumers of traditional consumer goods and look for the corresponding combination of factors that fit their values, thus achieving a state of satisfaction associated with satisfying needs and desires and maximizing the benefits obtained. This way of treating religion, although probably difficult to accept for many people, occupies an important place in the contemporary sociology of religion, while opening, as already mentioned, the possibility of developing the theory of church marketing.

#### **4. Marketing in the Church – a Threat to the Church**

Marketing means commercialization of activities and progressive consumerism among its recipients, even in areas where these phenomena are not obvious. Probably the greatest doubts may arise from the effects of church marketing. Apart from doctrinal ethical concerns regarding the marketing of faith and religion, doubts arise as to how marketing can affect the future of the Church. One can risk the thesis that the coming years will be more and more difficult for the Church in Poland and it will be difficult to stop the trend of the believers departing and the decline

in the quantitative ratios. It seems, however, that the Church's growing concern for detaining believers, manifesting themselves in caring for their spiritual needs (and thus *de facto* adopting a market orientation and marketing way of thinking) may result in closer ties with the Church by those who will not turn away from it. Thus, church marketing can strengthen the mechanism of positive qualitative changes in the religious sphere of the Poles [5, pp. 222-226]. In 2016, the Institute of Statistics of the Catholic Church published data on the religiousness of Catholics in Poland, also comparing them with earlier results of research conducted in 1980. Analyzing statistical data, it is impossible not to notice significant changes regarding the Poles' attitude towards faith and the changing model of Polish religiosity. Its ratio can be measured by the percentage of so-called *dominicanos*, i.e. the believers who regularly participate in the Sunday mass, and *comunicantes* - who attend the Holy Communion. The comparison of the values of both coefficients and the analysis of their trends show the contemporary tendencies of the changing religious life in Poland and lead to interesting conclusions. The percentage of *dominicanos* in 1980 was 51%. It grew rapidly during martial law (up to almost 60 percent), after which it systematically started to fall, in 2006 it reached the level of 45 percent, and in 2016 - 36.7 percent. In the same period, the percentage of *comunicantes* increased from 7,8% up to 16,0 percent. This means that fewer and fewer of the believers go to church every year, but among those who attend masses, the percentage of those joining Communion has steadily increased, which has doubled in the last 35 years. It can be said that sooner or later the Church will have to face the already visible crisis related to the decreasing number of the believers but this crisis is in a way offset by the growing awareness and zeal of faith of those who have not turned their backs on the Church. The church loses its mass character quantitatively, but it gains the "quality" of the believers. It seems that the application of marketing in these circumstances may play a double role from the point of view of the Church. First of all, the use of marketing strategies can be used to popularize the activities of the Church, which together with image-related activities is aimed at regaining the lost believers and acquiring new ones. In this way, it would be possible to determine the quantitative goals of church marketing. However, the goals relating to the study of the needs of believers and attempts to meet their expectations by religious congregations seem to be much more interesting. Thanks to marketing, it would be possible to stimulate the activity of the believers, better match the Church's offer with their needs, desires and postulates, which can significantly strengthen their relationship with the Church. Therefore, the quality goals of church marketing are also important. Of course, the growing percentage of *comunicantes* is not the result of fledgling church marketing – this phenomenon began much earlier than the teaching of marketing began to go to seminaries, and representatives of the clergy began to talk about the need for the Church to meet the challenges of modern times, also articulated as the needs and desires of the believers. The reasons for this phenomenon should be sought somewhere else – in the changing political and economic situation, on the side of globalization and its consequences, or the development of new technologies, changing the existing system of relationships and interpersonal interactions. Church marketing, however, can significantly contribute to a further increase in the proportion of ardent members of the Church, even in the face of disadvantageous quantitative statistics. Church marketing can be an idea for saving statistics, clearly showing the weakening religious commitment of Poles. Thus, marketing enters the Church, which until now has been deprived of promotion in the modern media sense, apparently ceases to cope without it. This does not mean that developing the concept of church marketing does not have negative consequences. Like every sectoral marketing, also church marketing, it is an adaptation of business marketing. The mere presence of marketing and business terminology within the faith, religion and the Church may raise serious doubts. The simplified treatment of faith and God as a commodity, and the Church as a service provider for many is an unacceptable desecration and distortion of the essence of religion. The use of marketing tools encouraging the society to more frequent and more conscious contacts with the Church may result in stopping the downward trend in the *dominicanos* percentage. The promotion of faith, God and the Church, its openness to modern techniques of communicating with the public can actually encourage participation in shared religious experiences. However, can they also have a positive effect on the *comunicantes* ratio?

The question is justified because the marketing concept of promoting religion may be unacceptable to conservative believers who, because of their awareness of faith and their zeal, are an important, valuable and lasting part of the Church, drawing its strength from dogmatic attachment to tradition and conservatism views. A strategic decision on how to use church marketing techniques to stimulate the number of believers may, therefore, require an assessment of whether the church depends on the total number of believers, or at the depth of their faith and a strong relationship with the Church. Its undertaking and implementation will probably require finding a specific optimum, which is the golden mean between quantity and quality. There is no doubt, however, that entering commercially-oriented marketing into the sphere of ideas is one of the reasons for the deideologization of social life, its progressive secularization. Church marketing, transferring the market rules of functioning in the world of economics and business to the ground of religion can have a significant, but ambiguous and difficult to predict impact on the religious life of society and the functioning of the Church. There is no doubt, however, that the commercialization of an increasing part of social life, including the sphere of religion, has become a characteristic feature of modern civilization and seems to be a progressive phenomenon. Faith and religion for a long time seemed to be an insurmountable barrier to this process, but today they are crossing the border more and more often. In a country where church marketing was created and develops fastest – the United States, these tendencies are perceptible most strongly and clearly. Georg Ritzer in his study on consumption points to mega-churches as a kind of temples of consumption – huge buildings of steel and glass, with hectares of parking, the most original equipped with bowling and psychological counseling, conducting aerobics classes and multimedia lessons of biblical knowledge, where on Sundays at large screens show verses from the Bible and texts of religious songs in the style of pop, that all believers see them [16, p. 47]. *Macdonaldization* or *walmartization* of religion are just some of the terms that occur when assessing such phenomena, which undoubtedly constitute a negative effect of the development of church marketing. Of course, the examples mentioned most often refer to Protestant denominations and cannot be a direct reference point for the Catholic Church in Europe or South America, but they show the potential directions of marketing interactions related to the functioning of church institutions and religious organizations.

The increasing scale of marketing impacts of the Church seems to be a consequence of the growing competition for the believers related to the creation and expansion of new religious movements and sects. Their number creates the basis for the functioning of a specific religious market where the functioning entities try to attract the attention and interest of possibly the largest communities using for this purpose various strategies, techniques and means of communication. These new religious movements are particularly easy to use the wealth of marketing instruments. According to Peter Ludwig Berger, many religious organizations are essentially like market agencies as their activity is dominated by the logic of market economics, and their offer is a specific counterpart of consumer goods [4, p. 186]. New religious movements and sects may constitute a catalyst in the diffusion of marketing management principles in the sphere of functioning of Christian churches. As Hanna Karp notes, new religious movements propagate their own learning and “logo” in various ways: the open parties organized by them are kept in a popular form and calculated as a mass participant, and they are perfectly able to respond to the needs of the market, religious pluralism and religious tolerance, turning spiritual practices into goods and selling them [9, pp. 22-23]. In such circumstances, the Catholic Church can also make efforts to better expose its spiritual offer and respond to the changing expectations of the believers, reporting needs and desires oriented to the market offer also in the sphere of the sacred. Perhaps this will result in a change in the traditional character of the Church’s activity and sometimes in adaptation to new conditions dictated by the changing recipients – the believers and previously unknown religious competition.

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