Generating Community through Interpersonal Relations and Digital Media: The Experience of Italian Parishes. Quantitative Research - First Stage Results

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Generating Community through Interpersonal Relations and Digital Media: The Experience of Italian Parishes. Quantitative Research - First Stage Results[1]

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Abstract

This paper has two cognitive objectives: to illustrate the contribution of Italian parishes to the development of interpersonal and associative social relationships capable of building community environments, and to improve understanding of the role played by community technology in shaping these relationships.

The above were investigated using relative quantitative information culled from an online questionnaire from 420 Italian church parishes.

An analysis of the data revealed the particular contribution of Italian parishes in favouring the construction of a community at both the local and symbolic levels, communities where interpersonal and digital relationships play a crucial role even if via different modes and styles.

Keywords: community technologies, church, religion.

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[1] The paper is the result of a joint investigation between the two authors. Lucia Boccacin was responsible for Introduction, 1.1 and 2.2, Linda Lombi for 1.2, 2.1 and the conclusion.

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1.   Introduction

The pandemic which began with the global diffusion of Sars-Covid-19 in 2020 has led to a realisation that, deprived of our relationships with others, we feel disoriented, lost.

The social risks inherent in such deprivation and the importance of the existence of a network of relationships for an individual and a community are well known. In awareness of these risks, it is appropriate to reflect on the locations, both material and symbolic, where the social aspects of life may be recreated and explored.

The harrowing days of the pandemic have made clear the importance of social relationships, and what the deprivation of the opportunities to access these connections means to our daily lives. Forced isolation has made contacts within multiple relational contexts involving physical or even symbolic locations and spaces impractical.

The presence of multiple relational contexts allows, from a sociological point of view, the creation of a "community". But what does this term mean analytically? And how can we recognise it when it is formed within social contexts? As with many concepts used in sociology, it is polysemic (Donati, 1991, 2013).

The definition which leaps immediately to mind is that of the existence of a commonality, of having something in common. This commonality may involve very specific aspects related, for example, to the organisation of political or economic collectives on local, national, and international levels.

Community has also been defined as "a group of people who share a social life, the same interests and behaviours".[1]

Sociologists have discussed the concept of community in great depth, a few examples being by Tönnies (1963), Etzioni (1993) and Bauman (2001). The various definitions offered may be roughly ascribed to three features which appear, albeit with different tones and intensity, within each meaning of the term. The first relates to the presence of a dense network of social relations (Donati, 2013), the second to the peculiar quality of the relationships themselves, often expressed in terms of social capital (Donati, Tronca, 2008; Donati, 2011), with the third identifying a specific geographic location, as in the classic series of community studies developed by the Chicago School (Bell, Newby, 1971, 1974).

Moving from these generalised semantic profiles to those to be applied in distinct cases, three further specific meanings of the term community may be identified, in line with Willmott (1986), although the first has been shown in the

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[1] http://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/comunita/

relevant community studies to trace back to the geographical characterisation of the term:

"- a territorial or place community, referring to a group of people who have something in common, a community often defined or delimited geographically;

- communities of interest, defined by a shared interest rather than a shared location, where the connection is through factors such as ethnicity, religion, employment or the use of leisure time;

- communities of attachment, where a common sentiment unites the individuals, a community 'spirit' expressed in collective action" (Di Nicola, 2015: 145).

The diverse semantic interpretations forming the basis for the concept of community make clear the relevance of the concept as a phenomenon in social contexts and concurrently the complexity of an attribution of its meaning within referential as well as structural and morphological profiles (Martignani, 2016).

A consideration of the interplay of the referential and structural elements represents therefore a crucial step in a sociological observation which may lead to an understanding of the community, its relationships and its processes (Boccacin, 2009). Communities are an essential reference framework for the people, the social actors and organisations contained within them.

These characteristics constitute a referential framework within which additional elements may be contextualised in order to better understand contemporary corporate dynamics.

An example would be the interweaving of elective and non-elective memberships and affiliations as factors supporting the classification of the community.

Theories do exist of the fascination of the "not place" (Dell'Aquila, 1999) and of delocalised nearness (Maffesoli, 1993) within contemporary evolved and sophisticated societies. However, the experience of the Covid pandemic has made us aware that the bonds of belonging require a spatial and geographical environment in order to take root, and that it is through establishing this foothold that a very particular feeling of symbolic, universal belonging, of being understood, of more meaning and wellbeing may occur (Donati, 2019).

It appears then that in contemporary society a composite concept of community exists where ascribed elements and elective elements combine according to the *modus vivendi* of those who live in them and the quality of the relationships which they succeed in undertaking.

Put succinctly, community may be identified as a corporate context morphologically relational at the meso level, which generates and regenerates itself through the interpersonal and personal relationships between the various social subjects who live and function within it (Boccacin, 2020).

Viewing community as such means its complexity may be adequately represented without exaggeration, and permits a more balanced understanding of the phenomena and social processes involved (Vitale, 2007). The perspective also allows an empirical observation of the interpersonal dynamics and the development of social interventions which takes into consideration the need of the individual to belong (micro dimension), the need to connect with the institutional dimension of the social (macro level), and the potential or real reticularity occurring in the inter-subjective contexts (meso level).

The meso level is crucial to the welfare of the community because it is there that the essential processes of mediation between individuals and the institutions of society take place, and it is where the identity of the community is formed. These mediating and identity processes are produced through the action of various social actors, for example, families, informal and intermediate aggregate group forms such as associations, pro-social organisations, and networks of collaborative relationships and social partnerships (Boccacin, 2009).

Our study focuses on one of these group forms, church parishes, a shared place and frequented reality of which little is known systematically, nor of their contribution to the construction of community and daily relationships in contemporary society. This present paper presents research which aims to fill this knowledge gap, with a specific focus on the contribution of community technologies or devices able to promote the reconstruction of connections and bring people closer together (Rivoltella, 2017).

In recent years, parishes have undergone profound transformations that have affected the whole of society, in particular with reference to the spread of digitization in all fields of daily life. Even before the Covid-19 pandemic, many Italian parishes used the internet and social media to introduce innovative communication strategies in order to identify new social spaces where persons with spiritual needs may be contacted (Marchetti, 2015). In 2020[2], the use of social platforms allowed parishioners to share and participate in celebrations while maintaining the pandemic-perscribed distance in interpersonal relationships which had previously taken place in-person (Spadaro, Casavecchia, 2020).

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[2] For an international overview of the relationship between church and digital media during the pandemic, see Campbell H.A., (2020 ed.).

2. Social relations at the time of personal media in the Italian ecclesiastical reality. An empirical research project

2.1 Research objectives and design

The objective of this paper is to present several findings resulting from quantitative and qualitative research initiated in 2019 as part of a three-year research project funded by the Sacro Cuore Catholic University in Milan, Italy. The triennial project focuses on social relations in Italian Catholic parishes during the present era of personal media[3].

Our hypothesis of departure aimed to override the prevailing interpretation of society as liquid and made up of superficial social relations and fleeting links, and to document the presence of strong social relationships capable of generating community environments where a social life is shared. We hypothesised that parishes are able to foster this type of solid social relationships (Borghello, 2018). We also believed that digital communication could be a proactive driver of positive social relationships and innovation, while not ignoring the underlying risks to its overexposure, as documented by many studies (Centro Internazionale Studi Famiglia - CISF, 2017), particularly among the very young and youth.

In synthesis, the aim of the survey was to understand whether and how interpersonal and associative social relationships capable of building community contexts were being generated and developed in Italian parishes, and the importance of digital technologies in these relationships, if and how this technological contribution supported and reinforced these relationships, and whether its use introduced innovative alternatives.

Our investigation examined relationships conducted in-person and via digital means in Italian parishes, hypothesising that these relationships would constitute the building blocks for the construction of community.

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[3] The research funding was provided through a Sacro Cuore programme to promote and diffuse scientific research under the umbrella of the University's project, *Social Relations at the Time of Personal Media in the Italian Ecclesial Reality. Subjects, Networks and Opportunities for Pastoral, Community and Educational Intervention 2018-2021*. The research was conducted by a multidisciplinary team composed of Anna Bertoni, Donatella Bramanti, Elisa Carrà, Alessandra Carenzio, Laura Ferrari, Simona Ferrari, Raffaella Iafrate, Linda Lombi, Sara Nanetti, Chiara Paolino, Stefano Pasta, Sonia Ranieri, Camillo Regalia, Pier Cesare Rivoltella, Marco Rondonotti and coordinated by Lucia Boccacin. The research was designed to consist of a quantitative survey conducted in two waves and a qualitative survey on five case studies. This paper will present a selection of findings from the first quantitative wave.

In 2019, we insisted that we could not simply accept a generalised narrative that social relationships were doomed, nor that digital communication was the font of self-isolation and social risk. In 2020 it became clear, unfortunately and dramatically through Covid, that apart from the assumed "liquidity" of a community, there is a further and irreducible component of the "social" which consists of relationships that give meaning and substance to a life in a society. The pandemic represents not only a period of individualistic closure, but also a new mode to share a part of life, of intense interpersonal exchange and the involvement of thousands of third sector voluntary associations. Community ties persist and are expressed in innovative forms which respond to today's needs.

In addition, the absence of in-person contact has been compensated for - in part - with connective forms of digital technology capable of supporting ties at a distance.

Our quantitative field survey was conducted between the end of 2019 and the beginning of 2020. Data was collected from an online questionnaire compiled by the parish priest, or person responsible, from 420 Italian parishes. The goal of the survey was to understand whether and how interpersonal and associative relationships are generated and developed within the parishes, whether and how these relationships contribute to building community spaces, the extent of the presence of digital technologies in these relationships, whether and how these technologies contribute to the support and reinforcement of the relationships, and if innovative itineraries are introduced through their use.

An initial recruitment attempt to build a stratified probability sample based on geographic area was made during the first stage. Random extractions were made from the list of Italian parishes provided by the Italian Episcopal Conference Office of Communications (CEI) followed by an invitation to participate in the study. However, the difficulties in obtaining the updated e-mail addresses combined with the low response rates led to the publication of a general invitation issued through other channels such as the CEI newsletter and research team contacts. As a result, the sample obtained was non-probability, self-selected based on the availability and voluntary accession of the participants.

2.2 Observation and statistical analysis tool

The survey questionnaire was composed of 28 questions addressing the following areas: socio-demographic characteristics (e.g. parish size, geo-location, pastoral membership numbers, age of pastor); parish activities (e.g. organisation of meetings, conferences, debates, initiatives, targeted recipients of the activities); relational aspects (e.g. the quality of relationships, level of trust,

help, cooperation, relationships and partnerships with other agencies); psycho-social aspects (e.g. perception of personal and social generativity, perceived sense of satisfaction); organisational aspects (e.g. degree of proceduralisation and formalisation of the activities of the parish, degree of sharing in decision making and participation in organisational processes); use, representations and attitudes towards the use of technologies, with specific reference to community technologies.

In order to aid a synthesis of the data, synthetic indices were constructed within several questions. The following indices were chosen for particular comment in the analyses:

- Trust index: a five-item scale to measure the degree of trust within the community, as perceived by the parish priest. The level of trust measured was above the minimum acceptance threshold (Cronbach's alpha = 0.66) (De Vellis 1991);
- Aid index: a five-item scale to explore the level of aid/help parishioners receive. The level of reliability resulted acceptable (Cronbach's alpha = 0.68);
- Collaboration index: a four-item scale to explore the degree of collaboration perceived by the parish priest within the parish community. The level of reliability resulted good (Cronbach's alpha = 0.78);
- Relationship quality index: a four-item scale to explore the perceived quality of the relationships between the members of the parish community. The level of reliability resulted good (Cronbach's alpha = 0.77)
- Cultivation index: a four-item scale to measure the degree of acceptance and authority of use of digital technology. The subject has a proactive approach in appropriating and integrating digital aids into daily life. The level of reliability resulted good (Cronbach's alpha = 0.78);
- Protection index: a three-item scale to measure the degree of prevention of the possible risks involved in using digital aids. The subject is characterised by their caution in applying digital technologies and, concerned about possible effects and management difficulties, tends to regulate and control its use. The level of reliability resulted good (Cronbach's alpha = 0.73);
- Technology to promote community ties index: a three-item scale to measure the subject's tendency, both actual and perceived, to see digital technology as capable of activating and maintaining connections. The level of reliability resulted very good (Cronbach's alpha = 0.86).

In order to identify the profiles relevant to the use of digital technologies in pastoral activities, a k-means cluster analysis was conducted commencing

with variables aimed at identifying the intensity of use of twelve specific technologies[4] and considering four possible purposes of use - to be informed, interact with others, work, and to encourage participation. A k-means cluster analysis was applied to group the most similar points within each cluster while maximising the difference between the clusters. The results illustrated the emergence of three clusters differentiated through the purpose of their use of the technology.

A second k-means cluster analysis was then conducted to explore the parish profiles in relation to several dimensions characterising the relationship between the members of the parish community - trust index, five items; help index, five items; collaboration index, four items; relationship quality index, four items. The results of these analyses will be illustrated in detail in Part 2.2.

The survey platform was Qualtrics© and the analyses were performed with SPSS© version 25.

3. Study results

3.1 Descriptive analyses

The following is a selection of the socio-structural context results. The participating parishes are located mainly in northern Italy (68.1%). Of the rest, 15.2% are located in central Italy and 16.7% in the south and Islands. The highest numbers of respondents lived in Lombardy (30.8%), Emilia-Romagna (12.8%) and Veneto (11.8%). Approximately one in two parishes, 46.3%, is a member of a pastoral unit. 46.5% of the geographical areas served by the respective parishes had populations of more than 5,000 inhabitants, with 32.3% of parishes having between 4,999 and 2,000. Most of the parishes (49%) serve 200 to 499 parishioners, with 32.3% of the parishes serving between 500 and 999. Approximately one in five parishes (18.8%) reported having more than 1,000 parishioners. The ages of the priests split into three groups with 32% less than 50 years old, 33.5% between 50 and 59 and 34.5% over 60. See Table 1.

When focusing specifically on relational and digital aspects, we noted that relationships may exist between a parish and other local stakeholders such as groups or associations based in the parish, dioceses, third sector and public authority associations, and, albeit more rarely, private entities. These relationships are on average good (on a scale from 1 to 5, the average index of

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[4] The following technologies were investigated for their use in pastoral activities: Blogs, E-mail, WhatsApp/Telegram, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Wikipedia, sites providing materials for pastoral activities, YouTube Film and Video, parish management apps, and dedicated parish apps. See Table 2.

the quality of relationships is equal to M = 3.49, SD = 0.77), especially if they also relate to other church groups (M = 3.86, SD = 0.88). Further stakeholders are made up of voluntary organisations, associations with a local base, pro-social foundations, and social cooperatives (M = 3.64, SD = 0.94), public institutions (M = 3.37, SD = 1.07), and private institutions (M = 2.99, SD = 1.12).

TABLE 1. *The socio-demographic characteristics of the parishes involved in the study.*

	N	%
Geographical area		
North	269	68.1
Central Italy	60	15.2
South & Islands	66	16.7
Age of priest		
Up to 49 yrs	128	32.0
50-59 yrs	134	33.5
60 or more yrs	138	34.5
Parish size		
Small (< 500 parishioners)	196	49.0
Medium (500-999 parishioners)	129	32.3
Large (>1000 parishioners)	75	18.8
Total	*420*	*100.0*

The quality of these relationships is judged to be higher in large parishes than in medium and small (small parishes M = 3.37, SD = 0.80, medium parishes M = 3.55, SD = 0.071, large parishes M = 3.71, SD = 0.068), indicating the emergence in larger parishes of the importance of creating networks of meaningful relationships with other actors in the environment.

Levels of trust, aid and collaboration were used to describe the quality of internal relationships within the parishes. These levels were based on the opinions of the parish priest or his representative, and identified through the construction of three indices. The average for the level of trust (always on a 1 to 5 scale, M = 3.0, SD = 0.57) increased when referring to the ability to freely express ideas within the parish (M = 3.64, SD = 0.95), and decreased with respect to the possibility of mutually exchanging objects (M = 2.31, SD = 0.90).

The index for the level of aid was recorded as average (M = 2.9, SD = 0.57). The highest value recorded concerns the aid for moral support (M = 3, SD = 0.84), while the item *In my parish, if someone is in difficulty they ask the others for help* garnered the lowest value (M = 2.68, SD = 0.82).

Levels of collaboration also registered average values (M = 3.1, SD = 0.71). The highest scores in this index relate to the item *In my parish, decisions concerning the life of the community are taken as a group* (M = 3.44, SD = 0.93), while the lowest are reported for *In my parish, when there is a problem, everyone works together to solve it* (M = 2.79, SD = 0.85). A greater propensity to collaborate was noted in large

parishes than in smaller ones (M = 3.4, SD = 0.62). Overall, an index value of average for trust, aid and cooperation emerges in the internal relational context of these realities.

Activities carried out by the parishes include educational activities (93.8%), decision-making and organisational activities related to the different bodies of these parishes, such as the Parish Pastoral Council (89.3%), and solidarity activities (85.7%).

This multiplicity of activities is geared to satisfy the needs and requirements of persons and families in a range of situations. The recipients are families with children, adolescents, young adults, couples preparing for marriage, the aged, persons in economic difficulties, etc.

Families are deeply involved in both the implementation of initiatives serving individual categories of recipients (answers "rather+very+quite true": 88.8%) as well as recipients of actions addressed directly to them (78.9%). In addition, the parishes have implemented initiatives that have enabled new relationships among families (77.4%). Family associations are reported as less frequently promoted (22.5%).

In planning interventions/initiatives to benefit families and alleviate their problems, the aspects considered most important are, in order, the strengthening of the family's education skills (in a 1 to 5 scale, M = 4.21, SD: = 0.93), to aid families in creating/strengthening relationship networks (M = 4.15, SD = 0.95), to provide adequate support to families of various kinds (M = 3.85, SD = 1.02), and to offer resources and materials to families (M = 2.96, SD= 1.17).

What is the meaning attributed to the presence and use of these relational resources within the parishes and what social functions do they perform?

At 52.9%, over half of the priests reported that the resources offered a sense of belonging to the community. 27.2% of respondents strongly agreeing that this web of relationships within the parish intercepts needs by offering practical resources. The parishes are also perceived by 12.7% to offer inter-subjective social life environments important in today's social context where depersonalizing and unrelated life situations predominate, and for 7.1% they significantly increase empowerment and confidence.

We turn now to the use of digital tools in the relationships established in pastoral activities by the priest or by those who perform a similar function. The digital technologies generally used as part of the activities are e-mail, parish Internet sites and WhatsApp/Telegram. These common instruments are not used by, respectively, only 1.8%, 6.7% and 10.8% of priests. Of the most common social media, one parish in two has a Facebook page, one in four is on Instagram, and much more rarely, only one in ten has a Twitter account.

The two main digital instruments generally used for communicating with others are Whatsapp/Telegram, used for this specific purpose by 56% of respondents, and e-mail by 53.5%. Priests use the same two instruments to collaborate with others, respectively 49.3% and 52.5%, as well as to encourage participation. See Table 2.

TABLE 2. Presence of digital technologies and their end-use purpose. MRQ (multiple response question).

	I do not use them	Inform/ information	Be in contact with others	Collaborate	Aid participation
1. Blog	79.2	15.2	5.2	2.2	6.0
2. E-mail address	1.8	54.0	53.5	52.5	39.3
3. WhatsApp/ Telegram	10.8	42.8	56.0	49.3	53.2
4. Facebook	47.2	32.8	22.9	10.7	22.1
5. Twitter	88.2	7.5	3.2	1.7	2.2
6. Instagram	75.9	14.2	10.9	3.0	8.2
7. Wikipedia	31.8	63.7	1.2	3.7	2.0
8. Sites that provide materials for pastoral activities	6.7	76.4	7.5	19.2	13.9
9. YouTube	30.8	56.0	8.0	9.7	14.2
10. Film & Video	23.6	50.0	15.4	15.2	27.6
11. Applications aiding parish management	41.0	29.1	9.0	29.9	13.4
12. Dedicated parish app	73.3	15.9	9.2	8.0	12.9

As mentioned in Part 1.2, a cluster analysis was undertaken to identify the digital profiles of the parishes, investigating the technologies used in the context of the relevant ministry and purpose of use - informative, relational, participatory and collaborative. The analysis revealed the following types:
(1) "Low users": comprising 31.1% of the participating parishes. These were defined by their low level of digital technology use in all the investigated use categories;
(2) "Informative users": 54% of the participating parishes. This cluster utilised technologies mainly to be informed, and rely comparatively less on digital means for other purposes.
(3) "Connective users": 14.9% of the parishes were characterised by their use of digital technologies for all the purposes investigated.
A bivariate analysis between the user profiles and individual priests revealed a more advanced user profile among younger priests. Among priests under 50, in fact, "connective users" represent 19.5% of the respondents, whereas they are only 15.9% of the 50-59 range and 10.1% of respondents over 60. The relationship is statistically significant, p = 0.003.

The respondents use technology with average frequency in the course of their parochial activities (see Table 3). One of the most frequent activities mentioned by respondents was their participation in closed online groups such as Facebook and WhatsApp to share information with every member of a collaborating group (responses "often" and "always", 58.1%) or to design pastoral interventions (45.5%). The use of presentation tools - PowerPoint, Prezi or similar - in catechism classes, or films and documentaries in various other pastoral activities was also frequent at 43.8%. Although much less common, it should be noted that even prior to the pandemic parishes were using digital technology to transmit the Gospel of the day (responses "often" or "always", 15%) or to broadcast live liturgical or pastoral events in 13.6% of cases.

When assessed for their opinion regarding the application of digital resources as a community technology, respondents demonstrated an average recognition of the contribution of these instruments to promote ties and relationships among the parishioners. 75.7% of respondents believe the statement "having to plan interventions/initiatives in favour of the parish, it is important to provide network services that facilitate the meeting, the exchange and the joint search for solutions" to be true[5], and 62.8% agree that they can rely on other members of the parish thanks to the digital network. About 55% of the parishes offer dedicated digital services within the parish which promote a sense of belonging, and a similar percentage use the network services, a parish website, Facebook page, etc., to facilitate meetings and collaboration between their parishioners.

Overall, on a scale from 1 to 5, the community index promoted by the technology index is equal to 2.7 (SD = 0.84), but with more favourable scores where there is a younger priest (up to 49 years, M = 2.9, SD = 0.82) and where the parish is of medium (M = 2.9, SD = 0.87) or large size (M = 2.9, SD 0.75).

These data suggest that the priests involved in the survey recognise the connective and inclusive value of the technologies, and that use of them can contribute to the empowerment of lasting relationships and the pursuit of well-being of individuals, families, and their community of reference (Rivoltella 2017).

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[5] The percentages stated here refer to the sum of the responses "fairly true + very true + entirely true."

TABLE 3. *Frequency of use of technology in pastoral activities.*

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Most of the time	All of the time	Total
1. I involve my community in the conscious use of technology to take action on issues that are not unique to parish life	26.8%	28.3%	28.3%	13.5%	3.3%	*100.0%*
2. I send the Gospel of the day via WhatsApp and/or I post it on a Facebook page/site	67.9%	9.0%	8.0%	6.5%	8.5%	*100.0%*
3. I also use digital media for pastoral activities because I believe that an online contact is an authentic contact	35.0%	19.4%	24.7%	15.9%	5.0%	*100.0%*
4. I participate in closed online groups on Facebook/Whatsapp/other ... with co-workers to share communications among the group	19.5%	7.5%	14.8%	37.3%	20.8%	*100.0%*
5. I participate in closed online groups on Facebook/Whatsapp/other ... with co-workers to plan pastoral activities	25.4%	12.1%	17.1%	32.2%	13.3%	*100.0%*
6. I post on social content sites because I want to generate discussion	52.5%	16.3%	17.8%	9.5%	3.8%	*100.0%*
7. I use digital technologies to live stream Church or pastoral events	65.3%	11.8%	9.3%	7.8%	5.8%	*100.0%*
8. I use live streams of community social events to encourage participation on the part of groups in our geographic area	76.3%	12.4%	6.6%	3.0%	1.8%	*100.0%*
9. I use social media to conduct normal meetings during which decisions can be made with my parishioners	78.6%	13.6%	6.0%	1.3%	0.5%	*100.0%*
10. I use presentation tools (PowerPoint, Prezi or similar) in catechism classes, or films and documentaries during various pastoral activities	14.3%	14.0%	28.0%	34.3%	9.5%	*100.0%*

3.2 A typology of interpersonal and digital relational styles: multivariate analysis indications

After outlining the general points above, we now examine a particular, peculiar aspect of the investigation namely the configuration of those 'interlaced' relationships which combine both interpersonal and digital elements.

The cluster analysis conducted using the variables characterising social relations within the parishes revealed the following three cluster types, each one corresponding to one of the three relational styles (see Tab. 4).

The umbrella title "Traditional parishes with pragmatic interpersonal relationships" describes 45.3% of the sample and connotes parishes of small size where the priest is most likely to be 60 years or older in age, 40.8% of the age span. Interpersonal relationships in these contexts record, compared to the other clusters, a medium-low level on the trust, mutual aid and collaboration orientation indices, respectively M = 2.58, M = 2.54 and M = 2.58. Parishes in this cluster stand out for one specific social function, their tendency, at 31.8%, to offer concrete resources and materials. However, the most frequently indicated function at 44.9% is the offer of a sense of belonging.

The profile of the use of digital technologies in this cluster, applied mainly for informational purposes by 55.9% of the parishes, does not differ particularly from that of the other two groups. However, a lower propensity to use such devices to promote connections and relationships is evidenced by a lower presence (13%) of "connective users". In addition, this group makes less use of technologies to promote community ties. The index of M = 2.42 is lower than those of clusters two and three, and the "cultivation" index of M = 3.07 is evidence of a less positive stance.

The second type, referred to as "Trust-based parishes: hybridised interpersonal relationships", concerns at 23.9% a sample minority and tends to be parishes with younger priests than those of the first group. Only 26.3% of priests in the second group are aged over 60. Another point of differentiation from the first group is the greater presence, at 23.4%, in the south of Italy. The quality of interpersonal relationships in this second group is valued at good, M= 3.19, with an unusual level of activation towards external parishes. At the same time, active relationships of the respondents with public and private entities, respectively 88,3% and - even lower - 63.5%, are less extensive. Medium-high indices emerge for trust, aid and collaboration in internal relationships, respectively, M = 3.47, M = 3.42, M = 3.67. Parish use of digital technologies in this cluster tends to be in line with that of the first cluster, even if the percentage of "non-users" is slightly higher compared to clusters one and three. The stance regarding the use of technology is, however, more favourable and positive, and the "protection" index at M = 2.55 is lower than that of the other groups. They are also more inclined, M = 3.02, to apply technology to promote community through addressing a range of services to satisfy the parochial intervention needs. The data indicate that the prevailing social function of the parishes in this group is to construct an atmosphere of belonging to a community. The value for this function, 62.6%, is higher here than for the other two clusters.

TABLE 4. Descriptive analysis of the clusters.

	Cluster 1- *"Traditional parishes with pragmatic interpersonal relationships"* (45.3%, No. 182)		**Cluster 2-** *"Trust-based parishes: hybridised interpersonal relationships"* (23.9%, No. 100)		**Cluster 3-** *"Multitasking parishes with interpersonal and prosocial relationships mediated by technologies"* (32.5%, No. 136)	
	%	M (SD)	%	M (SD)	%	M (SD)
Socio-demographic dimensions						
Geographical area						
North	69.2		62.8		71.1	
Central Italy	15.1		13.8		15.6	
South & Islands	15.7		23.4		13.3	
Age of priest						
Up to 49 yrs	26.4		35.8		36.9	
50-59 yrs	32.8		37.9		30.8	
60 or more yrs	40.8		26.3		32.3	
Parish size						
Small (<500 parishioners)	54.0		48.4		42.3	
Medium (500-999 parishioners)	33.3		28.4		33.8	
Large (>1000 parishioners)	12.6		23.2		23.8	
Type of services offered						
Offers practical resources	31.8		21.2		25.6	
Offers companionship	14.8		12.1		10.5	
Offers a sense of belonging	44.9		62.6		56.4	
Reinforces trust	8.5		4.0		7.5	
Relational dimensions						
Relationship quality dimension		3.09 (0.64)		3.19 (0.53)		4.24 (0.45)
Trust index		2.58 (0.45)		3.47 (0.35)		3.23 (0.47)
Aid index		2.54 (0.43)		3.42 (0.43)		3.15 (0.44)
Collaboration index		2.58 (0.48)		3.67 (0.55)		3.51 (0.54)
Technology related dimensions						
"Cultivation" index		3.07 (0.75)		3.33 (0.86)		3.34 (0.77)
"Protection" index		2.76 (0.80)		2.55 (0.98)		2.72 (0.82)
Community promotion through technology index.		2.42 (0.74)		3.02 (0.86)		2.99 (0.80)
User profile						
Low users	31.1		34.0		29.0	
Informative users	55.9		51.1		53.4	
Connective users	13.0		14.9		17.6	

The third cluster typology is called "Multitasking parishes with interpersonal and prosocial relationships mediated by technologies". They constitute 32.5% of the sample and are characterised by their medium-large parish size with 51.6% having at least 500 parishioners. They tend at 71.1% to be located in northern Italy where 36.9% of the responding priests are generally younger at under 50 years. The interpersonal relationship profile revealed a high level of interchange with all the stakeholders both within the parish and in the surrounding geographical areas, with a focus on dialogue. The values for the trust, aid and collaboration indices were average at M = 3.23, M = 3.15, and M = 3.51 respectively. The quality of relationships in this cluster is evaluated very positively at M = 4.24. Numerous digital technologies are utilised and the objectives tend to be, to a greater extent than the other clusters, oriented to promote connections. "Connective users" were measured at 17.6% of the cluster total. The shift to digital devices, however, appears ambivalent. Although the index value indicates a greater propensity to use technology as a tool to promote higher bonds than in the first cluster at M = 2.99 *vs* M = 2.42, a possible criticality is recognised through the "protection" index where the value is similar to that of the first group, M = 2.72 *vs* M = 2.76.

As with the other clusters, the social role played by the parishes in offering a sense of belonging and creating and reinforcing community ties is identified by 56.4% of the respondents. A distinctive feature of this third group is the extent and range of the activities and interventions offered to a wide recipient target, an indication of the adoption of a specific service logic in parish operation.

4. Conclusions

The data discussed above have enabled us to outline a first summary profile of Italian parishes with a particular emphasis on the qualification of interpersonal and digital relationships within the parishes, and the implementation of those relationships in parish activities. Our research confirms the affirmation made by Granovetter over thirty years ago which, although in a different context, demonstrated significant anticipatory capacity in interpreting realities. "Actors do not behave or decide as atoms outside a social context, nor do they adhere slavishly to a script written for them by the particular intersection of social categories that they happen to occupy. Their attempts at purposive action are instead embedded in concrete, ongoing systems of social relations" (Granovetter, 1985: 483).

Viewed from this perspective, the research offers a profile of the distinctive contribution of parishes in constructing a local community, both physical and

symbolic, in which interpersonal and digital relationships play a crucial role, even if expressed in different ways and styles. The actions of Catholic parishes have always had a capillary effect on the fabric of Italian society, and they could today be a hidden treasure which deserves being brought to the fore, especially in the face of the social isolation suffered by individuals during the Covid pandemic.

In particular, a clear image emerges of the important social function parishes play, with their diverse variations and nuances, in the generation and construction of a community framework. In today's globalised societies, the concept of community implies a web of belonging experienced within spatially defined areas, in this case within the circumscribed territory of the parish, and related to symbolic spheres of a sense of sharing the same values and cultural orientations (Borghello, 2018). This interweaving of spaces gives importance to the search for innovative relational solutions where relationships are made up of both interpersonal and digital elements, as demonstrated by the research documented above. Parishes operate in two dimensions at the same time, in physical locations with pragmatic activities of aid, as well as symbolic spaces where feelings of belonging may be reinforced through processes of sharing the attribution of meaning. Of note is also the willingness to dialogue and establish relations with the external reference framework detected in several cases, indicating, albeit indirectly, a secure grounding in the area of reference.

These cases involve, to paraphrase Jenkins (2009), spreadable relations, relationships capable of breaking through their set boundaries, diffusing in every direction to be generative within society.

In other words, a "mixed" conception of interpersonal and digital relationships is emerging in the ecclesial sphere, where they are not configured as alternatives but as complementaries, within a social environment in which online and offline interpenetrate in an interdependence that constitutes the common and shared horizon of everyday life (Hogan, Wellman, 2012; Campbell, Lövheim, 2020). A point of reflection here is the fact that the presence of the technologies in the Italian parishes is not always experienced as an aid capable of contributing, within the limits of the specific languages and instruments utilised, to the construction of the community. The data demonstrated a widely diverse situation territorially, reflected in the degree of experimentation with the technologies. This opens up the possibilities for new educational profiles designed to clarify the potential and applications of technologies not only in general but with specific reference to the strengthening of interpersonal relationships.

In summary, a community built within a parish represents a relational context in which individuals may experience a fundamental grounding and

sense of belonging, and where the bonds derive from interpersonal and sometimes digital community relationships at the meso level.

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