Constructing an Identity Online: Logging-On as “Catholic”

Margaret Mullan

Contact: margaret.mullan@arbor.edu

Keywords: social media; Catholicism; identification; virtual communities - religious aspects; popular culture

Abstract

This article explores the nature of Catholic identity, as constructed in a Catholic social media site, PhatMass. This study, a month-long virtual ethnography of PhatMass, took place during the significant global Catholic event in February to March of 2013—the former Pope Benedict XVI’s resignation and the new Pope Francis’s election. James Carey’s (1989) ritual view of communication sheds light on PhatMass participant engagement with social media, popular culture, and Catholic identity during these online discussions.

The findings from this ethnography indicate that religion, media, and popular culture meet in the religious, media-using, culture participant who communicates, consumes, or creates...
meaning through daily ritual on technology. The blend of pop culture content and traditional Catholic beliefs on PhatMass reveals a broader Catholic identity emerging online. The PhatMass conversation provides details about how Catholic identity formation takes place in a world increasingly marked by online communication.

About the Author

Margaret Mullan (M.A., Spring Arbor University) is currently working on her Doctorate in Rhetoric with Duquesne University Department of Communication and Rhetorical Studies. She worked for a Catholic non-profit organization for almost two decades, where she designed and taught spiritual and character development curricula for adolescents and university students. After gaining an Ecclesiastical degree in Religious Studies from the Regina Apostolorum in Rome, she has worked as a catechist and director/advisor for several Catholic outreach programs. Her scholarly research interests include: dialogue online, religious communication and community in online settings, interpersonal and intercultural communication, civility in online settings, listening, and the rhetoric of technology.


1. Introduction

In February 2013, the Catholic Pope, Benedict XVI, broke with tradition and resigned. Social media sites exploded with conversations about the significance of this event. One Catholic social media site, PhatMass¹, witnessed a surge in online comments and discussions after the news of the Pope’s resignation. PhatMass, founded and directed by lay Catholics—not
by Catholics in the Church hierarchical structures—has offered an online environment for Catholic faith sharing since 2000. This site invites participants to discuss topics on its public online “Phorum”, which is overseen by a PhatMass moderating team. The most visited discussion thread, called “Open Mic”, includes diverse themes from Catholic rap music to atheism to the benefits of Catholic confession.

A social media site communicates a style and worldview of its members, who both participate in and are shaped by the culture of this online community. In gathering online around Catholic events and interpreting collective meaning, participants shape their Catholic identity through communicative action.

Scholars have studied how some Catholic communicators either engage such social channels or avoid them. Frobish (2006) examined how Catholic leaders use the Vatican website to build ethos, Gambescia and Paolucci (2011) described how Catholic universities conveyed Catholic identity on their websites, and Cantoni and Zyga (2007) noted how Catholic religious communities, traditionally separated from use of secular media, were opening up to using the Internet. But there remains a gap in empirical studies and analytic scholarship about how lay Catholics participate in online discussions. How lay Catholics communicate online about certain events and how this communication impacts the creation of Catholic identity will be a critical point in cultural development as we move further into our increasingly technological society.

Catholic spokespersons have actively encouraged the laity to join online communication about the faith. Part of the defining marks of a Catholic, according to the Catechism, is actively living that faith in the world as a missionary (Vatican 1993, no.831). Accordingly, Catholic Church leaders have communicated encouragement to Catholics to share their faith in the world of the Internet. Since 2002, Vatican leaders have been calling for Catholics to enter into dialogue taking place on the Internet and to use online tools to continue Catholic “communication of the Good News of Jesus Christ” (Pontifical Council for Social Communications 2002b, no.5), and official Catholic communication continues to entreat Catholics to engage in religious communication online. Letters and speeches by Catholic leaders (Benedict 2006; 2009; 2012) encouraged Catholic members to share their faith online through joining faith-based online discussion groups or by developing Catholic online discussion groups.
Yet, Catholic communication is not only defined by official Catholic spokespersons but is also constructed by lay Catholics (Vogt 2011).

The PhatMass website seems to answer this call-to-action. It is run by lay Catholics—not sponsored by the hierarchical Catholic Church leaders—and its leaders offer a particular expression of Catholic culture. PhatMass’s main page has included an unusual juxtapositioning of images such as a traditional Catholic scene of a priest incensing an altar, side-by-side with a kitten sporting large headphones accompanied by the tagline “Cat Rap.” PhatMass states that it promotes a “devout, orthodox, and down-to-earth Catholic message”, and it uses the language and images of popular culture to communicate a traditional Catholic worldview. PhatMass states its mission is to be an online community of participants who “live and defend the faith given to us by Jesus Christ by remaining totally and completely obedient to the teaching authority of His Church.”

Current discussions about Catholic identity explore continuums between orthodox/progressive and conservative/liberal positions. This article seeks to attend to the presence of an integrated Catholic identity that includes both traditional and popular culture. While PhatMass clearly aligns itself with Catholic hierarchical teaching authority, it also takes a tone of levity even in its name, PhatMass. The website redefines its name, “phat”—ordinarily slang for cool, attractive, or appealing (according to UrbanDictionary.com)—to stand for “Preaching Holy Apostolic Truth.” PhatMass uses an informal tone to describe its mission in this tagline: “With orthodoxy, charity and humility, PhatMass will infiltrate the entire planet earth with Catholic propaganda.” What type of Catholic identity is PhatMass facilitating? Here, PhatMass participants can freely communicate a particular Catholic culture that blends traditional religious characteristics with popular culture expressions.

2. Literature Review

This review first explores participation in social media as a ritual process in which communicative acts create culture, before looking at general cultural expressions in popular and religious culture. Then this exploration focuses on Catholic engagement with popular culture from the leaders’ and lay perspectives. Next, the broad and particular definitions of Catholic
identity are explored. Finally, online community is explored as a place of insight into Catholic identity formation.

a. The Social Media Experience: Communicating Through Popular Rituals

Carey’s (1989) ritual view of communication, in which communication is cultural, provides the theoretical framework for this study. Carey, building on rich cultural explorations by Hall, Giddens, and Dewey, argues that participants in communication can be confirmed in attitudes and worldviews as they gather around a common “representation of shared beliefs” (p. 18). Social media, for example, is a form of ritual communication: a periodic logging-on to interpret, affirm, or re-present beliefs.

Carey also called for attention to be given to the community from which and within which communication emerges. Community participants understand meaning through a “total experience” or “representations of experience” (Carey, p. 33). Culture does not happen to participants—they are born within culture, and co-substantiate culture while, and through, sharing experience. Culture may be called a sum total of “a set of practices, a mode of human activity, a process whereby reality is created, maintained, and transformed” (Carey, p. 65). A social media communicator logs on, emerges into an online culture, joins an existing scene, and takes part in the ensuing communicating.

The study of popular culture attends to daily communication among participants in a shared space and time (Carey 1989) and reveals a certain consciousness or approach to the world (Carey, p. 38). Popular culture, created for and enjoyed by a group of people (Greeley 1988), bears characteristic markings of those people who claim it as their culture. Popular culture provides artifacts around which people may gather or identify themselves, points to the beliefs and values that particular participants espouse, and may also describe places in which those beliefs and values are communicated through storytelling or expressions (Clark 2007). Pieper (1948, p. 57) indicates that “culture lives on ‘worship’,” and this worship or celebration of festivals points to what a community values and aspires toward. In this way, pop culture artifacts reveal dimensions of participants’ identities (Mazur and McCarthy 2001).
As a way of creating meaning, popular culture may include a religious dimension. Religious culture and popular culture are enmeshed in the daily sense-making of interaction with artifacts, either through creation, consumption, or sharing (Hoover 2006).

Scholars attending to religious dimensions of a particular cultural activity note various types of meaning-making within that activity (Hoover and Lundby 1997; Lynch 2005). Some people express religious culture through pop culture (Romanowski 2001); others engage in popular culture because their religion commands them to (Schultze 1996); and others see religion as a dimension of culture, conjoined with culture as an explanation for—or structure of—culture (Lundby 1997). Specific religious denominations may encourage their followers to engage with or avoid popular culture (Campbell 2013; Carreaga 1999; Dawson and Cowan 2004; Schultze 2008; Woods 2013; Zaleski 1997). Individuals can also choose to gather around religious radio, television shows, movies, the Internet, or music groups (Eskridge 1998; McCracken 2010; Schultze 1996; Woods 2013).

Hjarvard (2008) proposes that religious beliefs are now primarily shared via media. This “mediatization” of religion means that the media, in place of institutional religions, primarily provides spaces for community gatherings and belief-sharing (Hjarvard 2008). Yet, although the media provides a changing landscape for religious conversations, voices for religious culture and popular culture continue to speak about how to create, consume, or share community culture (Campbell 2011).

b. Encouraging Catholic Engagement with Popular Culture

The Catholic Church has spoken frequently about its interaction with popular culture and media. The Catholic Church has, throughout its history, adopted symbols and practices from local cultures—from pagan festivals to fire and water rituals (Greeley 1988). Some of these appropriations have become popular piety practices, part of the “religious sense” of the people. This popular “religious sense” finds expression in cults to saints, praying the rosary, or re-enactment of the stations of the cross (Greeley). Catholics have sought engagement with popular culture (Soukup 2008), sometimes as lay members in the local culture (Greeley 1988), or through official Catholic declarations. Historically, when Catholics appropriated popular expressions,
the essential question was whether this expression faithfully served the Gospel message (Catholic Church, 1994: no. 1676), and the interpretation of this has remained in the hands of pastoral leaders (Catholic Church: no. 1675). So discernment of the Catholic use of media or popular practices for expression has been sifted through the lens of Catholic leadership.

As stated earlier, Catholic leaders clearly encourage participation in online communication, often offering directive guidance. Campbell (2006, p. 19) notes that the Catholic Church “may tend to adopt a predominantly ‘top-down’ view of the Internet, seeing it chiefly as a means of disseminating official communications from the leadership to the faithful.” Vatican leaders recognized that “the question of freedom of expression on the Internet is… complex” (2002a: no. 11) when dealing with themes that are not in agreement with Catholic beliefs in areas of theology, authority, morality, and spirituality. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) has asked Catholic Church personnel to use social media in specific ways: for example, posting clear codes of conduct about maintaining a charitable tone, and facilitating discussions “primarily from a faith perspective” (Department of Communications 2000). The Catholic bishops remind church personnel managing Catholic sites that “personal communication by church personnel reflects the Church,” and that the individual communicator is to indicate personal ownership of all online communication, separate from a generic Catholic voice (Department of Communications 2000).

The Vatican encouragement to increase Internet use has also been tempered by Catholic messages of caution. While Campbell (2010) and Vogt (2011) note that some Catholic leaders use the Internet to speak about the faith, McDonnell (2009) found that Catholic leaders also caution about possible Internet dangers. McDonnell quotes the Vatican’s (2002a, no.2) warning that “the Internet is being put to many good uses now, with the promise of many more, but much harm also can be done by its improper use.” The “improper use” of the Internet includes increasing the “digital divide,” supporting cultural domination, or fostering isolation (Pontifical Council for Social Communications 2002a, nos.10-11).

Gray and Gautier’s (2012, p. 2) comprehensive 2012 survey of over 1,000 American Catholics reported that 43% of American Catholics were concerned with the “lack of civil tone” of online discussion. A broader analysis of religious conversation in public settings reported that religious discussion can break down into mutual pontificating or incivility (Frisina 2011),
something found in many genres of online discussion (Campbell 2013; Hurrell 2005; Papacharissi 2004, Reader 2012). Online discussion sites about politics have concluded that moderators of conversation protect safe online spaces for respectful dialogue (Hurrell, 2005). Compliance with discussion guidelines creates safe online spaces where civil discourse can happen (Hurrell 2005; Kenski, Coe and Rains 2012). The engagement in online discussion requires a moderator’s presence to ensure that participants maintain a civil tone towards others and keep the space open for dialogue.

As Gray and Gautier (2012) noted, if 50 percent of adult American Catholics are unaware of Catholic presence online, then we can conclude that many American Catholic members do not seem interested in an online Catholic identity—despite their leaders’ encouragement. Evidently, either Catholics are not engaging this particular aspect of popular culture, or many lay Catholics do not identify with current online Catholicism.

The lack of Catholics identifying with online Catholicism may also indicate a lack of identification with Catholicism overall, which is a broader Catholic dilemma. Catholic identity is complex, and a brief clarification is required for this article.

c. Identifying a Broader Catholic Identity: Encompassing and Including

Catholic identity, shared by one billion members worldwide and 74 million members in the United States (Pew 2011), eludes strict definition. Catholic members identify with varying political perspectives, conservative or liberal; take diverse roles as ordained or lay participants; and seek progressive or traditional interpretations of the same texts or codes. Different groups like church leaders, news media, or lay participants will understand Catholic identity from their own particular perspectives. Catholic identity includes shared values, beliefs, history, and expectations for social behavior, and particular persons or groups who identify with all or some of these aspects must translating them into their own communities and narratives.

Defining any universal Catholic identity includes defining what cultural identity or individual identification with a culture actually means. The rhetoric of large organizations is always a “management of multiple identities” (Cheney 1991, p. 9). Bochner’s (1973) definition of cultural identity includes the majority group’s shared values, assumptions, definitions and
beliefs. Hall (1990) proposes that cultural identity may be either a collectively shared culture or a coexistence of distinctive characteristics, while Yep (2004, p.79) describes cultural identity as “a social construction” that offers participants a sense of belonging and establishing expected ways of acting.

Particular translation of a broader cultural identity takes place through communication. Erikson (1968) located identity in the individual’s confidence about inner “sameness,” and Berger (1963) notes that one’s identity with a group must be granted by the group. Cheney and Tompkins (1987) state that sub-groups or individuals express identification with the group by indicating similarity between particular and shared characteristics. The individual indicates identification with the group through using the same symbols, like language, or sharing the same beliefs (Cheney 1991). These conversations about identity may take place at a broader cultural level, between group representatives in international dialogue, or between two individuals identifying shared beliefs.

The history of “Catholic identity” is complex. The parent term for Catholic, the Greek term kathalou, was mentioned first by Ignatius of Antioch in a letter in 107 A.D., when he stated “wherever the bishop shall appear, let the multitude of the people also be, even as, wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the kathalou” (Srawley 1900/2012). Catholic meant universal, or all-encompassing, and also took on the meaning of doctrine containing the whole truth, different than heretical doctrine containing partial truths.

The official communicators for the Catholic Church – the Vatican offices, the Pope, bishops, and Catholic representatives on a local level – propose criteria for a uniform Catholic identity in official written documents. The Catechism of the Catholic Church outlines these beliefs, codes and interpretations: for example, “We believe all ‘that which is contained in the word of God, written or handed down, and which the Church proposes for belief as divinely revealed’” (Vatican 1993, no.182). Catholic identity markers in liturgy and prayer include Eucharistic adoration, participation in the Mass and other sacraments (Vatican 1993, no. 914).

The Cathechism also encompasses a broader meaning for Catholic identity. Referencing a declaration from the Vatican II Council in 1960, it states:
“Let us be very careful not to conceive of the universal Church as the simple sum, or . . . the more or less anomalous federation of essentially different particular churches…the Church is universal by vocation and mission, but when she puts down her roots in a variety of cultural, social, and human terrains, she takes on different external expressions and appearances in each part of the world.” (Vatican 1993, no. 835)

This passage opens up the term “Catholic” to allow for different expressions and appearances. The term “Catholic” may then be interpreted as meaning not uniformity but variety. The universal Catholic identity incorporates particular Catholic identities as embodied by individuals rooted in their own cultural and societal milieus.

Dillon (1999), studying the phenomenon of dissenting Catholics in the United States, proposes that Catholic identity includes diverse subcultures. Dillon (1999, p. 4) argues that “dissent from what are purported to be core doctrines does not necessarily fracture the tradition and unity of the church.” Dissenting Catholics amplify the concept of Catholic identity beyond strict followers of hierarchical authority to include connected, autonomous doctrine interpreters (p. 9). The co-existence of dissenting Catholics with orthodox Catholics, who attend more closely to Vatican declarations, produces a multiplicity of Catholic identity definitions.

Recent official communication by the current Pope, Francis, offers a helpful metaphor for Catholic identity. Pope Francis proposed that “the Church is Catholic because it is the ‘House of harmony,’ where unity and diversity are able to be combined to be a richness” (Zenit 2013, no. 3). Catholic identity is embodied in persons who respect the shared beliefs and rules for living with others in this “House” and who dialogue about diverse opinions or needs. This dialogue is happening in online forums, as spaces for conversation about topics like diversity, dissent, and interaction.

d. Identity Indicators

Online communities and forums have been home to religious conversationalists for many years. Campbell (2005), combining ideas from earlier researchers (Brasher 2004; O’Leary 1996, Van Dijk 1997; and others), defines online communities as “people gathering around a specific
topic or purpose with some level of commitment to that topic or purpose and each other” (Campbell 2005, p. 44). Online community members, co-constructing online content, co-construct community and thus create a narrative.

Campbell (2005) proposes that attending to the community’s narrative reveals the beliefs and views commonly shared by community members. This narrative identification involves “uncovering [the community’s] history, identifying its faith-based focus, considering its interpretation of the larger Christian narrative, locating its definition of community, and labeling the core self or identity of the group” (Campbell 2005, p. 79). Approaching the online religious community from this perspective includes attending to the particular community in its situatedness within a broader community.

The PhatMass narrative includes both traditional Catholic and modern pop culture themes. Religion, media, and popular culture meet in the religious, media-using, culture participant who communicates, consumes, or creates meaning through daily ritual involving technology. As such, this blend of pop culture content and Catholic beliefs reveals an emerging Catholic identity online, beyond traditional parish boundaries. And this phenomenon provides insight into a critical component of modern Catholic identity.

3. Method

This qualitative case study examined the Catholic social media site PhatMass. To study the public conversations taking place among active PhatMass community members, I selected non-participant observation virtual ethnography (Hine 2008). Initially, I had hoped to interview PhatMass members for their interpretation of their personal experiences in the PhatMass community. But the PhatMass founder, “dUST,” who is also currently a PhatMass moderator, gave permission only for a case study of the public conversations. A future exploration of PhatMass member interpretation through interviews would offer broader explanation of PhatMass communication and community. While direct access to PhatMass participants would help explain why PhatMass members participate, my attention to social conduct and conversations in the public discussion boards can explain how PhatMass members communicate.
Each PhatMass member creates a public profile listed in the “Pham,” including a username—although there are no guidelines, usernames usually include no indication of real offline names—an avatar, and optional personal information like age, gender, and religion. Usernames like “Lil Red,” “Nihil Obstat,” “Noel’s Angel,” and “dUST,” along with their avatar images, are accessible in the public domain. Although all PhatMass discussions are public, I still joined as a PhatMass member in order to observe the added private feature of the informal chat room. I joined the community with the name “RomanEthnographer,” with the religion “Catholic,” and the gender “female.”

Thematic analysis of the PhatMass website and discussion boards was conducted from February 5, 2013, through March 15, 2013. I logged on daily from 11:00am to 1:00pm, 4:00pm to 6:00pm, and again from 9:00pm to 10:00pm. As 40% of social media users check Facebook several times per day (Rainie et al. 2013), different times of the day may reveal different media practices. Therefore, I chose different times so as to note when different participants logged on to the discussion and how quickly comments were added.

I spent most of my time in the “Phorum,” where about ten new discussion topics were posted daily. 100 to 200 replies were posted daily across all discussion threads. Between 30 and 50 PhatMass members participated in discussions each day. PhatMass publicizes guidelines for forum participation prohibiting attacks against persons, other religions, or the Catholic faith, and content “not appropriate for underage visitors.”

Aware of the complexities of freely accessing comments made in public online spaces while respecting the privacy of the people posting (Campbell 2013), I recorded comments without names, using “Member1” and “Member2” if the conversation involved dialogue among members. All of the posts I included in this report are accessible via search engines.

I looked in discussion posts or on the site for expressions of Catholic identity and/or pop culture. My operational definition of Catholic identity was expressions of belief in Catholic Church authority (teaching tradition) on faith and morals, or belief in saints (among them Mary); recognition of the supreme authority of bishop of Rome; mention of Catholic liturgy and worship, or association with a particular Catholic religious group (Crocker 2001; Gambescia and
This Catholic identity also included self-identification as Catholic, even while espousing differing cultural or social expressions of faith and morals (Dillon 1999; Vatican 1993). My operational definition of pop culture was references to cultural artifacts (Clark 2007), popular practices (Carey 1989), or identification with pop culture artifacts (Mazur and McCarthy 2001). I also recorded participant use of popular culture phrases or artifacts combined with religious artifacts (Eskridge 1998; McCracken 2010).

4. Findings

a. PhatMass Popular Culture: Ritually Logging-in Catholic

Events in the Catholic Church taking place during the month of this study had a significant effect on the research. On February 11, 2013, Pope Benedict XVI, announced his resignation (Vatican 2013a), and Catholic leaders elected the new pope, Pope Francis, on March 13 (Vatican 2013b). PhatMass participants shared much discussion about these events. In comparison to other discussions, the discussion about the Pope’s resignation attracted more participation in number of comments and participants. Participants commented on the outgoing Pope Benedict or speculated about the type of new pope that might be elected. PhatMass members proposed possible reasons for the Pope’s resignation and referred to Catholic teaching about the Pope’s right to resign. The discussion of a pope’s resignation—an event that had not taken place since 1415 (Vatican 2013a)—had an informal conversational style.

PhatMass members also started guessing who would be named the new Pope, sharing “Official Papal Picks” and playing “Fantasy Conclave,” an adaptation of Fantasy Football. PhatMass members shared alerts and updates from other social media sites like “PopeAlarm.com”, which used the tagline, “When the smoke goes up, you’ll know what’s going down.” After the election, PhatMass members continued commenting, offering opinions on the new Pope Francis, or sharing popular Catholic images of the new Pope Francis timidly waving after his election with the added tagline: “Pope Francis says hey.” PhatMass Catholics communicated about a significant Catholic event in the style, tone, and approach particular to PhatMass culture.
These informal PhatMass conversations show key characteristics of the activity of traditional Catholics immersed in today’s culture. Catholics on PhatMass offered humorous interpretations of the new Pope’s gestures, or “bet” on papal election outcomes, but they also referenced Church doctrine on papal protocol, calling for a new more traditional Pope who would “return to the Latin Mass.” A PhatMass social media conversation reflects a particular combination of traditional beliefs with popular culture vocabulary.

PhatMass members weighed in on this Catholic event through familiar rituals of communication. PhatMass members regularly joined online discussions, offered opinions, and responded to comments from other members. By posting Catholic memes, reacting to others’ comments, or sparking a string of discussion, these members participate in creating a Catholic culture. PhatMass members ritually logged-in, weekly, daily, or hourly, and experienced communally and personally the global event of a pope’s resignation.

PhatMass users form relationships and reputations through ongoing discussion, and reference these in their posts. For example, a female member noted that when a female begins a post on modesty, male posters always respond: “You guys do it ALL THE TIME here. A thread about getting dressed up? Guys come in and troll it. Make up thread? Guys come in and troll it and give opinions. Another clothing thread? Guys come in and give opinions.” The post indicated the usernames of some members who were known for offering opposing arguments or opinions. An online community invites ongoing engagement of members, so that members maintain currency in the community conversations.

Certain topics also attracted increased engagement by PhatMass participants, particularly those about traditional Catholic themes – like modesty – or popular culture. Participants indicated cultural values by gathering around these particular conversations.

b. Identifiably Catholic

Although open to varying opinions about papal election, PhatMass offered a particular rhetoric marked by identification with the universal Catholic identity promoted by hierarchical communication (Vatican 1993). Evidence of identification with Catholic beliefs and mission as defined in the Catechism (Vatican 1993) permeated the PhatMass website. PhatMass members
referenced beliefs and moral codes, shared an excitement for Catholic liturgy and prayer, and respectfully dialogued about Catholic moral codes.

One Catholic identity marker—expression of belief in Catholic Church authority—pervaded images and text created by PhatMass webmasters. PhatMass proclaims its mission as “to live and defend the faith given to us by Jesus Christ by remaining totally and completely obedient to the teaching authority of His Church” (http://www.phatmass.com/about/). As the dominant image on its main webpage, the PhatMass site posted images of prominent Catholic leaders like Cardinal Dolan sporting a red cardinal’s hat, under the title “Social Magisterium”. “Social Magisterium” connected PhatMass members to Catholic leaders’ social media messages on Twitter and Facebook.

PhatMass is imbued with expressions of Catholic prayer and liturgy. Catholic liturgy uses particular colors for each liturgical season (Department of USCCB, 2012). The PhatMass website indicates the current season by color-coding its site: green during ordinary time, purple in Advent, blue for Christmas, and grey during Lent. PhatMass members talked about how much they enjoyed doing Eucharistic adoration or taking part in Catholic liturgies. Members referenced Catholic belief in Mary by posting and reposting images of the rosary or posting “props” (the PhatMass phrase for support) for Mary. One member posted the image of a “Hi Mom” baseball cap from a popular music video, Party Rock Anthem (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KQ6zr6kCPj8) and added that this image was in Mary’s honor. Site participants promoted green army-fatigue style t-shirts bearing the phrase “Church Militant”. Some members inquired about and discussed favorite Catholic apps like “iBreviary” or “iPieta,” which provide daily Mass prayers and Catholic spiritual writings. PhatMass members participated in discussions that indicate that the community values traditional Catholic practices and conversations about Catholic themes.

c. Catholics Calling on Popular Culture

PhatMass participants also showed enthusiasm for popular culture, and a pop culture rhetoric informs PhatMass exploration of Catholic themes. In discussions, PhatMass members frequently referenced pop culture artifacts such as movies or celebrity figures, and often quoted
popular movies or songs. For example, in the four modesty discussion threads started during February 2013, different PhatMass members posted a phrase by a celebrity comedian, Will Ferrell, “Well, you’re a smelly pirate hooker.” This reference to a popular movie, *Anchorman* (2004), highlights an exaggerated response to immodesty by Will Ferrell’s character. This particular reference in the PhatMass discussion indicated that a member thought the discussion had taken an exaggerated approach to modesty, and felt the discussion needed a lighter or more humorous tone.

PhatMass members have also appropriated *My Little Pony* images to communicate a particular message. When a discussion included negative comments about people or authoritarian comments like “a woman should always dress modestly,” PhatMass members inserted *My Little Pony* images with comments meant to lighten the tone of serious discussion. For example, in the modesty discussion, someone posted a *My Little Pony* image with the phrase “Well, we can get one of those two out of the way. Pinkie Pie is quite modest in this dress for the Grand Galloping Gala.” Another time, a poster expressed offense and hurt feelings about a comment; soon after, another member commented, “This thread needs ponies,” and immediately, five or six members posted their favorite *My Little Pony* image to that thread. Regular PhatMass posters understand the meaning of these images. These pony images sometimes sparked a change in tone from serious to light discussion, and at other times ended the discussion.

PhatMass participants also value particular pop culture artifacts. They commented on products they appreciated, promoting among themselves “the most swagalicious Catholic t-shirts in existence”, with names like “Catholic Swag V-neck,” or “Catholic Beast Mode” (*UrbanDictionary.com* states that both “swagalicious” and “beast” mean “awesome” or “amazing”). When a discussion has attracted ongoing participants and a number of signs of appreciation, the image of a “taco” is added. The taco is a symbol of popular approval that PhatMass members have created and sustained.

PhatMass participants also offered opinions on their favorite beers to consume, frequently commenting in the discussion thread named “Beer Garden: The Lost Art of Catholic Drinking.” The combination of religious affiliation with beer drinking seems to be a particular expression of PhatMass culture. The content accepted by moderators or valued in discussions reflects the particular brand of Catholic espoused by this community. The PhatMass members promote
particular combinations of values, and the site attracts those people who appreciate that combination.

PhatMass values are also reflected in the website’s promotion of Catholic hip-hop music. The site states “PhatMass is not a record label. We are a production entity and a network…or as we like to say, phamily.” PhatMass promotes Catholic hip-hop artists and their music on its website and in off-line events. This may reflect the founder’s appreciation for Catholic hip-hop, but this is not explicit on the site itself. I would need to conduct interviews with PhatMass founders and members to make sense of the history, mission, and effect of this particular combination of Catholic culture with hip-hop music.

The PhatMass website promoted humorous approaches to traditional topics, including the Pope. PhatMass shared a “SuperPope Anime,” a Catholic adaptation of the popular anime style of cartoon involving a superhero Pope battling the devil. PhatMass members joined in the informal approach to papal figures using popular expressions of affectionate approval, like “the Pope is dope” (UrbanDictionary.com states that “dope” can mean “cool” or “awesome”). When some members expressed discontent that the new Pope Francis was not wearing the traditional red cape, a PhatMass member replied, “Pope Francis is named after a saint who stripped himself naked; you lot should count yourselves lucky he’s got anything on at all.” PhatMass’s informal approach to traditional Catholic themes communicates both amused enthusiasm and respect.

As PhatMass members referred to earlier conversations, they wove together a shared story, told and repeated over time. Some comments began with “remember when,” or “this is what REALLY happened,” and then others joined in with new interpretations of the stories. At the end of one discussion about the history of the name “Phat,” one member posted: “Just goes to show you can give any meaning to anything and believe what ever you want.” Meaning is made and re-made. As Catholics gather around popular images or phrases, they share understanding of what these images communicate in community. PhatMass participants interpret traditional Catholic beliefs using popular culture references, creating Catholic culture through their communication.

d. Constructing Online Civility
The PhatMass combination of traditional Catholic beliefs with popular culture references includes ongoing discussion about acceptable or unacceptable communication. PhatMass—directed by lay members outside the jurisdiction of Church personnel (Department of Communications, 2000)—interprets what is acceptable on the PhatMass site. For example, the PhatMass team maintains identification with official Catholic statements about belief, liturgy, morals and prayer, but allows humorous or informal tones in its religious discussions.

A Catholic blogger outside of PhatMass described it as “a grassroots movement within the Church, made up of numerous volunteers, to promote orthodoxy to the Catholic faith” (Penitent Blogger, 2004). Communication that emerges in this type of Catholic grassroots forum provides distinctly different messages than communication from Catholic leaders. PhatMass provides an online witness to one such informal conversation, and may give insight into how lay members communicate about Catholicism.

As an online community, PhatMass sets up its rules for engagement, and counts on a team of moderators to help enforce the rules. In the “Phorum Guidelines,” posters are told “Do Not Post: Personal Attacks,” “Harmful, rude criticisms of religions,” “public criticism of moderators,” “Catholic vs. Catholic bickering,” or “mature content.” “The Main Rule” is “Don’t be a jerk.” The eight PhatMass moderators acted on infractions throughout the month of this study by enforcing these rules. It was evident that rules were being enforced when text was deleted and the moderator posted “Edited by moderator”, but I did not see any of these specific expressions of incivility before the moderator had deleted them.

PhatMass participants expressed incivility through name-calling or pejorative comments. Certain topics like women’s modesty, women priests, politics, and conservative Catholic bloggers attracted incivility. There were many examples of name-calling, sometimes serious and sometimes in jest. For example, when one member stated: “Please stop interrupting me,” another member responded “Shut Up Hippie” along with an image of Richard Nixon. When one female member seriously proposed bathing dresses for increased modesty, another female member joked that “All the Blessed Mother’s fashion magazines were discovered in the Qumran caves, and she definitely had a preference for these.” Another discussion about modesty drew comically exaggerated responses from twenty posters, including a picture of a woman in a space suit with the comment, “I think it might show a little too much face.”
In the analysis of uncivil expressions, I sometimes found it difficult to distinguish between humorous name-calling and serious name-calling. Other researchers of incivility in online discussions have found sarcastic comments difficult to categorize as uncivil or civil (Hurrell 2005; Kenski, Coe and Rains 2012). PhatMass moderators have not acted publicly on all possible expressions of incivility on the site. Future interviews with PhatMass moderators would give more understanding of how and why they decide to respond.

PhatMass offers evidence of lay Catholics moderating their own community conversations. Civility is constructed and maintained among peers, and civil reactions appear in response to incivility. For example, one PhatMass member, Member1, referred to Pope Benedict as a “quitter” and reflected on his resignation: “I’m obviously disgusted.” This was the day the resignation news had emerged, and others expressed disapproval of Member1 with sad face emojis or negative comments. This led to the following exchange:

Member1: “I guess I’m just another cripple who has no place in society and nothing left to offer, I resign from Phatmass so that I no longer upset anyone.”
Member2: “I feel really badly if you feel we beat up on you today, we needed to vent a little, this resignation of the Pope has caught us all by surprise.”

Commitment to civility includes continuing the conversation, explaining meaning, and asking for understanding. Sometimes PhatMass members shifted the tone of a conversation to more civil ground, and other times, a moderator stepped in to end the conversation. Peer and moderator communication includes communicating through incivility to reclaim civil discourse and shutting the door on conversations that have no room for civility.

As these lay Catholics negotiate their way through a public online forum, the presence of clear guidelines and active moderators allow for the emergence of civil dialogue about religion. In general, PhatMass conversationalists, using an informal tone, attempted to maintain respect for the participants. And yet, only those who wanted to participate joined the dialogue. As such, PhatMass provides a particular niche for Catholics, blending orthodox Catholicism with popular culture and offering a broader example of how those discussions may remain civil.
5. Space Online for Broadening Catholic Identity

After the election of Pope Francis, a PhatMass member posted an image of Willy Wonka saying: “Oh you think the Pope isn’t Catholic enough? If only the cardinals had consulted your blog instead of the Holy Spirit.” PhatMass provides an online space where certain Catholics feel at home, and the combination of traditional and popular cultural expressions signifies the particular Catholic identity created by this online community.

a. Range of Opinions: True to Tradition

Although PhatMass discussions included a range of opinions about Benedict’s resignation and Francis’ election, PhatMass is identified overall as traditionally Catholic. The PhatMass managing team promotes authoritative Catholic answers in its “Defense Directory” and a “Catholic Q & A,” where Catholic experts named “Church Scholars” offer reflections on the Bible, the Pope, sacraments, and morality. Although PhatMass comments sometimes took a sarcastic tone, reminiscent of Protestant satire on websites like the WittenburgDoor (www.wittenburgdoor.com), an overall respect for Catholic hierarchical contexts was promoted and enforced. When one post questioned the authority of a bishop, the moderator censored the comment while referencing the rule prohibiting “Catholic vs. Catholic debate.” PhatMass website and members took an informal tone toward Catholic leaders, while still maintaining respect for their authority.

When a member stated disagreement with Pope Francis because he was “anti-Latin mass,” peers responded immediately, asking the member to stop. A traditional Catholic approach to Latin Mass may mean disagreeing with Catholic Church leaders who do prefer vernacular masses, but the PhatMass guidelines prohibit this kind of discussion. It was clear from members’ comments that this Latin Mass debate often appears on PhatMass and is handled the same way each time. After this occurrence in February 2013, the moderator issued a warning, and finally posted: “That.is.enough. Do NOT make comments like this thread again.” The original comment was then overwritten by the PhatMass moderator with red writing: “Enough with the Catholic vs. Catholic debate… THIS TOPIC IS LOCKED”.
b. Range of Opinions: Open to Change

Some discussions in the Phorum revealed diverse approaches and opinions about Catholic topics. PhatMass members frequently referenced sources of Catholic authority like Church law, the Pope’s teaching, or the writings of a saint. Yet, as PhatMass members discussed Pope Benedict XVI’s decision to resign as Pope, comments about current Church problems emerged. One PhatMass member reflected on a possible link between the papal resignation and an “inquiry into Vatican gay officials.” Others responded: “Maybe this is the case!,” “You’re exaggerating and this causes scandal,” and “Everyone involved had better be extremely freaking careful.” The discussion continued, with some members referencing different sources, and others leading long tangential conversations about other issues. The last comment about this particular topic was “To paraphrase the t.v. show Raising Hope: ‘It’s one of those urban legends, so it must be true.’” The discussion had come to no conclusion about the veracity of the original statement; participants had merely conversed about possible interpretations.

Varying opinions about official Catholic teachings appeared in discussions about homosexuality and same-sex attraction. No significant conversation occurred during the month I studied PhatMass, but participants referenced earlier discussions about this issue, and it seems the conversations include different interpretations of Catholic teachings on homosexuality. However, in the PhatMass “Catholic Q & A,” website staff maintained official support of the positions promoted by the Vatican. PhatMass provided clear communication about current official Catholic teachings through this “Questions & Answers,” but also a limited—but real—space in discussion for exploration about what those beliefs might mean to individual Catholics.

c. Online Identifying with Catholicism

We can uncover the shared beliefs and views of this Catholic online community by attending to its narrative and core identity (Campbell 2005). While PhatMass promotes an orthodox Catholic identity strongly identified with hierarchical Church teaching, less traditional Catholic identities are also emerging on PhatMass through pop culture references and member
discussions. As in any interaction among distinct persons, shared identity and differences of opinion and understanding emerge in conversation. PhatMass Catholics are by no means representative of all Catholics, but they show how Catholics may participate in defining their identity through a personal and communal co-construction. PhatMass’ shared Catholic identity may encompass diverse expressions, including traditional and popular culture, and conversations indicate that dialogue is permitted and promoted.

Pope Francis suggested that a “catholic” Church could be a “‘house of harmony,’ where unity and diversity are able to be combined to be a richness” (Zenit 2013, no. 3). PhatMass is evidence that online communities provide ground for Catholics to unite around their key beliefs through a diversity of expressions, governed by common rules and practices. PhatMass is just one type of online community, but a multitude of participants call this community home.

6. Conclusion

American Catholics may not have reported high involvement in Catholicism online (Gray & Gautier 2012), but major events such as the papal resignation and election in the early months of 2013 can draw active online commentary about Catholic traditions and contemporary culture. The timing for this study coincided with extraordinary circumstances for a Catholic online discussion. Further study of PhatMass or other Catholic social media sites during more ordinary months would provide more accurate descriptions of typical communication. Yet, the increase in online communication about Catholic events may also represent where, how, and by whom Catholic identity is currently constructed.

PhatMass members ritually log-in to their online Catholic community, gathering around identifiably Catholic traditions and calling on pop culture for self- or communal expression. PhatMass participants co-construct this online community in a fairly civil environment, abiding by discussion guidelines and incorporating humor into communal negotiations of incivility. Further study of how civility is fostered in online and/or religious dialogue would help shed light on how better to negotiate incivility in an online setting.

PhatMass is an online space where some lay Catholics are gathering to participate in conversations about Catholicism, outside official Catholic hierarchies or Catholic parish
geographical boundaries. This particular conversation is characterized by traditional Catholic beliefs and popular culture references. Participants broaden the meaning of Catholic identity to include popular expressions of traditional beliefs and unconventional connections to orthodox teachings.

When Catholics heard that the head of the Church, the Pope, was stepping down, they took to the virtual town squares of social media to discuss the news. Catholic social media gathering spaces provide broader access to communication channels, and thus permit varied types of Catholics to gather. As various types of Catholics feel more comfortable in the digital space, expressions of Catholic identity will only continue to evolve and grow in ways worthy of study and analysis.

Bibliography


Notes

4 Gray MM and Gautier ML (2012: p. 8) in “Catholic new media use in the United States” state precisely that “53% of Catholics do not visit a Catholic-related website of any kind,” (p. 6) and only 5% of Catholics follow Catholic blogs.
5 PhatMass member quotes included in the “Findings” section are primarily from “The Phorum” web page on the PhatMass website. Then, quotes from any other part of PhatMass website are followed by a reference to the PhatMass web page where this quote was found. The latter types of quotes are referenced through this type of specification in the endnote.
7 Conclave means the gathering of Cardinals to elect the Pope.
8 Fantasy Football is an ESPN-sponsored online game in which participants create fictional teams and guess which offline teams will score and win games. Available at http://games.espn.go.com/frontpage/football (accessed 23 July 2014).
9 USCCB states in a document produced by the Committee on Divine Worship that the varying colors used in liturgical vestments reflect “the specific character of the mysteries of faith being celebrated and to a sense of Christian’s life passage through the course of the liturgical year” (no.345). USCCB specifies that white is used for feast days, red for Holy Week, Green for ordinary time, violet or purple for Advent and Lent, while gold may be used for solemn celebrations (no.346). Available at http://old.usccb.org/liturgy/current/chapter6.shtml (accessed 10 February 2013).
11 A sad face emoji is an image like this 🙁 inserted in online or cellular text conversations.