

Mission Possible: Blogging Russian Orthodox Priests¹

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Abstract. The present paper dwells on the modern phenomenon of the clergy going online and exploring new audiences. The empirical study conducted by the author concerned the activities of popular Russian-speaking Orthodox bloggers whose heightening media presence is aimed at digital missionary work and catechism. The research was organized in accordance with the theoretical framework of the concept of communicative figurations that was coined by Andreas Hepp. This constructivist approach implies that mediatization blurs the borders between previously disentangled actors and encourages the growth of their interactions and, thus, a tighter social reality. To embody a communicative figurations-oriented study, the author lays down methodological foundations that are able to express the nature of personal practices and the reflections on them. For this purpose, the methods used consisted of case studies, expert and field interviews, and online text analysis. The findings can be set out in the following manner. Online media activity and social networking allow greater transparency and a wider audience. Despite stereotype and politicized doxa, the online demand for a specific niche of purely catechetical Orthodox priest blogging has existed for a decade and a half. Over the years, media practices of missionary work, catechism, and preaching have been formed, mainly on such social networks as VK.com, LiveJournal and Instagram, and on YouTube channels. This dynamic has been growing: priest blogs have acquired the audiences of tens of thousands of subscribers. This is because priests use contemporary language when addressing the public for the purpose of missionary work and catechism. They attract an audience of the Russian-speaking network of actors that is diverse in age, gender, and country of residence. Seeing and aiming beyond the conservative confines of an offline parish and church, blogging priests have the opportunity to create their own audience – to reach out to a particular generation, choose the style and content of a sermon or testimony of faith. In turn, the audiences choose priest bloggers according to their interests and the preferred methods of religious participation. Orthodox blogger priests strive to consolidate their efforts, to promote various forms of testimony of faith in the digital space. The central direct consequence of the mediatization of catechism and missionary practices is the promotion of a new image of the priest and a new version of priest–layman interaction, both contributing to a new church construct.

Keywords: digital Orthodoxy, social networks, priest blogs, communicative figuration, Orthodox blogging, digital missionary work, Orthodox media practices

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Digital Orthodoxy is a dynamically developing online niche for engaging priests and lay people, Orthodox media discourses, forums, and priests' blogs on social networks. Until recently, this phenomenon was on the periphery of researchers' attention, and now sociologists and religious studies scholars are becoming increasingly interested in it. The years 2015–2020 saw the publication of studies on the dynamics of Orthodox media digitization (Luchenko, 2015), mediatized Orthodoxy of traditionalist media (Grishaeva, Shumkova, 2018), attitudes to the internet and Orthodox blogging (Suslov, 2016), the use of the internet in the parish environment (Grishaeva, Busygin, 2020), the image of the Orthodoxy in secular media, and mediatization of pastoral care in the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) (Bogdanova, 2020). This new subject of research is characterized by its digital form and constant dynamic change. Its innovative form directly correlates with the rapid mediatization of modern Russian society, with the routinization and banalization of new media technologies, the blurring of boundaries between online and offline everyday life. In the realities of the 2020s, it will hardly occur to anyone to dub Orthodox media practices some autonomous virtuality. Moreover, as far as we can see from the current research, Orthodox media practices are a routine constituent of various venues on the Russian internet.

The rapid mediatization of Orthodoxy makes it impossible to travel the traditional route of reifying research results and conceptual models. Digital Orthodoxy is in a state of constant flux. Its media practices become more variegated, its technological infrastructure is developing, and the attitude to the internet and media technologies inside the Orthodox environment is changing, too. For instance, back in 2014–2016, researchers noted “digital anxiety” and unease over the internet among Orthodox clergy (Suslov, 2016).² However, 2020 publications with increasing frequency record a generally positive attitude on the part of Orthodox believers to the internet as a medium that offers direct access to priests; these publications also feature topics of online pastoral care and images of Orthodox priests in mass media (Morozov, 2016; Bogdanova, 2020). Journalists in both secular and Orthodox media write more and more about blogging Orthodox priests and their online activities.³ The routinization of Orthodox media practices has come a long way from the late 1990s to 2020s – from digitizing specialized ecclesiastical and para-ecclesiastical media to creating Orthodox web portals and sites, to the first blogs of priests appearing on LiveJournal and YouTube, and finally to the variegated activities of Orthodox priests and lay people on popular social networks.

² M. Suslov proposed the “digital anxiety” concept as an analytical description of the attitude of the Russian Orthodox Church priests who blog on LiveJournal to the internet and new media technologies (Suslov, 2016).

³ Glinkin A. 2018. “A Blog is a Very Convenient Tool for Preaching”: Why Priests Have Gone on YouTube. *Afisha Daily*. Available at: <https://daily.afisha.ru/infopom/9074-blog-eto-ochen-udobnyy-instrument-dlya-propovedi-zachem-svyaschenniki-prishli-na-youtube/> (accessed: 20.12.2020); Segeda A. 2020. TOP-10 Best Priests' Blogs on YouTube. *Pravoslavie.fm*. Available at: <https://pravoslavie.fm/glavnoe/top-10-luchshih-svyashhennikov-blogerov-youtube/> (accessed: 23.12.2020).

Blogs on social networks are of particular interest for a sociological study of Orthodox media and the mediatization dynamics of modern Orthodoxy. As far as we can judge from the works of sociologists and anthropologists from outside Russia, it is religious blogs on social media that construct religious influencers, identities, and community boundaries today. Orthodox blogging (its key subjects, digital formats, infrastructure, actors, and repertoires) still remains a little-studied cross-section of the Russian-speaking digital Orthodoxy. What do blogging Orthodox priests bring on the internet? What tasks do they set themselves? What do they see their mission to be?

The present article will expound the results of an empirical study of a communication network of Orthodox Russian-speaking bloggers whose media practices are construed as digital missionary outreach and catechizing. My research proceeds from the hypothesis that the strategies of using the internet and media technologies emerge within the context of long-term digital practices of Orthodox priests who started personal blogs as a religious media practice of a testimony of faith. The key research issues were the forms of media communication in priests' blogs, their infrastructure and thematic framing.

Research methodology and methods. In selecting my methodology, I was guided by the fact that media practices of Russian-speaking blogging priests remain poorly studied. Consequently, such a study requires a methodological framework that would allow the researcher to elucidate connections between actors, media, and topics of Orthodox blogging. The communicative figuration concept proposed by Andreas Hepp (Ostrovskaya, 2020) has acquitted itself well as just such a methodology. This concept is becoming increasingly popular among scholars of religion as it allows them to analyse the digital practices of a particular religion in the context of wider mediatization of today's societies.

Hepp's starting point is the sum total of provisions of the socio-constructive approach (Hepp, 2020). Mediatization is understood here as a historically and culturally determined meta-process of social changes in all areas of social life, including religion. This process has three waves: mechanization, electrification, and digitization. At the digitization wave, mediatization penetrates so deeply into the sociocultural environment that it creates previously non-existent combinations of actors, media technologies, and media practices (Hepp, 2020: 5–6, 8, 11). Hepp proposed the concept of communicative figurations for conceptualizing the stage of society's "deep mediatization."

According to Hepp, communicative figurations are patterns of processes of communicative interweaving that exist across various media. It is in communicative figurations that people construct symbolically significant sociocultural worlds. Each such figuration has four constituents: communicative forms, media ensembles, a constellation of actors, and a thematic framing. The term "communicative forms" refers to practices typical of a society's specific sub-system (politics, economy, religion, etc.). A constellation of actors is a network of individuals connected by specific communicative practices. Such a constellation may be formed either by individual actors or by groups or organizations. Each figuration has only one constellation of actors that

perceives itself as part of it. Media ensembles are certain sets of media used by actors to mediate their communication and to form the environment used as a medium for the given communicative figuration. A thematic framing sets a landmark for a meaningful interaction between actors and at the same time is the point of figuration (Hepp, Hasebrink, 2014: 260–262).

The algorithm for empirical research into communicative figurations was developed by Hepp in cooperation with Uwe Hasebrink (Hasebrink, Hepp, 2016). In the multiplicity of media brought by the wave of deep mediatization, they propose singling out those that mediate an individual's practices – individual media repertoires. The media practices of figuration are correlated with a media ensemble. It might turn out to be scantier than individual media repertoires as regards the assortment of media engaged in it. Conducting interviews is the relevant method at this stage of research. Key questions here concern the pragmatics of using specific media in the figuration practices on subjects that are relevant for that particular figuration (Hasebrink, Hepp, 2016: 7–15).

Hepp and Hasebrink's methodology appears to me to be highly productive in two aspects. First, it contains an algorithm for researchers to access a given figuration: a sequence of steps for establishing connections between individual actors with a focus on individual media repertoires and the specifics of their use. Second, Hepp and Hasebrink proposed a methodology for determining the boundaries of a figuration. Hepp and Hasebrink believe that targeted empirical research requires adjusting to scale the boundaries of a figuration. These boundaries can be either scaled down to a group or a digital collective, or scaled up to the limit, i.e., to the media practices of a social field or system (Hepp, Hasebrink, 2018: 23–24). In the context of my research, the possibility of accessing the field via the study of the individual repertoires of blogging priests allows me to identify those communicative networks that are not rigidly tied to the practices and boundaries of local Orthodox parishes.

The empirical part of the research was conducted between February 2019 and December 2020. The principal research methods used were online textual analysis, case studies, and field, expert, and biographical interviews. The first stage of the research was information collection: analysis of publications about popular priests' blogs on Orthodox media, and subscriptions to personal accounts of Orthodox bloggers in order to monitor the thematic repertoire and main practices of blogs on social networks such as VK.com and Instagram, and on YouTube. This stage also involved collecting 23 field interviews with members of St. Petersburg Orthodox youth clubs at various churches in St. Petersburg. The second stage involved conducting expert interviews with priests connected professionally with the missionary departments of the St. Petersburg and Minsk dioceses (15 interviews). Experts were asked about their attitudes to the internet and new media, the media practices of the dioceses on social networks, and their assessment of online activities of blogging priests. The findings obtained at both stages were used to create a target sampling for specific case studies. Blogger target sampling was produced via respondent-driven sample selection (Heckathorn,

2007; Volz, Heckathorn, 2008). The following criteria were used: the blogger's age (the generation born in the 1970s–1980s); their relevant offline occupation as an ordained priest; regular blogging over the past four to five years; and the blog being thematically geared towards missionary outreach. The third stage involved conducting ten interviews with blogging priests.

My research was geared towards studying the media practices of Orthodox priests for whom blogging is not part of their professional activities, i.e., the activities they have officially been charged with. I took four blogs as representative cases to be considered for the purposes of the present article. Three of them are blogs of Russian-speaking Orthodox priests who embarked on their own media activities long before the Russian Orthodox Church made a decision on Orthodox blogging.⁴ They use various media (YouTube, personal websites, LiveJournal). Their authors employed different media practices for addressing and engaging with digital audiences. Additionally, these three blogs were mentioned as good examples of the genre in interviews with other blogging priests and in expert interviews. The fourth case is somewhat different: it is an Orthodox priest's blog on Instagram with a non-trivial way of offering his testimony of faith and engaging with the digital audience.

An Orthodox digital blog's constellation of actors and media. Expert and blogger interviews invariably named three Russian-language blogs as the most popular, with the highest numbers of subscribers: “Batushka Will Reply” by Fr. Alexander Kukhta on YouTube; “Existence Between” by Fr. Sergius Lepin on LiveJournal; and Fr. Konstantin Parkhomenko's page on the Azbuka Very (The ABC of Faith) website. The fourth blog, “The Running Priest,” was named in most field interviews with members of St. Petersburg Orthodox youth clubs. Additionally, the #батюшкаонлайн (#batushkaonline) hashtag links it to a public page made up of priests' blogs that are popular on Instagram. The author of each of these blogs was asked about opinion of the internet and new media technologies, the Orthodox media he uses, and his individual media repertoire.

The respondents offered highly positive assessments of the internet as a new space for the testimony of faith, a space that allows them to go beyond the confines of their parish or specific church and carry their preaching to tens of thousands of people subscribed to the blogger's channel or who regularly visit his site:

I have an article titled “Why Does an Orthodox Priest Need His Own Website?” I write that this is a chance for us to multiply thousandfold the words I address to people. I have been delivering sermons for many years to 20–30 parishioners, few people come to church on weekdays. The numbers obviously increase on religious holidays, to 100 or even 500. But I celebrate liturgy and deliver sermons on weekdays. And the

⁴ Vlogs of Priests of the Russian Orthodox Church: Recommendations and Advice. 2018. *Moscow Patriarchate. Synodal Department for Church's Relations with Society and Mass Media*. Available at: <https://sinfo-mp.ru/-videoblogi-svyashhennikov-russkoy-pravoslavnoy-tserkvi-rekomendatsii-i-sovetyi.html> (accessed: 25.12.2020).

internet has given me such an opportunity: first as audio recordings, then I began to upload videos of my sermons, and thousands of people watch them. And I know that even my poorly expressed word (I do not think of myself as an outstanding preacher) has provided support for people, healed them, led them out of some dead-end situations in their lives, saved from committing suicide, from despair and depression. I have given it much thought – why do I need a website? We know that Christians have always used whatever technological capabilities have been available to them. When Christ preached to people, he sailed off a bit from the coast of the Sea of Galilee in a boat because water carries sound far. And people assembled on the shore, and Christ spoke from the sea, a short distance off the coast, and his voice, amplified by water, carried to hundreds and thousands of people. St. Paul the Apostle invented an amazing epistolary genre. He began writing letters to various Christians. There had been private letters back then, but Paul's were what we call "open letters" today. He would make a note at the end: "read it and give others to read." John Chrysostom introduced an interesting practice. Tachygrapher boys followed him, writing things down. Then they would extend their shorthand notes, he would correct them, and final copies would be made and sold. That's why so many of his texts came to be passed down to us. The internet offers us incredible opportunities in this particular regard (Fr. Konstantin Parkhomenko).

The interview also stressed that new media technologies allow bloggers to choose their target audience, to address it in a particular communication style. The LiveJournal space that seems to have lost its erstwhile popularity still attracts those who prefer a friendly dialogue by way of written communication. Fr. Sergius Lepin's "Existence Between" blog is a stark example. Over 17 years, the blog has gained a stable audience that is constantly growing through the links to LiveJournal the author places in his accounts on other social media. It is crucially important to note that the blog's subscribers regularly take steps towards establishing offline communication with the priest. Many of them come to Father Sergius's church to see him and talk to him in person. They also join him on pilgrimages. In the interview, Fr. Sergius stressed that the media environment of the internet and social networks allow the lay person to choose to meet different priests, and between different forms of testimony of faith:

For 17 years, I've always had a little over 3000 subscribers. The influx stopped once LiveJournal was no longer one of the most popular social networks. Now I have a massive influx of subscribers on other social networks, for instance, on Facebook, where I started cross-posting. I have over 4500 subscribers there now, and another 1000 are awaiting confirmation. For now, I remain optimistic about this being a worthwhile endeavour. And it's not even a matter of the number of readers! Priests, like medications, should be different. There are people who cannot stand the type of priest I represent. And then there are those, on the contrary, who like my style. There are different priests and different audiences. My audience is often made up of people who have doubts, who are free both literally and figuratively, who have their own idea of what proper writing style is, people who care least of all about some Old Church Slavic words in

a text, about traditional devices in exegesis, people who are not very afraid of new things. But there was never any specific goal to preach to a particular group of readers. I did what I wanted to and what I liked: I chose things I wanted to write about, and I chose the literary devices I was familiar with and thought to be proper and possible. A priest should be himself. Virtual presence is friendly presence first and foremost, not official and formal presence under some instruction and duty. This is not a parish activity where I must celebrate liturgy in a certain way, deliver a sermon on a certain subject, talk to certain people even if I am not in the mood today and have an attack of misanthropy. Online, I can choose people who might be interested in me and whom I am interested in. When delivering a sermon, I must be universal because there are people there who have knowledge and those who don't, people who are educated and people who are not, right-wing people and left-wing people. In church, you must come to them with an invocation that is proper and instructive for everyone. And on Live-Journal, I could use words without having to think whether or not my reader knows what "transcendental apperception" is. When you write about things you want to write about in the way you want to write about them, then your online friends are those who like what you write, who find it acceptable. If a person is not interested in apperception, they will not visit your page again, instead, they will visit the page of someone who will tell them cardinal direction they should face when bowing to the ground and before which icon of the Mother of God they should light candles for a particular purpose. The rule is simple: write about the things you are interested in, and there will be people who are interested in that, too, or those who will write a hundred comments telling you why they don't care about this even one little bit. You know, it's like with doctors' clinical practice: there are situations when it does not matter whether you are an ophthalmologist or a cardiologist, you are first and foremost a doctor. But then there are situations when your specialization is paramount. It is the same with priests: in 99% of their practice there are "simply" priests. But as academics, theologians, columnists, and bloggers, they can afford to have a specialization and target a specific audience (Fr. Sergius Lepin).

Every interview clearly manifested reflections on target audiences and feedback from subscribers. The respondents stressed that their subscribers are guided in their choice by their preferences for particular media, styles, and contents of a certain blog:

The problem is that, mentally, we are stuck in the world of Internet 2.0, where social networks and horizontal connections rule the roost. That's true. But recently, the system has begun to grow more complex, the complicated algorithms of social networks and the constant bombardment of users with information have been added to the familiar ways things are. People now seek out people they like and trust, rather than a particular social network. But you cannot take a felt-tip pen and paint a picture using only one colour, just like you cannot cure any illness with a single medication. And priests should also be different. For instance, I am not a fan of what the priest NB does. Nothing but pink ponies and unicorns! But I understand there are groups of people who need just that kind of language. There is no universal approach that absolutely

everyone will like and that would meet every need (...) I was born in 1992, I am 28. Who is my audience? I have YouTube statistics, and it turns out that school children make up 0.1% of my viewers, while 50 % *are the same age as me*. I fit in with that generation, I grow, and my viewers grow, too. Many of them have some problems with the Church. But I understand that I cannot resolve these problems remotely. So, what I do is I sow seeds of thought that may sprout under the influence of other circumstances and will prompt folk to search for answers. In that way, YouTube is an ideal missionary thing. (Fr. Alexander Kukhta)

An analysis of answers given by bloggers on YouTube allows us to describe their audience: 60% are women, 40% are men; 85% live in cities. And subscribers are generally aged between 25 and 60 years old.

In every interview, blogging priests said that YouTube, VK.com, and LiveJournal were the most popular venues for people interested in the Orthodoxy. Subscribers like YouTube channels best because they prefer videos, while users of LiveJournal prefer long texts and the option of stating their opinion in the comments section and of engaging in months-long discussions. Instagram was seen as a network “mostly for women,” since its prevalent communicative form is photos, brief captions, or tiny texts.

The author of “The Running Priest” blog had a radically different opinion of Instagram. Judging from his own experience, he characterized it as a reliable intermediary in establishing a direct contact with the young audience. Additionally, he stressed that Instagram makes it possible to quickly find like-minded people and establish connections in the Orthodox media environment:

Social networks are a reality of our life. I’ve long thought about whether I need it or not. Social networks help me find people; they may also help in self-fulfilment. Early on, I opened accounts on VK.com and Facebook. But I don’t do anything there, I am not interested in being there. And then I launched an Instagram account because I wanted self-fulfilment, I wanted to protect myself and find like-minded people. In just six months, I had 4000 subscribers. Thanks to Instagram, an employee of the Orthodox TV channel Spas found me. I have been trying to start a running club here at the cathedral, at the diocese. People would listen to me and say nothing. And here a girl writes to me on Instagram inviting me to come on the Spas TV channel, to appear on the Morning on Spas programme. And I explained there why I run. By that time, I had already gone to Moscow with the #бегущийсвященник (#runningpriest) hashtag. So, it was thanks to Instagram that I got invited to Spas. And then I went back to St. Petersburg from Moscow and was invited to the Department for Relations with Sports Organizations at the St. Petersburg Diocese. I had previously phoned them, introduced myself and told them I jog. They wanted to meet me and asked whether I wanted to start a running club. Now I have an official paper that I am a chaplain at the running club at the St. Petersburg archdiocese. The club is called “Orthodox Marathoner,” and literally a month or a month and a half ago, everything was finally settled. Currently, we have three priests there, a deacon, and five lay persons. So, we have about eight people there. That’s all thanks to Instagram: I invite everyone, I tell people that we meet

every day at 6pm at the Central Park of Culture and Leisure for a nightly run. We have a locker room and a shower, everything is set up in such a way so that no one gets cold. We meet for cross-country runs (The Running Priest).

Thematic framing and media practices: missionary activities and catechizing. Most expert interviews stressed that rank-and-file believers (and priests, too) draw little distinction between missionary outreach and catechizing. Moreover, “frequently, even priests equate” these two independent types of religious practice. However, according to the interview, if lay believers are involved in relevant educational bodies at churches (clubs, Sunday schools and meetings, catechizer courses, etc.), they relatively quickly understand the essence of catechizing. Things are far more complicated with missionary activities, since there is no clear and single model of offering testimony of faith in different milieus of modern city dwellers. This subject is highly relevant for organizing online missionary activities of the Russian Orthodox Church’s bishoprics. I will quote from an interview with the head of the missionary department for working with young people at the St. Petersburg diocese. In the interview, the expert gives a definition of Orthodox missionary activities, and reflects on the specifics of media environments, the need to develop new forms for everyday engagement in the missionary thematic framing, the language of preaching, and non-trivial media practices:

I have been engaged in missionary activities for the last 18 years. Missionary outreach is primarily a testimony about God, about the Glad Tidings of the Gospel, about the Church given outside a church to a person outside the Church. In the 1990s, my audience consisted of Old Believers, Jehovah’s Witnesses, scientologists, and Krishnaites. I held discussions in such environments. With time, I began to intrude into closed atheistic communities. Proceeding from the premise that the mission, i.e., offering the testimony of God and the Gospels, is a commandment, the internet is a field where the Church should offer the testimony of God, the Gospels, Christ. We need to use the language of new media, such as social networks, web portals, apps, networks, websites, in order to address people, to call on them to engage in parish activities. Modern society is highly saturated with information, it is permeated with media. The Church here is lagging behind, as if running after a train that is moving away. Russian-speaking Orthodox bloggers, even the most popular ones, have several tens of thousands of subscribers. This is a very small percentage, a very small missionary field. My colleagues and I are now preparing a vlog, looking for a certain style and the right educational format. We are planning to start a channel on YouTube, since it is popular with young people. We have already created missionary groups on VK.com because this is the most popular social network in Russia. We understand that VK.com is losing its audience, but the network is popular outside of St. Petersburg and Moscow, in other Russian cities. Therefore, we should be engaged in missionary activities there, and so we have our missionary Vk.com groups of the Stavros Youth Missionary Centre there, for instance. Facebook largely has an English-speaking audience. Additionally, there is more intense personal communication there. Let me give an example. I was sent to the Philippines for half a year as a missionary in 2019. Upon my return, I saw

that I had a thousand Filipino subscribers, and we continue to communicate after my missionary stay there. Today, the Church is essentially facing the problem of creating a language for communicating with netizens. My colleagues and I are trying to find ways to address large network audiences. Yes, sometimes these ways are unusual. I am looking for ways to address atheistic communities. These are atheist groups on VK, for instance. Additionally, we created an original method of reaching audiences of millions: sermons on the social radio on the *Zello app* (Fr. Nikolay Svyatchenko).

A detailed description of innovative missionary media communication can be found in an interview with an employee of the Missionary Department of the St. Petersburg diocese. She is actively engaged in implementing a project of developing a format for media practices of mass online missionary outreach. In her interview, she noted that Orthodox missionary outreach is addressed primarily to non-believers or non-Christians, and this is a complex, highly variegated, and multitudinous milieu of modern mega-cities. Addressing such a milieu requires revising existing media formats, revamping the design and contents of outdated Orthodox sites, creating a network of missionary sites and web portals with the option of direct online communication and engagement between all those who are on a spiritual quest. The respondent particularly emphasized that her current experience of working at the missionary department reveals an acute need for developing new forms of everyday engagement within the missionary thematic framing. Clearly, there is a long-overdue need for updating the language of preaching, revising existing media formats, and creating new non-trivial media practices: *The Orthodox Church is represented on the internet thousands of times less than the Catholic or Protestant denominations. This is what the figures collected in academic research on Christian missions on the internet show. The Orthodox Church needs missionary sites. Regular Orthodox sites start with symbols: crosses, onion domes. Many people are in an existential crisis, they are looking for the meaning of life, some woe has befallen them, or they are at a cross-roads in their lives, they are pondering the questions of existence. If we look at internet query statistics for searches about "the meaning of life," we see that the numbers are quite high. But what search engines offer are standard, non-interactive Orthodox sites with their typical symbols, or some esoteric sites. We are creating a specialized resource whose contents will not push people away, that will contain answers to the questions: what is death, suffering, happiness, etc.? It will have missionaries on duty who will be able to immediately talk to a person who addresses them. We as missionaries are not particularly interested in Orthodox channels, because they already have an Orthodox audience. We need secular channels for our missionary activities. One such initiative is addressing a wide audience via Zello, a mobile app. It's an app designed in the United States, with many channels and 150 million users throughout the world. When you download it, it transforms your smartphone or iPhone into a walkie-talkie, a social walkie-talkie: you press a button and ask a question. There are many different channels. We launched a series of broadcasts at the Religion and Politics channel, which that has 135,000 subscribers. This channel offers round-the-clock communication on every piece of news and different religions, and every religion has its*

representative. With the approval of the channel's owner, we hold debates and interviews with Orthodox priests. Our broadcasts spark lively interest among the audience. In our missionary groups on VK.com, we advertise these broadcasts and upload those that have been held. We clearly understand that a missionary resource needs to be geared both towards people who are looking for answers, and towards people who do not yet realise that they are searching for answers. As with a street mission, we address everyone. To address large audiences, we need to channel our energy online. Blogging is a very important area in our mission because every person needs their priest.

In and of itself, launching a YouTube channel or starting a personal account on social networks does not mean entering the “missionary space of the internet.” Every priest who has resolved to implement the religious practices of missionary activities, catechizing, and preaching in a media format has to independently search for the language and forms of offering an online testimony of faith. The author of the popular “Batushka Will Reply” blog stated that when he started the blog in 2015, he was not clear on the form and language of his chosen media practice. He chose missionary outreach as the main subject of his online work and wanted to address his peers, to speak a language his contemporaries would understand. After many years of work, he now has a YouTube vlog with 42,000 subscribers. He developed his own signature style of media communication on the testimony of faith presented as subject-driven videos:

When I studied at the Minsk *Theological* Seminary, I was hanging out with a groups that called itself the “Youth Missionary Brotherhood.” And we were really engaged in social missionary work: we went to orphanages, hosted groups, organized huge festivals. At graduation, I was all charged-up to engage in some active work, and not just merely serve as a parish priest. And that was the result of my upbringing in the brotherhood. I was appointed to a parish outside Minsk. And I realized that for a person of my generation, finding self-fulfilment in that particular environment was fairly hard to achieve. Additionally, I am formally a church official, I work at the Synodal Missionary Department of the Belarusian Orthodox Church. I can say that it is a problem for us: in the popular ecclesiastical mind, “missionary outreach” and “catechizing” are mixed up. People, including priests, do not draw lines, while we try to draw them and to win back our territory. Catechizing means working with those who are already members of the church, who are baptized, with people who already belong with us. Missionary outreach means working with stereotypes and clichés. I thought carefully about it and found YouTube. At first, I did not understand what to talk about and how to do it, and I searched for a long time. Many of my first videos are hidden, they need to be re-worked. Back then, I was trying to respond to different precedents, it was not always justified. The process of making a video consumes many resources, including time. You need to write a script for a video. This is hard, translating ecclesiastical subjects into simple human language is hard. Additionally, you need to take into account critics from your own milieu, too. Then, shooting and editing. Between 20 and 40 hours of work total. I try out videos on focus groups, depending on the subject, I show them to my programmer friends. Absolutely any subject can be treated from a missionary

angle. Now, for instance, I am writing a script for a video about abortions. I have long been milling the subject of a video about why we pray for the authorities. I don't have a content plan for the next year or anything like that. A missionary has to break a cliché or the traditional stereotype of a priest driving a Mercedes, to show that the Christian world is deeper, more complex, more interesting, to bring a person to the church. The purpose of my blog is to bring people to the church (Fr. Alexander Kukhta).

An analysis of the interviews with blogging priests leads to the conclusion that a long-term experience of communication about missionary outreach, catechizing, and preaching involves a constant search for new media forms. These new forms should be sensitive to the rapid development of the Russian-speaking internet's media environment, to the deepening mediatization of everyday life of modern society. I believe it is important here to quote from an interview with Fr. Konstantin Parkhomenko, a St. Petersburg priest widely known in the Orthodox milieu and beyond who creates content creator at the popular Orthodox web portal Azbuka Very (The ABC of Faith). For 16 years, he has been carrying out the media practice of offering the testimony of faith. During this time, he has travelled a long way from creating and maintaining his own interactive site to developing a new vlog on YouTube with 99,200 subscribers and tens of millions of views. In his interview, Fr. Konstantin stressed that transforming forms and formats of media practices frequently correlates with changes in new technologies, their infrastructure, and users' demand for them. Striving to address wide audiences of all ages, levels of education, interests, and overall competence entails innovations, flexibility, and creativity in inventing new forms of communication via the media:

Back in 1996, when I was a student, I hosted an Orthodox programme on a Protestant radio channel, there was no Orthodox radio back then. Since 2000, I've been hosting a programme on our Orthodox radio. I've been on the radio for many years. I teach, give lectures, hold classes. Our Orthodox content attracts shamefully few people, and this is upsetting. For some reason, people have no interest in it. Stand-up comedy garners half a million views. This is interesting for people, while Orthodox content is not. Additionally, Orthodox people are not trained to be interested, people are in some sort of a hibernation. In 2004–2005, I started my own site on Azbuka Very – this is a huge resource, and I have a site there. It has many sections: books, articles, photo albums, travel, pilgrimages, explanations of liturgies, photos with comments. Kirill Tantsyrev launched this resource, with his own money (...) I read in 2010 that by 2020, as much as 90% of all content will be in the form of videos. And I thought back then that making videos could be the way to go. And going into 2013, I began uploading videos from liturgies. Every day, I would comment on the Gospel online. Every day, we read the Gospel in church. Every day, we read a small excerpt. That way, we managed to read the entire Gospel over the course of a year. This is called the Pericope. These videos are uploaded to the "calendar" section on Azbyka Very. People could open the calendar and read about the saints and listen to my conversation for that day, where I treat the reading for the day. It prompted huge interest among people, and I saw that it was in great demand. Thousands of people started writing that it was very important

for them. And I started vlogging. First it was about the Gospels, then it occurred to me to upload the sermons I deliver in church. Priests often call me to ask how to do it. They want to start a blog or an online mission, but they think they need a team and a lot of funding. I shoot everything myself during liturgy. There is a small pause during the liturgy, I go, set up a tripod, and turn on the camera. Then I go into the altar and finish the liturgy. The camera records me on its own, and then I edit the recording the way I want. I explain to priests that I do everything myself, I don't need any assistants, and only the most basic camera. The biggest problem is we don't have any money for this work. Only donations – for instance, people bought a camera for me (Fr. Konstantin Parkhomenko).

Expert interviews and interviews with blogging priests invariably reflect on a wall of alienation between “old school” priests and the younger generation, secular people. Priests of the generations born in the 1940s–1950s frown upon media practices of the testimony of faith and are sceptical about the new generation of priests that is willing to reach out to the audience directly. Against this criticism and against the resistance of the internal milieu, priests born in the 1980s–1990s are searching for new ways of engaging in missionary outreach and preaching, ways that could bring people to faith and to church. “The Running Priest” blog is a vivid illustration of an innovative practice of offering the testimony of faith. A biographical interview with the blog's author alexey_marafonec on Instagram reflects on the difficult path that opens for a priest who wants his mission to be in sync with today's texture of everyday reality. Such priests encounter a double problem: an outdated language and practice of religious communication in its offline format and the need to implement their innovations in a media format:

I am a practitioner, not a theorist. I want to show a different priest. I've been at the church, at the altar, since I was six, I've seen many things. I grew up in the Odessa Region in Ukraine. was born in the Czech Republic into the family of a military man. I've been here, at the Andreevsky Cathedral, for 12 years now: I started out as a chorister, I was a driver, a storeroom clerk, a sexton, a deacon. I graduated from the Odessa Seminary. I've gone through every role, starting from a regular lay person and a chorister. I was trained as a music teacher, a piano teacher. My running is a strong point of building up trust, calming unbelievers, those who are against the church people. They look at me and say that maybe things aren't that bad. There is much like that now: there are people and then there are priests. I am a priest myself, and this kind of outlook is beginning to disappear with me. But I remember the way it was before, the gap between clergy and regular people. I've been running for about ten years, and I've been running marathons for about eight years. After an ultra-marathon, it occurred to me to take the handle “running priest.” I did face a wall of opposition to my running. I was prohibited from doing it. But I see the way regular people react to it. I am a priest, and I run. Those who run are with me already. This is the process of running – we meet to run, to train. This is my missionary work, the degree to which I or some of the guys set an example for people. Everyone who is going to come knows that I am a priest. A fervent atheist

is not going to join us. A larger half of subscribers to my Instagram account are people who have no connection to the church, many people are foreigners from all around the world, a lot of runners. The soul detaches itself from the body when you run a long distance (The Running Priest).

In their interviews, bloggers clearly state that there is great demand for various media practices of missionary outreach, catechizing, and sermon. The media ensemble of the communicative figuration of Orthodox missionary outreach features not only social networks such as VK.com, Facebook, Instagram, new Orthodox sites and secular mobile apps. Priests' blogs on LiveJournal remain relevant. The respondents explain this by saying that the audience needs "their own priest," as well as through the multiplicity of media practices of the testimony of faith. For instance, Fr. Sergius Lepin's "Existence Between" LiveJournal blog is invariably mentioned in all interviews without exception. The respondents believe its advantages lie in the fact that the priest uses text to address his audience, in his highly detailed and careful consideration of the Scripture, in its tradition of Christian theological and philosophical discourses. The textual media practice of the testimony of faith in this blog attracts lay people, secular people, and clergy alike. Theological discussions on this blog go on for years, the most complicated matters of the doctrine are addressed. When discussing the distinguishing features of the modern testimony of faith, Fr. Sergius Lepin makes special mention of virtual space being a reality of everyday routine and life, and it is high time we abandoned the outdated definition of virtual reality as something unreal. Media practices of the testimony of faith are important not only for people outside the church or for lay people, they are equally addressed to priests:

Blogging for me is a way of writing texts. Some people wrote diaries that were meant either for their children, or for some audience in a time far away (...) At some point, I began to move away from purely academic scholarship towards scholarship-intensive column writing. At first, I wrote for LiveJournal with a view to publishing what I posted there. But the writing turned out to be impossible to finish. This is a way of writing a book, maybe. I don't know whether it will happen. LiveJournal is a book you want to keep editing. But it turned out to be impossible to finish, to transform into a finished product. Anyway, not a single one of my books will be leafed through by as many people as have "leafed" through my LiveJournal. I have many hashtags on LiveJournal. The most popular are about the Gospels, interpreting and understanding them. This is obvious because I am primarily a priest, a preacher, a missionary. I write a lot, for instance, about musicians, but sooner or later everything shifts to the "subject of God," everything is about religion. Can a leopard change his spots? The same is true about a preacher: whatever he is writing about, it comes across like a sermon, even if not a sermon in the traditional sense of the word. I've also been on the "Batushka Online" project, and why not? A person lives in some village, hankers for communication, and it's good if that person finds a priest online. The idea itself is fine, I saw the possibility of giving the floor to priests that hanker for communication, for clever questions. You can celebrate liturgies for 20 years in some village parish and

hear no questions save for what to do with a candle stub from a funeral or what icon to buy to cure a headache. This is reality: you can be a priest for years and never hear a question about Christ, the Trinity, or Salvation (...) You will always hear about apples, Easter breads, eggs, but not always or everywhere about that. This life can dumb you down “professionally.” And then there are lay people who cannot find a priest to have a serious conversation with about Christ: they only meet those priests with whom you can only talk about communion bread and bows (...) This resource also offers many tips for young priests: you can learn some tips, get some answers from your colleagues. You’re not limited by space – that’s great for lay people, too. This is why this project is needed by priests who want to give answers, and by regular readers (...) I am against contrasting the virtual and the real worlds. The problem lies in treating the virtual as something inauthentic, unreal. Things are far more complex! It seems to me that virtuality is a type of the mental and the intelligible, and if this is so, then this is a realm of spiritual warfare and of the attainment of virtue. The term “virtuality” can be derived not only from the Latin *virtualis* (possible, imaginary), but also from *virtus* – virtue. (Fr. Sergius Lepin).

Conclusion

The results of our study open up a radically new angle for looking at digital Orthodoxy. The media practices of blogging priests do not fit into the established models of academic presentations of digital Orthodoxy as “fearful of the internet,” or as using media for certain politically motivated purposes outside the scope of faith. The interviews showed that missionary work, catechizing, and preaching are the leading thematic framings of media practices in priests’ blogs on VK.com, Facebook, Instagram, and LiveJournal.

Most large blogs with tens of thousands of subscribers have existed for over 15 years as a stable communicative practice of a Russian-speaking constellation of actors varying in age, gender, and country. The Orthodox clergy from the generations born in the 1970s–1990s clearly reflect on the dynamics of mediatization processes in today’s society and on the need to revise the media created at the early stage of Orthodoxy entering the missionary field of the internet. It is equally obvious for blogging priests that there is a need to expand the repertoire of media practices, to correlate new forms of offline missionary work with new formats of media faith practices. It is noteworthy that long-term media practices of missionary work and catechizing have emerged thanks to the personal initiative of individual priests. As for the thematic constituents of religious practices, these can be divided into missionary and catechizing for the blogs considered. Only few blogs combine both types of a priest’s religious practice. They are representative of the variety of forms of the new language of preaching, missionary work, and catechizing – media communication in the forms of vlogs, education in the basics of serving the faith, comments on Biblical texts, and digital biographical history. One direct consequence of mediatization is promoting a new im-

age of the priest offline and a new version of the engagement between the priest and the lay person. Blogging priests are not constrained by the conservative framework of their offline parishes, and they can shape their own audience, address a specific generation, choose the style and content of their sermon or testimony of faith. The audience, in turn, chooses a blogging priest that fits with their interests and desired forms of religious participation. Blogging Orthodox priests strive to consolidate their efforts, to promote different forms of offering various forms of testimony of faith online.

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