Consecrated Life in a Digital World: Towards a Deeper Understanding of some Paradigm Shifts in Human Environment

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Abstract

As the digital media has enormously changed the world in the past few decades, especially after the arrival of smartphones, religious life is also experiencing its influence in various ways. There have been only minimum efforts to academically evaluate the situation. This article is an effort to critically understand the paradigm shift that digital environment is bringing into the religious life and its traditional way of existence. Based on the data available about digital natives, this reflection notes that increased involvement in the digital environment could be inversely correlated to mental health, compassionate behaviour, and religious affiliation. Moreover, it is pointed out that in a world of online communities, call to a religious community life demands strong convictions about one's religious vocation and efforts to seek a right balance between one's online and offline existence. The need of sticking to traditional community activities while transforming the formation pedagogy to nurture life in a digital environment is also pointed out.

Keywords: Consecrated/Religious Life, Digital Environment, Digital Natives.

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Introduction

Religious life has the characteristic of being secluded from the world in one way or another. However, today, it is hardly possible for Consecrated people, especially those who are actively involved in ministries, to keep themselves aloof from the digitalized environment in which the world is living. Many consecrated communities find online opportunities to make their ministry and life known to the world.[2] The digital world has made it easier and cheaper for many preachers to reach out to their audience, who may be spread all over the world.[3] There are other studies that depict how the digital environment is helping motivation and achievement in one's learning process.[4] Moreover, many consecrated persons make use of social media positively to maintain healthy relationships and to ever rejuvenate their religious commitment by connecting themselves to spiritual, psychological and theological resources and guidance, which could have been difficult for them to reach without the support of some digital media. Without forgetting the many blessings that the digital environment brings into consecrated living and ministry, this paper, however, is trying to look critically at how digital media is changing human existence as persons in general and as consecrated persons in particular. This awareness can be essential for anyone trying to understand consecrated lives in this digitalized world. Before beginning, it will be good to clarify what this article is not about; it is essential to know what is not part of this discussion. So, the following are not the foci of this paper:

1. This is not a discussion on how to evangelise the world using digital media or how to use the media for Christian ministry. It is not an exposition of the best software, apps, AI bots or social platforms at the disposal of a religious.

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[2] See for examples, https://www.ofmcap.org/en/ and https://osb.org/.

[3] Catherine Gomes and Jonathan Y. Tan, "The Global Appeal of Digital Pastors: A Comparative Case Study of Joseph Prince, and Brian and Bobbie Houston," in *Religion, Hypermobility and Digital Media in Global Asia: Faith, Flows and Fellowship*, ed. Catherine Gomes, Lily Kong, and Orlando Woods (Amsterdam University Press, 2020), 149, accessed January 28, 2024, https://www.aup.nl/en/book/9789463728935.

[4] Elif Aktas and Serap Uzuner Yurt, "Effects of Digital Story on Academic Achievement, Learning Motivation and Retention among University Students," *International Journal of Higher Education* 6, no. 1 (January 4, 2017): 180.

2. It is not a discussion merely about new candidates and the young generation of religious. This discussion is concerning everyone, both young and old, who has taken up consecrated life as their call.

3. It is also important to learn that this article is not an invitation to drift away from the digital environment but to live in it and make maximum out of it.

So, this paper tries to evaluate the changes that the digital world has brought into consecrated life. The discussions here are motivated by data and insights from various literature. The seven points below try to bring out some key aspects related to living a consecrated life in the digital world.

1. Digital Media to Digital Environment

As one hears the word digital world, one of the first things that would come to mind is the various media that help people to communicate with others and watch some videos, listen to music, learn things etc. But the understanding of media as merely a channel through which data is transferred is very outdated, whether it is used for communication, entertainment, learning etc. More than a mere channel, it has now become an environment in which humans live.[5] That is why, the term 'digital media' is often replaced with the term 'digital environment.' It is very important to understand this shift to keep oneself away from being victimised in various ways. When people live in a noisy city, they make their windows soundproof to help themselves sleep well; when people live in a place where mosquitoes are plenty, they make sure to have nets for their windows and doors. Understanding the environment keeps one prepared to live in it safely. Similarly, understanding that the digital world has transformed from mere communication channels to an environment would be essential for every Consecrated person to live in it well.

However, there is a great difference between the digital environment and the city contexts that were narrated just before. If one does not want to take the risk of living in a polluted city, one can shift his or her house to a serene village which is free of pollution. But whether one likes it or not, it is next to impossible to keep oneself away from the digital environment. It is around us wherever one

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[5] Aline Amaro da Silva, "Catechesis in the Digital Age: From Transmission to Sharing," *Communication Research Trends* 38, no. 4 (2019): 12.

is in this world, especially in the case of consecrated persons who are in various ministries around the globe. Everyone, in one way or another, is forced to live in this digital environment. So, the only thing one can do is to take prudent steps to live in it while making effective use of its benefits (just like the benefits offered by a city life, compared to living in an underdeveloped village), but without becoming victimised by the dangers it poses. So, the key realisation here is that digital media is no longer mere channels of data transfer, but it is an environment people live in.

2. Digital Natives and Digital Migrants in the Same Network

Based on the year of birth people are often placed under various generation titles. Accordingly, one popular classification is as follows: X generation (1960–80), Y generation (1980–2000), Z generation (2000–2010), and Alpha (2010–).[6] The Z generation and the later ones can be considered typically digital natives since they have never lived in a world without the internet and so on. (Sometimes, even the Y generation is also included in it). Those born before 1980 are often digital immigrants. (They moved from a world without the Internet to a world of the Internet.) Much research has been conducted, and articles have been written about the characteristics of digital natives. Among the different findings and features of digital natives, this paper presents five that could be of interest to the discussion on religious life. The interest in presenting these here is the possibility that many of these characteristics, in one way or another, are intruding into the so-called digital immigrants as well.

a) The first finding is that the digital natives find it really hard to engage themselves in 'doing nothing,' yes, in 'doing nothing'.[7] It may sound confusing, but it is true. Digital natives are forced from within to keep themselves engaged in one thing or another. If they get any free time, they often take their mobiles and start swiping. Even when they walk on the road, there will be earphones in their ears, either talking to someone or listening to music. Even though this finding is about the digital natives, the question here is how far the digital immigrants are influenced. Can adults today claim that they are not really influenced? So, in this context, a new virtue seems to be emerging (in fact, it is

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[6] da Silva, "Catechesis in the Digital Age: From Transmission to Sharing," 14.
[7] da Silva, "Catechesis in the Digital Age: From Transmission to Sharing," 13.

re-emerging): the call to 'do nothing'; in other words, the call to remain quiet is often a missing virtue in the contemporary world. For a consecrated person, this 'doing nothing,' this quietness, is very significant. The call of religious today could be to remind the world that this doing nothing, this silence, is not passive.[8]

b) Certain research suggests that in the digital natives, the use of the digital world is negatively correlated to empathy, compassion, etc.[9] This is a finding which demands further research. However, observing various trends in social media raises the same question. Raising arguments and counter-arguments on the social platform and leading to physical violence is not an unheard thing anymore.[10] It is indeed alarming to learn about these findings and reflect on the possible impacts they can make in society. The question here is, are the consecrated people today losing their empathy and compassion? Whatever the answer that each one has, it would only be right to become aware that, with the careless use of digital media, a lack of empathy and compassion could be a trojan horse that can enter into religious life even without their knowing.

c) The third finding was that the use of the internet and religious affiliation are also negatively correlated. In other words, digital natives are more prone to withdraw from various religious affiliations that they might be born into.[11] Interestingly, the research also suggests that even when the internet reduces religious affiliation or attachment to an exclusive religion, it does not hinder participation in religious services.[12] Thus, it may be giving a hint that everyone who attends the religious services may not be doing it with a strong affiliation to the religion or the faith. In other words, a kind of inactive or disinterested

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[8] da Silva, "Catechesis in the Digital Age: From Transmission to Sharing," 14.

[9] Amanda Nicole Moscrip, "Generation Z' Ation Z's Positive and Negative and Negative Attributes and the Impact on Tributes and the Impact on Empathy After a Community-Based Learning Experience" (University of North Florida, 2019), 10, https://digitalcommons.unf.edu/etd/908.

[10] Teresa Montemayor, "Online Hate Speech Leads to Real Life Violence - CHR," last modified June 27, 2023, accessed September 26, 2023, https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1206573.

[11] Kirk A. Bingaman, "Religion in the Digital Age: An Irreversible Process," *Religions* 14, no. 1 (January 12, 2023): 11; Paul K. McClure, "Tinkering with Technology and Religion in the Digital Age: The Effects of Internet Use on Religious Belief, Behavior, and Belonging," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 56, no. 3 (2017): 493.

[12] McClure, "Tinkering with Technology and Religion in the Digital Age: The Effects of Internet Use on Religious Belief, Behavior, and Belonging," 493.

participation may be present in the Internet generation. Concerning consecrated people in the digital era, it may not be right to think that they are living their religious life without real interest in it or participating in religious services in a disinterested manner, but these research findings tell us that the digital world can influence people to the core, even without their knowledge or consent. Hence, it might be demanding from the consecrated people an awareness and informed behaviours. Interestingly, in the above-mentioned research report suggests that the use of TV is not changing the religious affiliation of people as much as the internet is doing.[13] This probably indicates that the Internet era is quite different from the TV era, even though they are on the same continuum.

d) The next finding to be presented here is the decline in the mental health of digital natives due to the increased use of digital media. Mental health issues might include anxiety disorders, depression, sleep disruptions, socially unacceptable behaviours, and reduced levels of self-esteem, among others.[14] Once again, the question that arises is, are the digital immigrants — those born before 1980 — really free of these dangers?

e) The fifth and final finding is of a different tone. The finding was that digital natives have more difficulty in storing information in their brains than the previous generation.[15] But against a spontaneous thought to see it as a negative thing, there are seemingly some positive sides to this reduced storing capacity of the digital natives. According to this argument, since the digital natives don't keep their brains "full", creativity and inventive intelligence emanates from them. Instead, they can use their brains to produce new and original thoughts.[16]

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[13] McClure, "Tinkering with Technology and Religion in the Digital Age: The Effects of Internet Use on Religious Belief, Behavior, and Belonging," 81, 91–92.

[14] Nicole Crump, "Digital Natives: The Nature of Technology on College Student Mental Health" (James Madison University, 2015), 10; Michelle Jayman, "Digital Lives: Growing up in a Hi-Tech World and Staying Mentally Healthy," in *Supporting New Digital Natives*, ed. Michelle Jayman, Maddie Ohl, and Leah Jewett, 1st ed. (Bristol University Press, 2022), 8, accessed September 26, 2023, https://www.cambridge.org/core/product/identifier/9781447356462%23c1/type/book_part; Fazida Karim et al., "Social Media Use and Its Connection to Mental Health: A Systematic Review," *Cureus* (June 15, 2020): 6–7, accessed September 26, 2023, https://www.cureus.com/articles/31508-social-media-use-and-its-connection-to-mental-health-a-systematic-review.

[15] da Silva, "Catechesis in the Digital Age: From Transmission to Sharing," 13.

[16] da Silva, "Catechesis in the Digital Age: From Transmission to Sharing," 13.

This is indeed a positive aspect of the digital revolution. However, is foregoing the traditional 'wisdom' always good?

3. Certain Characteristics of Digital Environment

Adding to the above findings and reflections, certain characteristics of the digital environment can be identified.

a) First, a closer look reveals that the digital environment overvalues pleasure and fun.[17] Creating amusement and wonder has become an aim of the content creators. Unless there is something that can hook the viewers, the content, whether it is a news or entertainment programme, does not sell well. As a result of this overvaluing of pleasure and fun in the online world, it becomes the norm of life in the offline world as well. The simple daily routines become boring and uninteresting. Without a strong internal motivation and purpose in life, religious life and traditional practices naturally become boring mandatory requirements for continuing membership in the community.

b) Secondly, in social media, the principle seems to be "end justifies the means." For an increase in subscribers and viewers, it has become an 'accepted' practice in social media to venture into any means even if they are socially unacceptable.[18] Trying to create fun by fooling or disturbing people in public (pranks) has become a popular way for video content creators. Even some of the so-called religious channels, too, follow the technique of clickbait to catch viewers.

c) Thirdly, sometimes quantity seems to be of more value than quality, though this is not always the case. Especially when one notices the efforts to gain more friends, more likes, and more followers, even when many of these friends may not be really close to the person, one can identify a trend that values quantity over quality.[19] But there is also another side to this. That happens when people

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[17] da Silva, "Catechesis in the Digital Age: From Transmission to Sharing," 14.

[18] Emmanuel Tupas, "3 Vloggers Charged for Kidnap Prank," *Philstar.Com*, accessed September 26, 2023, https://www.philstar.com/nation/2023/04/30/2262598/3-vloggers-charged-kidnap-prank.

[19] Romeo Vitelli, "Is Quality Better Than Quantity in Social Relationships? | Psychology Today," accessed September 26, 2023, https://www.psychologytoday.com/intl/blog/media-spotlight/201911/is-quality-better-quantity-in-social-relationships.

get obsessed with one or a small number of close friends. This friendship circle can also become destructive or productive depending on various factors. Adding to that, it would be apt to point out a characteristic observed in the digital natives: for them, relationships are never hierarchical, and for them, authority is never something gained by title but by closeness and authenticity.[20] This fact can have great implications when it is translated into the context of consecrated living together in the digital era. In the communities of consecrated lives, a relationship is often hierarchical, and the authority is accorded by the title. It can be hard for digital natives to accept such authorities unless it is complemented through closeness of relationship and authenticity in life.

4. Community Life in a Digital World

Another important area to be brought into discussion here is the community life of consecrated people and the changing characteristics of community in the contemporary world influenced by digital media. The digital world has either changed the traditional meaning or added new meanings to the concept of community. Traditionally, a community is mostly understood as a group of people connected together in the same locality.[21] It was very much bound by place. But the advent of online social platforms and the possibility of easy travel across the globe has waived off the requirement of being in the same locality. Hence, communities can be now understood as something that creates strong bonds between people.[22] Personally, I found this definition more meaningful because it points to a necessary characteristic of an ideal community. Thus, this definition posits a challenge for the traditional religious communities where 'communities' are legally formed by patents issued by superiors. On the other side, online communities are formed by people of the same interests and wavelength. Even when a Consecrated person earnestly tries to adjust to the different personalities in the community formed by appointment, the easiness and dearness of the online communities provide a platform for the religious to keep themselves engaged. More than merely an interest based coming together,

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[20] da Silva, "Catechesis in the Digital Age: From Transmission to Sharing," 14.

[21] "Community Definition & Meaning | Britannica Dictionary," accessed September 26, 2023, https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/community.

[22] Anita L. Cloete, "Living in a Digital Culture: The Need for Theological Reflection," *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 71, no. 2 (February 6, 2015): 261.

online communities fulfil various needs of people: these needs could be informational needs, esteem needs, or even emotional needs.[23] If the spatially limited communities formed by appointment become a place of conflict, it is very natural that people tend to resort to online communities such as friend circles, WhatsApp groups, etc. Additionally, unlike the traditional communities where the superior becomes the centre, in online communities it is always the person at the centre; or in other words, only in such communities/relationships he/she will enter into because it is not mandatory for them to be part of any online community; it is something that they choose when they find it interesting.[24] And in case, if one relationship or online group does not reach up to their expectation there is always a chance to shift to another circle of friends. Thus, in a way, it can be said that it is the individual himself/herself becoming a community. So, he/she is always the chief there and hence happy as well. Thus, it can be noticed here how easy and comfortable it is for a person to be more active online than offline. Hence, sticking to a religious community life and making it a place where people live together in love, really needs a religious spirit and a strong love for Christ. Except for a strong love for Christ, what reason can one find to live a joyful religious life with another person whose styles and thoughts are never in line with that of one's own? Unless a consecrated person keeps oneself continuously reminded of the meaning and purpose of religious life, it is always possible that he/she may move to the soothing shades provided by some seemingly green oasis around. Interestingly, this oasis does not always need to be a relationship; it can also be movies, news, limitless entertainment, and so on. The famous quote of St. Chavara reminds every consecrated person that: "The strength of monasteries does not consist in the thickness of their walls but in the religious zeal and virtue of their members."[25]

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[23] Cloete, "Living in a Digital Culture," 262.
[24] Cloete, "Living in a Digital Culture," 261.
[25] As cited in Saju Chackalackal, "Holistic Integration of Mystical Aspirations and Social Commitment: Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara of the Nineteenth Century India" (n.d.): 12, accessed January 28, 2024, https://www.academia.edu/15405948/HOLISTIC_ INTEGRATION_OF_MYSTICAL_ASPIRATIONS_AND_SOCIAL_COMMITMENT_Saint _Kuriakose_Elias_Chavara_of_the_Nineteenth_Century_India.

5. Formation of Candidates

Having seen the challenges paused by the digital world, it is worth considering the formation programme of candidates for religious life. Do the existing formation programmes equip new candidates to live a religious life in the online world?[26] Most of the existing formation programme (that I have come across) is aimed at forming offline religious and priests. The candidates are getting formed to minister in the offline platforms and live their religious life in the offline contexts. As noted in the beginning, digital media is no more a media but an environment in which everyone lives. As this is a reality, as this is a world where even religious women and men spend a good amount of their time, is there a proportionate preparation (formation) to live their religious life in such a digital environment? Maybe this is something to be reflected upon further as various formation programmes for the candidates to religious life and religious priesthood are designed.

Often, the tendency is just to keep the digital environment far away from the formees to keep themselves protected from any pitfalls. This often results only in digital ignorance rather than digital maturity. Later, after making their perpetual vows or getting ordained, when the young religious receive their horizons opened towards the digital environment, it is very likely that they still fall into all the pitfalls from which they were protected by the security provided by the prohibitions and laws. Instead, it might be more beneficial to train them to live maturely in the digital environment by letting them into it and helping them with needed insights and inputs.

6. Action versus Contemplation in Religious Life

Even though active religious practitioners have reduced in Western countries in the past century, it is clear to anyone who has lived in a Western country that the influence of the Christian religion is very much present in their culture. However, there arises a question: will this influence last forever? When active practice of religion diminishes, will it not change the culture as well? In today's fast-changing world, cultural change can be very quick as well. Hence, 'How

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[26] Cloete, "Living in a Digital Culture," 260.

long can the Western countries remain Christian, at least in their culture?' is something to be waited and seen.

With this concept in the background, the current discussion on religious life can continue. Achieving a balance between action and contemplation has been a real challenge in consecrated living. When the digital environment intrudes into religious houses, this balancing becomes all the more difficult.[27] Does the digital world prompt the religious to adopt something that can be termed as "active consecrated life?" What is meant by this "active consecrated life" can be understood with a simple example. When a person often spends long hours in spiritual counselling over phone or online prayer meetings as an expression of his/her consecrated life and continually remain absent from the traditional community activities, can it be justified by saying that he/she is living an "active consecrated life?"

Just like the fact that any cultural influences by religion will disappear when the active practice of religion diminishes, consecrated life would surely disappear when the consecrated life is merely reduced to many external ministries without having its soul in meditation, community life and prayers. How can there be action if there is no contemplation? Action may be possible without contemplation, but it may not have any connection with faith and Christian mission. However, it is to be noted that this discussion is not a call to reduce religious life to contemplation, but it is a call for seeking a right balance between community life and the time spent in the external environment brought by digital media. It leads one to the traditional question: whether one should contemplate in action or act in contemplation or go for a mature balance? In short, the question is this: as the digital world gives a lot of 'opportunities' to embrace the "active consecrated life" by keeping aside the traditional consecrated life, should one really embrace everything available in that digital market?

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[27] Uche Charity Anthonia Onyekonwu, Remigius Ikpe, and Jude Chisanga, "The Effects of the Digital Culture on the Life of Consecrated Religious Women in Lang'ata, Nairobi, Kenya," *Journal of Sociology, Psychology & Religious Studies* 3, no. 2 (2021): 61.

7. Changed Distribution of Christians

Before this discussion is brought to a conclusion, it could be interesting to know how a religious congregation in the Global South can make impacts in world scenario of consecrated life today. Statistics show a change in distribution of Christian population over the last century. Whereas 82% of the Christians were in the Global North (Western Countries etc) in 1900, in 2020, the statistics show that 67% of the Christians are now in the Global South.[28] Hence, consecrated religious from the global south has a big role to play in the Church today. How they embrace their religious life in this digital world would surely make an impact in the consecrated scenario of the world today. This seems to be a fact, whether anyone is ready to accept it or not.

Conclusion

Some trends in history have reversed at a later part in the history. However, not every trend reverses back to the previous one. It seems that the world's shift towards a digital world is of this second category; it may never ever be reversed.[29] Hence, it demands the realisation of a permanent shift in our environment and the necessity to be prepared to live in it.

As stated in the beginning, this article was not intended at discussing the use of digital media for religious ministry; instead, the effort was to initiate a discussion on the concrete challenges faced by people who have embraced religious life and their religious communities in this digital era. The questions raised by the above discussions are left to personal and/or communitarian reflection and dialogue. It would be a good idea to consider that online and offline aspects are complementary.[30] Both are part of human lives today. Humans are coexisting in these two worlds simultaneously. The success of a contemporary religious lies in maintaining a right balance between one's online and offline existence. Even though many things can be shifted to online mode,

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[28] Gina A. Zurlo & Todd M. Johnson, "Is Christianity Shrinking or Shifting?," *Lausanne Movement*, last modified March 11, 2021, accessed September 27, 2023, https://lausanne.org/content/lga/2021-03/is-christianity-shrinking-or-shifting.

[29] Michael Bittman et al., "Digital Natives? New and Old Media and Children's Outcomes," *Australian Journal of Education* 55, no. 2 (November 2011): 162.

[30] Cloete, "Living in a Digital Culture," 263.

everything cannot be moved online. A simple example can be, even though one can buy saplings online, for cultivating it, one must work in the field. Similarly, even though it is possible to give a spiritual experience via online services, Catholic faith does not allow a full sacramental participation online. At the same time, keeping completely away from the online world will also be a great foolishness in today's world, as the openings offered by it are enormous. The celebrated ChatGPT may be only the beginning of a new era in the digital world.

Here it is important to stress once again that the aim of this paper was never to paint the digital environment as something negative; but just to reflect on some possible changes that can be brought by the digital environment in the individual and communitarian existence of consecrated people. Moreover, this paper does not intend to state that the offline existence is safer or devoid of any negative effects. The invitation is to make a right blend of one's online and offline existence, both of which can contribute enormously in the fruitful life and ministry of every religious. For this, a religious may require two kinds of knowledge: a thorough knowledge or convictions about one's call as religious, secondly, a deeper knowledge and prudence about the undercurrents at work in the digital and physical environments. It is often heard that, today, if something is not in the media it is almost equal to saying that it is non-existent. Hence, if someone is inactive online, he or she may be easily forgotten and uncared. Thus, it becomes necessary to push oneself into an online existence,[31] not only to make one's ministry available to the public, but even to remind own members about one's existence in the religious community. How many members will remember those elderly (and younger) religious brethren or sisters (who reside in a different abbey/house and) not active in the WhatsApp group of the religious order or congregation? This necessity to push oneself into an online existence is not something negative, but just an impact of the fact that the world today is not merely limited to the physical environment. Yes, the world has gone beyond the borders of the physical environment to embrace the digital environment as a huge landscape within its horizons. Hence the activism in the WhatsApp group is to be seen only as an extension of one's offline active presence in the religious community. Hence it would be important to remember, prudent and wise online and offline existences are complementary and necessary. Thus, a firm religious

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[31] da Silva, "Catechesis in the Digital Age: From Transmission to Sharing," 18.

commitment, knowledgeable prudence, and mature balancing of one's online and offline existence become key factors for a witnessing religious existence in today's world.

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