

## The Digital World – challenges and tensions – consequences for religious life

UCESM Conference 22 April 2026

---

We are increasingly aware that the widespread penetration of digital media has consequences for religious life (RL), as indeed it does for many other spheres of human activity and ways of life, both for individuals and societies. Perhaps with the exception of those congregations that manage to remain outside these networks or that severely restrict access to them. The fact is that a significant proportion of consecrated persons feel that various aspects of their lives and consecration are now being influenced by the use of these media. I am referring primarily to three categories: the virtual world of the internet; social media; and artificial intelligence, with its chatbots.

Obviously, this is a completely new process, one that was absolutely not foreseen either by Christian revelation, the writings of our founders, or the sources of our respective charisms. It therefore becomes difficult to find, in these cases, inspiration and guidelines to direct us in these new circumstances. We are faced with yet another instance – the umpteenth – in which it becomes clear that the programme of ‘resourcement’ or ‘return to the sources’ is of little help, and that other approaches and methods are needed to address this new situation and the challenges associated with it. I propose, in what follows, to first explore a set of theoretical frameworks that may assist us in clarifying the problem or, rather, diagnosing it; then to review various practical analyses already published; and finally to attempt an initial empirical study of the perceptions held by religious, paying particular attention to young religious, who are probably those most immersed in a very new environment.

I begin with my own experience and what I have observed over the years, namely that a transformation of religious life is inevitable as a consequence of the new conditions fostered by digital media, and that it would be unwise to ignore them or to continue with our practices—including those of formation—without taking them into account and without anticipating developments that may become—and indeed are already becoming—highly disruptive for our communities.

### 1. Some theoretical frameworks

First of all, it is useful to better contextualise the process we are witnessing with the help of certain models or theories that can assist in analysing and understanding the processes underway. Among the many we could draw upon, I propose three: the first derives from an application of social systems theory; the second applies analyses from cognitive psychology and the process of belief; and the third is decidedly theological and, in ‘’, seeks to apply the classical model of tension between three vectors: being created, fallen and redeemed.

#### *a. Social systems theory: the digital environment*

The first model takes into account a premise: the development of digital media and, even more so, of AI makes them much more than mere tools or assistants that we can use as hardware; in fact, they become a veritable ‘environment’, in the sense of creating the conditions that establish or redefine our relationships, our worldviews and the ways in which we manage many areas of our lives. The same occurred with the advent of mass media; the introduction of private mobile telephony; or the ease of transport. If we accept this premise, then we must assume that VR is embedded within a new environment, with new conditions, stressors, and facilitators, which were absent until recently.

This premise invites us to explore a theme dear to social systems theory, particularly that developed by Niklas Luhmann over several decades. For him, a social system arises through its distinction from its environment, thanks to forms of complexity reduction and the transformation of uncertainty, via a communication code specific to each system. In the case of the religious system, basic communication distinguishes between immanence and transcendence, but also between salvation and damnation in an absolute or ultimate sense. It is obvious that this code of communication has had to be updated and

adapted to various social and cultural changes, some of them quite dramatic. For example, we are still trying to adapt to the environment that has shaped scientific knowledge, and this remains an unfinished task for many theologians and Christians. The same applies to technical progress, and is now happening with the development and rapid expansion of the digital environment.

One might wonder how such a theoretical framework can be of help in our case, that is, in addressing the challenges that arise in VR. The answer is nuanced, even though such an abstract model may seem of little relevance. But perhaps we can identify some more useful applications. For example, social systems theory compels us to conceive of an evolution of the VR subsystem, within the religious system, which must take into account the new conditions that force VR to adapt or to reduce an excess of new complexity, or even to update its communication code so that it continues to convey meaningful information, that is to say, that VR is perceived as a subsystem that still generates meaning and thus contributes to the sustainability of the global social system, and does not become redundant or superfluous in that new environment. The risk would indeed be that the conditions and resources of the digital environment render the general religious system, and that of VR in particular, incapable of conveying anything relevant and useful for the purpose of maintaining the global social system. This can occur when the new environment completely wears down or erodes the meaning of religious communication, or invades the system to such an extent that it renders it incapable of distinguishing itself from its environment. We have a clear example of this in the processes of internal secularisation undergone by many religious communities, which serves as a warning of how a new environment – that of secular society and culture – can undermine or flatten religious distinctiveness, resulting in the dissolution of the system, which has been unable to maintain its contrast with its environment. I fear that this very process is occurring under the strong influence of the digital environment in various sectors of VR. The question, therefore, is how to preserve the code and communications within VR so that it does not fail in a new, highly complex and unpredictable context.

#### *b. Cognitive theories and the study of beliefs*

This second framework also offers points of interest. Many studies on human cognition focus on its inherent nature or its connection to the media and networks of its environment. Here too, the digital world becomes a true cognitive environment that constantly interacts with human minds to shape perceptions, knowledge, beliefs and judgements. In this model, the mind is less a processor of information arriving via the senses and processed for various applications. The mind is conceived within a complex system of interactions with its environment, with many ways of processing information arising from these interactions, much of it from external sources. Indeed, today we often entrust some of the cognitive tasks once performed by our minds to various intelligent systems.

We can observe a similar model regarding the formation of beliefs, which is increasingly becoming a process that does not stem from our own intelligence, but depends on many external factors that are, unfortunately, all too easy to manipulate. The formation of beliefs within digital environments is no longer governed by logic, probability calculations or the authority of testimony, but by the pervasiveness of messages or their ability to connect with stimuli targeting highly recognisable dynamics of the mind, such as its curiosity or its susceptibility to conspiracy theories. It has now become much easier to manipulate people's beliefs and convince them of anything. Faith, in the theological sense, is thus a far more complex and conditioned reality.

All these dynamics clearly affect the way we perceive and experience our world, our community realities, and our own vocation. The problem and challenge here is to maintain a vision and beliefs that withstand or are strengthened despite the constant pressure arising in the digital environment, whether on social media or through chatbots with their own approaches and enticements, which are not easy to compete with.

#### *c. Theological anthropology*

In this case, theology can help us to better analyse and understand the processes we are witnessing, including in VR. It is useful to conceive of Christian anthropology as a field of vectors and forces in which three main attractors are present: that which corresponds to the idea that we are created in the image of God; that which acknowledges our negativity and sin; and that which affirms the presence of grace and the power of redemption. In this field, complex tensions arise between the three poles of attraction, so that human nature and behaviour can be examined in light of how closely or distantly they align with the three poles, or how effectively they combine in their interactions with them.

The emergence of digital forms and, even more so, of AI implies an epoch-making change and the need to reassess these tensions. On the one hand, humans feel more powerful and capable thanks to these intelligent technologies, yet also overtaken by them, so that the sense of human excellence in relation to God is diminished. Furthermore, this environment may simultaneously foster a sense of new capabilities that could reinforce our virtues and limit negativity, but it could also work in the opposite direction, deepening evil and forms of abuse, as has always been the case with every form of enhancement or technology. Furthermore, intelligent systems may render the discourse on grace obsolete: or perhaps we must link the action of grace to these systems. In any case, many voices maintain that grace is more necessary than ever to redeem us from the most dangerous risks associated with the development of AI.

Once again, the question is whether this theological framework can be applied to guide religious and consecrated persons in coming to terms with the digital environment and its challenges. The simple answer is that the proposed model serves to facilitate more effective discernment regarding the use of such systems or our relationship with them in VR. The question we should ask ourselves in this case is to what extent the dialectic between creation, sin and grace is reflected in these digital environments, and to initiate models of implementation and formation in our relationship with them. The ultimate criterion should be that of practical effectiveness, namely, to what extent our relationship with these media or the way we navigate the digital environment contributes to the vitality and fidelity to the values we have professed.

## **2. The most important issues in the relationship between consecrated persons and the digital environment**

Certainly, a great deal is being published on the impact of new digital media and AI on the religious dimension. I am aware of several ongoing research projects seeking to better understand the impact that AI has, or is expected to have, on Christian communities or parishes. In my bibliographic research, I have also found several studies focusing on the effects of these digital media in monastic communities. Several texts on the subject have been published recently, such as Pina Riccieri's *\*Connection and Vocation: Consecrated Life in the Digital Age\** (2026). The author states, for example, that "the logic of speed, visibility and constant connection influences the profession of religious vows, the quality of fraternity, the balance between community and solitude, and even spirituality".

A review of these texts invites us to distinguish between different levels of concern. The first concerns monastic communities. In this case, it seems justified to suspect that the use and abuse of digital media, or immersion in that environment, may call into question the principle of separation from the world that should characterise this way of life, insofar as the easily accessible digital environment brings monks and nuns much closer to the world—even if this is a virtual world with characteristics different from the real one. One must indeed ask whether the distinction between the real and the virtual is, in these cases, rather blurred, rendering cloistered life somewhat less effective when entering the digital environment.

However, there are other levels that should be taken into account. In active religious life, digital media offer many possibilities for pastoral application and evangelisation, but also risks. Furthermore, the

community level appears to be highly sensitive to these developments, which can have a strong impact on fraternal relationships. The other level we must take into account is that of spirituality and prayer, insofar as these tools can act as facilitators, but also risk turning spiritual accompaniment and expression into something, to say the least, inauthentic or somewhat unreal. However, it is worth dwelling further on such applications, such as spiritual chatbots and prayer assistants, which are now abundant, in order to better understand their effects. It is obvious that these developments have an impact on formation programmes and that these must adapt to these new circumstances.

The general question regarding the impact of the digital environment—which now also includes AI—on religious life has at least two initial answers. The first is that it has no effect, or almost none, since most consecrated persons live on the margins of these developments, which seem very alien to them, given their advanced age or the limitations arising from their inability to navigate such an environment. However, another response is that the digital environment does, in fact, have an effect—and a significant one at that—even if we are not always aware of it.

To begin with, we must ask to what extent new technologies, such as computers, the internet, mobile phones or new social networks, have influenced consecrated life. It is clear that these developments have changed the lives of many consecrated persons, especially the younger ones. These technologies have exerted their influence on pastoral care, on the life of the Church and on a large proportion of the population. Another question is whether this influence has been positive or whether it has caused serious disruption, for example in community life, personal relationships, or the way we experience affection.

With the advent of Artificial Intelligence (AI), we perceive an effect that continues or amplifies the trends already observable since the spread of those other communication technologies that preceded it. Unless consecration is an exercise in complete *withdrawal from the world* and social and cultural isolation, it is inevitable that technical developments will influence us, for better or for worse.

AI, too, has two sides: the positive and the negative. On the one hand, like all technologies, it helps to solve problems and make tasks easier that might otherwise be burdensome. As an assistant in various jobs, it offers opportunities of great interest. For example, we use it to prepare sermons and topics we need to discuss, to write letters, to proofread texts, and to create presentations for meetings. In these areas, it proves to be a very practical tool that many of us already use with good results, just as computers, the internet and social media have helped us in the past, bringing about great progress and saving time.

Other applications of AI can be ambiguous. For example, the development of *chatbots*, or conversation systems focused on specific themes or activities. Indeed, there is already talk of ‘spiritual *chatbots*’, i.e. those offering intelligent, well-founded conversation that could replace a mediocre spiritual director – though not a very good one. Certain services or forms of pastoral care could be entrusted to intelligent systems capable of providing highly valuable and effective assistance. Following this path, these *chatbots* also present themselves as interesting conversational systems, which can be accompanied by a pleasant voice and can even be visualised as personal holograms. In many cases, such systems facilitate a better conversation than that of the people close to us, whom we are tired of or bored of listening to. Like the internet and social media, these proposals raise issues of fraternity and relationships that we have often not addressed in religious life, as they offer very realistic substitutes capable of replacing or compensating for the harshness and demanding nature of interpersonal relationships. There are many instances where consecrated men and women find refuge from loneliness in these virtual environments, something I dare not judge, as it can become a positive compensatory factor in specific cases, and even a form of therapeutic aid.

The most serious problems for religious life perhaps lie in other areas. We must consider, for example, to what extent the development of AI entails a further displacement and marginalisation of religious

life, which becomes even more anachronistic and irrelevant in an environment where other factors matter, where new technologies render the religious figure a curiosity of the past, something that does not fit into the futuristic scenarios emerging with new technologies. Consecrated life becomes highly sensitive to these advances that sideline it. Indeed, it is easy to perceive the spread of super-intelligent systems as a further step towards the marginalisation of the religious factor, which may even be replaced by artificial systems of spiritual accompaniment.

Some critics also highlight another negative effect of AI. Being something ‘artificial’, it fosters an inauthentic view of the world and of people, a complacent and accommodating perspective, incapable of compromise and one that distorts freedom and its inherent tensions; in short, an excess of “simplification” that distances us from the real world and its inevitable tensions, from doubts and from the need to try things out and learn from mistakes. Religious life too would suffer if it were to settle into that comfortable and inauthentic realm, losing its identity and its meaning. We must also consider the risk of what is known in English as *‘unskilling’* or the progressive loss of skills that are entrusted to intelligent systems. Such a loss would make us less capable of spiritual insight and appropriate responses when we resort to the answers and solutions offered by new digital and intelligent resources, rather than engaging in personal quests that involve us and demand more of us.

Other problems have arisen in recent months from the use of and interaction with intelligent systems. The newspapers frequently report cases of mental distress and even suicide as a consequence of a deviant or pathological relationship with AI chatbots. We must be vigilant to ensure that such extreme cases are avoided within VR; this requires targeted training and monitoring, as well as sound spiritual guidance.

Perhaps all is not lost, and it is indeed possible to envisage a place for consecrated persons in an environment where new technologies are taking up ever more space and offering greater capabilities. A primary role for religious would be to offer a certain stability, a sense of certainty and authenticity, through the witness of lives consecrated to God, and thus serving as a reference point to the ultimate Love, the most unconditional and transcendent. In the face of the many fears arising from the development of AI, it is good that some communities maintain a rhythm of prayer, celebration and adoring silence, reaffirming the essential and the dimension of mystery that should be safeguarded by us and our practices. They are also important as a reaffirmation of the ‘naturalness’ of human life in the face of artificiality.

In a more practical sense, religious life is seen as a therapeutic institution, that is, a community of healing, especially in the face of growing mental health issues. Many communities and consecrated persons become figures of accompaniment, listening and prayer for those most in need. AI might present itself as a functional substitute for such positive contributions, but I fear the trend may be the opposite, and that its spread and applications will make it even more necessary to turn to trusted individuals, communities of prayer, spaces of silence and intense inner life, the search for a strong sense of transcendence, and a longing for the God of love.

### **3. Results of the consultation with young religious**

Lluís Oviedo Torró OFM