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## **Mediatization of Pastoral Care in the Russian Orthodox Church: The Reasons Behind “Ask the Priest” Websites**

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*The article examines the mediatization of pastoral care in the Russian Orthodox Church drawing upon “ask the priest” websites. The study is based on the theory of mediatized worlds in the framework of social constructivism. Various forms of communication between the priest and the audience are analyzed, as well as the reasons why both sides choose online communication. The analysis leads to the conclusion that the mediatization of pastoral care is due to a combination of two types of motivations: developing new forms of comfortable communication within the parish or overcoming crises that may occur in the parish. Overall, there is a general crisis of communication in the Russian Orthodox Church, and the actors are looking for new forms to cope with it. The use of new media is one of such strategies.*

**Keywords:** mediatization of religion, pastoral care, mediatized world of the parish, Russian Orthodox Church.

### **Introduction**

**R**ECENTLY, scholars have investigated interactions between the Russian Orthodox Church and media at various structural and individualized levels, including that of lay believers (Shtele 2017; Luchenko 2015). Sites on which priests answer questions in text, audio, or video format offer a new scholarly perspective into the mediatization of ministry. Studying communication with the priest is critical since it is the primary manner through which Church tradition is transmitted and therefore occupies an essential place in Church communication. The phenomenon of communication with a priest through media has a long history in Church tradition and literature, dating

back to texts belonging to the “question to spiritual authority” genre (e.g. *Guidance toward Spiritual Life: Answers to the Questions of Disciples* by Saints Barsanuphius and John from the sixth century and *Questions and Answers of Falassius* by Monk Maximus the Confessor from the seventh century). Such works relayed spiritual aesthetic experience. Contemporary “questions to the priest” are a new stage in the development of this communicative practice. In a modern, media-saturated society, these questions have relocated to the digital environment, creating an impetus for analyzing the methods and reasons for the mediatization of this type of communication.

This article examines why the audience of these sites and priests choose the online format to communicate. It proceeds from the assumption that amongst the audience there is a demand to communicate with the priest and that from the side of the priest there is a response to that request. The combination of demand and response creates a space of mediatized communication, the prerequisites of which are the focus of this study. Is this an effort to expand traditional offline communication, or does it indicate a desire to reformat it and therefore a dissatisfaction with its actors? What shapes the audience’s request and why are the priests ready to answer it? The study of these issues provides insight into church communication and pastoral care in the Russian Orthodox Church today. Can we speak of this as a crisis? And to what extent are these media methods the audience and priests use to overcome the crisis traditional?

### **Existing scholarship**

The preconditions necessary for the mediatization of ministry rest at the intersection of two branches of scholarship — media and religion on the one hand and new forms of pastoral work and activity on the other. Therefore, in order to understand the development of scholarship on the topic, this essay will survey both subject areas.

Relationships between the Russian Orthodox Church and media have been the subject of myriad works devoted to communication within the Church and its interaction with the “outside” world, including with that of secular mass media. A significant subsection of scholarship deals with purely journalistic issues: the development of both a media system and Orthodox mass media, the principle ideological trends of the Church agenda, the specific work of Orthodox editorial offices and press services, the use of media to relay values, informational risks, interaction with secular mass media, and so on (Luchenko

2015; Shtele 2017; Tkachenko 2015; Grishaeva and Shumkova 2018; Zhukovskaia 2016; Dobrokhotova 2012).

In sociology the theoretical foundations for studying the interaction of religious communities and the media-sphere are well-developed, in particular the theory of mediatization of religion. In Russian scholarship, E. I. Grishaeva and E. A. Ostrovskaya have studied its development and criticism, however, their emphasis is not on online communication but on other issues (Grishaeva 2018; Ostrovskaya 2019). In another article, “Internet Mediatization of Confession in Orthodox VK Communities,” E. A. Ostrovskaya examines communication of religious actors on the Internet (Ostrovskaya 2018, 56). And in yet another joint project with A. E. Alekseeva, “Confession in the Digital Space,” the authors examine confession on the VKontakte sites of Yekatrinnburg parishes (Ostrovskaya 2018, 205). This is perhaps the only article in which “questions to the priest,” the subject of this article, are mentioned. Suslov’s compilation *Digital Orthodoxy in the Post-Soviet World* is devoted to the various formats in which the Russian Orthodox Church is present on the Internet; several of these works deal with the connection between the priesthood and mass media, but none address the issue of pastoral care (Suslov 2016). For example, M. E. Morozova examines the image of the priest in mass media, including in online media, but does not touch on pastoral care (Morozov 2016).

Pastoral practices are considered in N. N. Emel’ianov “The Harvests Are Many, but the Labors Few: The Problem of Priest-Lay Interaction in Contemporary Russia,” P. Vrublevskaia’s “Investigating the Church Community in a Small Town: The Role of the Priests and Other Aspects of Orthodox Communitality,” collected articles in *Parish and Community in Contemporary Orthodoxy: The Roots of Russian Religiosity*, and Y. I. Grishaeva’s “The Role of Communication Practices in Shaping the Identity of Orthodox Believers” (Emel’ianov 2019; Vrublevskaia 2015; Agadzhaniana 2011; Grishaeva 2016). These authors discuss personal, offline communication with a priest but do not consider issues of online communication. Archpriest Nikolai Emel’ianov, the author of what is perhaps the most detailed study to date on communication with priests, argues that confession is the only form of communication with a priest (Emel’ianov 2019, 133). This paper contends that it is necessary to add to this, online communication with the priest. Its relevance is demonstrated by the fact that the query “questions to the priest” yields 2 million results on Yandex and 87 million on Google. Yet, the mediatization of pastoral care and the sites of interest to this study are not considered in any of the aforementioned

works. Thus, this article charts a new sphere in the study of the mediatization of religion, and in particular the mediatization of pastoral care.

### **Theoretical framework**

As this study examines the implementation of pastoral care through the media, it employs the theory of mediatization as a theoretical approach. Within the framework are two fundamentally different approaches — institutional and socio-constructivist (Hepp 2013, 616). The first contends that media as an institution subordinates other institutions, including the church, to its logic (Hjarvard 2008). The influential logic of media and other related concepts received significant criticism in scholarship (Lövheim 2011) (for a Russian language critique of mediatization see E. I. Grishaeva) (Grishaeva 2018).

Two points are essential for this research. The paper presupposes that the actors themselves choose the communication format and transform it, i.e. they are not passive recipients of the external logic of the media, (Hjarvard 2008) and that parish communications are in the sphere of church communications. Thus, this paper takes a social-constructivist approach. It considers media in the entire context of societal communication, as one of many communication tools (Hepp 2013, 618). It analyzes how media is used through the concept of “mediatized worlds,” (Krotz and Hepp 2013) that is the spaces of societal life, “which depend on the articulation through media communication” (Hepp 2013, 621). In their article A. Hepp and F. Krotz develop the concept of mediatized worlds as a communicative network — “structured fragments of living worlds, associated with a pool of intersubjective knowledge that must be kept in mind, with specific social practices and thick cultures” (Krotz and Hepp 2013, 120). In their study, it is important not only how media works, but how the actors of communication, who can be involved in different formats of communication, behave (what Lahire described as the heterogeneity of the actors of communication) (Lahire 2011). This is essential for this study since both the audience and priests communicate in offline and online formats.

In a number of studies emphasis is placed on the subjectivity and the role of actors in communication as opposed to the “logic of media.” Thus, A. Hepp describes the mediatized world through the framework of communicative figuration and notes that the actors are its structural basis. R. Silverstone and M. Lövheim underscore in their works the importance of subjects, asserting that the actors directly impact

how mediatization manifests (Silverstone 2005; Lövheim 2011). With this in mind, this study considers parish communications carried out through media or the mediatization of the parish as taking place in the context of parish communications as a whole. The parish in this study is a community of people who attend services in a particular church and receive guidance in their spiritual lives from the priests of that church. Since a priest in the Orthodox Church realizes his activities as a member or leader of a particular parish (cleric of a particular church), this study considers communication with him to be parish communications and defines this as mediatized ministry,<sup>1</sup> that is, pastoral care carried out with media tools. In some cases, pastoral care is performed in relation to the parishioners of the parish in which the priests serve, and in others, it is performed on the behalf of those who do not belong to the parish or the Church in general (as in real life both a parishioner and a non-parishioner can turn to a priest).

This study examines mediatization not from the perspective of its results or how it happens, but rather asks why it occurs in the Russian Orthodox Church and what prerequisites enable its development, in this case from the perspective of the audience's request and the responses (and requests) from priests. To do this it analyzes the intentions of the audience and the priests based on the answers they gave about why they chose to communicate online. Such a study will make it possible to understand whether mediatized ministry is simply an extension of offline ministry, or whether the request for it indicates a dissatisfaction with offline communications and a desire to overcome them with the help of media.

Since the study is interested in the reasons for turning to mediatized forms of pastoral care, it also considers the motivations for using the Internet among representatives of the religious community. In Russian language scholarship E. I. Grishaeva and A. G. Busygin studied the use of Internet resources by Orthodox believers but "questions to the priests" were not analyzed (Grishaeva and Busygin 2020, 14). Their research, based on use and gratifications theory, focuses more on the results of access to the Internet rather than on the reasons behind its occurrence (Grishaeva and Busygin 2020, 9). This study found no scholarly works that investigated the prerequisites of mediatized min-

1. This study considers pastoral services in the context of parish life, since in the Orthodox Church a priest is always associated with a particular parish and there is no scenario in which someone is ordained outside of the parish. This understanding of the priesthood has existed since ancient times and was confirmed in the Sixth Canon of the Council of Chalcedon (451 CE).

istry in the Russian Orthodox Church, and therefore this study was carried out on the basis of its own methodology. Since this article examines mediatized pastoral care only at the present, the research is of a synchronic nature (Hepp 2013).

### **Empirical base**

Surveys of those who visited the “Questions to the Priest” section of the Orthodox journal “FOMA” [foma.ru](http://foma.ru)<sup>2</sup> and of the priests who answered audience questions make up the empirical base of this study. The study is based on an anonymous survey and an interview with some priests who participated in the survey. The survey was conducted from 27 November 2019 to 7 January 2020. The study examines this period, which corresponds with the Nativity Fast, because it is a time when practicing Orthodox Christians and non-churchgoers are disposed to ask questions of spiritual significance. A survey was included in the “Questions to the Priest” section and visitors were asked to complete it (see appendix 1). The survey was completed by 396 people. For the present study, the answers to questions five, six, and eight are most important. Additional data made a more complete picture possible (the degree of church attendance and the presence or lack thereof a spiritual father made it possible to tie the respondents’ intentions to features of contemporary church life). In total, 295 respondents (71.9 percent) answered the question “Why did you decide to ask your question to the priest online?” These answers form the basis of this study.

As the data shows the “Questions to the Priest” section of the website [foma.ru](http://foma.ru) is in demand among active Christians, those who observe major holidays, the nonbelieving, agnostics, and those who do not consider themselves to be of any religion. Of the respondents, 55.7 percent identified themselves as practicing Orthodox Christians (they attend church weekly or several times per year, participate in divine holy services, confess, and receive communion). Several more responded separately that they were on the parish staff, sing in the choir, and participated in divine services every Sunday. Of the other respondents, 19.3 percent answered that they went to church at Christmas and Easter to light candles; 10.16 percent attended according to their mood or went rarely; 8 percent believe in God but do not attend; 1.6

2. “FOMA” is one of the largest Orthodox mass media sites (the monthly audience includes 2.5 million readers, 112,000 VKontakte subscribers, 68,000 on Instagram, 39,000 on Odnoklassniki, and 17,000 on Facebook) and it is one of the Top-3 Runet web projects about religion, according to Yandex. [https://radar.yandex.ru/top\\_list?thematic=religion](https://radar.yandex.ru/top_list?thematic=religion).

percent called themselves atheists; and 0.3 percent did not accept religion, but respect faith. That those in the last two categories turned to an Orthodox priest reflects the high level of confidence in the Russian Orthodox Church.<sup>3</sup>

This paper also employs a parallel study of 50 clergymen of the Russian Orthodox Church, who have experience answering questions from visitors to various online projects (see appendix 2), and in-depth interviews with 10 of those priests. These interviews did not impact the overall picture of the questionnaires but clarified some points. The study foregrounded the geographic diversity of the respondents as the surveys and interviews were conducted online, making it possible to communicate with priests from different regions, including those outside of the Russian Federation. While the place of worship is not important when it comes to online communication, it seemed pertinent that clergymen from different types of locations resorted to online communication.

The survey also tracked a host of other factors (age, tenure, etc. . .). Of the responding priests, 52.2 percent were between 30 and 40, 32.6 percent between 40 and 55, 8.7 percent between 20 and 30, and 6.5 percent older than 55 years of age. Those surveyed also had different tenures: a plurality (37 percent) had tenures between 10 and 15 years, 26 percent between 5 and 10 years, 15.2 percent between 15 and 20 years, 10.9 percent more than 20 years, and 10.9 percent had less than 5 years of experience. These factors reflect both ministerial and life experience. To conclude, 50 percent of the priests interviewed answered questions mainly within the framework of their own Internet project, 33 percent within the framework of a collective project, and 17 percent within the framework of mass media. There are cases in which priests use both their own project and mass media, but this study asked them to answer which format they considered to be their primary one. The study also revealed that priests preferred to combine different re-

3. These data suggest that there is a certain level of trust or at least interest in Church opinions on various societal issues. This corresponds to the data of a survey conducted between September 26 and October 2, 2019 by the Levada Center (Activities of public institutions), [https://wciom.ru/news/ratings/odobrenie\\_deyatelnosti\\_obshhestvennyx\\_institutov/](https://wciom.ru/news/ratings/odobrenie_deyatelnosti_obshhestvennyx_institutov/). As the survey demonstrates the level of trust in the Church is not too high (40 percent versus 48 percent in 2018) but it cannot be considered low. Among the institutions considered the Church takes fourth place (out of 19). According to VT-SIOM data for November 2019, 62.7 percent of Russians approve of the activities of the Russian Orthodox Church (Nativity Fast 2019), see <https://wciom.ru/index.php?id=236&uid=10038>.

sponse formats, primarily video and text, with the audio format being the least popular.

## **Discussion of the results and conclusions**

The survey was especially interested in the prerequisites for going online. As noted, “Why did you decide to ask your question to the priest online?” was the primary question of interest in the audience survey. The question was open, with no ready-made options, in order to highlight the respondents’ reasoning. In turn, these reasons permitted the study to discuss the preconditions underlying the audience’s request for a mediatised form of ministry. In the survey of priests, similar data was obtained from the question “Why did you start answering questions online? What does this practice mean to you?” These were also open responses. The answers from the priests reveal both why they were ready to respond online and whether they responded to the demand of the audience, or whether they themselves desired a mediatised format to communicate with the flock (both real and potential).

### **1. The audience’s reason for formulating the request**

The reasons the audience espoused were divided into two categories: 39.6 percent emphasized reasons that had hindered offline communication with the priest and 60.4 percent expressed reasons that underscored their attraction to the online format.<sup>4</sup>

Those who responded with reasons that hindered communication with the priest are divided into two groups: 1). Reasons from the audience and 2). Reasons from the side of the parish. And those who expressed that the online format was attractive are divided into three groups: 1). The possibilities of the Internet, which allow one to cope with factors that prevent offline communication with a priest (that is, reasons from the first category [“reasons from the side of the parish”]); 2). Additional opportunities presented by the Internet not associated with parish obstacles; and 3). Spontaneous choice (that is, knowing that there is an opportunity to ask a spontaneous question to a priest online).

4. In the empirical material, it turned out that respondents either spoke of what hindered communication with the priest at the parish level or what drove them to ask a question online. There were no answers that contained reasons for both categories.

The set of reasons for communicating online from the side of the audience is presented in table 1.

**Table 1. Audience’s reasons for communicating online**

Reasons hindering communication with a priest offline	Attraction of mediatized ministry	
1. Reasons from the audience: – psychological, – physical restrictions.	1. Possibilities of the Internet, which allow one to cope with factors that prevent offline communication with a priest: – accessibility and efficiency, – convenience.	
2. Reasons from the side of the parish: – lack of time among priests, – pastoral incompetence ( <i>nekompetentnost'</i> ), – lack of information about the possibilities of communicating with a priest.	Paradigm of personal communication: – write to a specific priest, – compare opinions – reach out about concerns.	Paradigm of mass communication: – read ready-made answers, – make answers public.

A more detailed description of the reasons demonstrates more accurately the demand from the audience. To begin, this paper considers reasons that hinder communication in the parish.<sup>5</sup>

*Psychological reasons* — psychological barriers arise because the respondents perceive the priest as a special figure, with whom communication transcends the familiar and therefore causes discomfort. Many respondents expressed feelings of fear, shame, and embarrassment that arose when asking questions of a priest in person. In one such response, this fear was tied to a near reverence for the clergyman: “I really understand that these are God’s people, that they are graced, and am very afraid to somehow say something wrong or to

5. When naming reasons for this category, respondents often indicated several reasons at once, making it impossible to calculate the total number of responses for each reason. Therefore, we have focused only on the general content of responses.

say something irreverently.” Mediatized communication however, “removes these fears.”

Responses also referenced *physical restrictions* associated with either illness or with being a long distance from the church, having to attend during a work shift for example.

The reasons from the side of the parish include insufficient time for the priest, pastoral incompetence, and a lack of information regarding how to communicate with a priest. The respondents associate the *lack of time among priests* with the intense workload of the priest, or the situation whereby the parish confession is the only time to communicate with the priest (as pointed out by N. Emel’ianov, see above), and that in that time there is not sufficient time to ask questions.

*Pastoral incompetence* is associated with the fact that priests cannot and do not want to answer questions and that they do not meet the expectations of the flock. Regarding expectations, one informant emphasized that not only was information insufficient, pastoral attitude was as well: “To give a good answer, one should love the people as much as possible, empathize with them, and understand the problem of the parishioner.”

The aforementioned responses indicate a crisis of ministry: people desire it, but those desires are often not realized. Of the respondents, 55.7 percent identified themselves as churched but only 28 percent had a confessor (a priest to whom they regularly confess and with whom they consult their church life). As such, a significant number of those who regularly lead a church life do not enjoy access to one of its main components — the spiritual guidance of the priest, which is one of the main forms of human initiation in Orthodoxy. The lack of communication with a priest or the perception that communication is insufficient is itself frightening and uncomfortable and potentially leads people to look for answers outside of the parish, in particular on the Internet.

An *informational deficiency* seems to be more common among the unchurched, who lack information on how to “technically” organize a meeting with a priest. Of the respondents, 2 percent answered that they simply did not know how to come to church and pose a question to a priest. This indicates that in churches and on parish sites there is a lack of information on how to talk to a priest or invite a priest to one’s house if there is no opportunity to meet in a church.

The remaining references to the mediatized form of pastoral care are associated with the opportunities that the Internet offers (see the right column of Table 1). Of the respondents, 15.5 percent referenced the *lack of obstacles impeding online communication* and another 9.3 percent

emphasized the *convenience of writing*. In the words of one respondent, mediatised communication with a priest allows one to “quickly, very quickly” get an answer to a question while spending a minimum amount of effort (without leaving home). Based on the experience of an editor for the “Questions to the Priest” section of the website *foma.ru*, the author of this article asserts that some questions are asked out of an unwillingness to independently search for answers in literature or on a search engine. On the one hand, there is a desire for the opinion of a priest, and on the other, a desire to obtain information with minimum effort and time. And of course, the Internet solves communication problems for those, who, for physical reasons, cannot get to the church. The written format also facilitates anonymity and thus removes feelings of shame and fear. Furthermore, written communication permits the inquirer to formulate a complete and structured question, and for the respondent to carefully consider the question and prepare an answer, which in turn solves the problem of lack of time among priests in the parish.

However, it is important to note a certain gap between desire and reality, which A. Hepp and F. Frontz identified. In real life the priest may not always be available, but if there is a confession or conversation with him, it occurs in the here and now. In online communication, the audience can contact the priest at any moment (by sending a question to the site through a special forum), but this does not guarantee that the priest will answer immediately. In addition, there is a possibility that for technical reasons the question may not reach the priest. Hepp’s and Krotz’s phenomenon of communication dispersion is evident: media make it possible to communicate with a person who is not present, which means that the interactivity of personal communication is absent (Krotz and Hepp 2013). That absence of interactivity makes a live dialogue with a priest impossible. Moreover, whereas communication offline can be accompanied by a joint prayer, in the online environment it is limited to the answer to the question. In fact, mediatised communication does not solve the primary request — personal communication with the priest. Moreover, it does not provide proper pastoral guidance in the long-term and is depersonalized.

Other possibilities of the Internet that are not associated with overcoming the crises of parish communication can be divided into two paradigms — personal and mass communication. The *paradigm of personal communication* includes three possibilities that can be realized at the parish level: to write to a specific priest (4.6 percent of respondents), comparison of opinions, (5.4 percent), and reaching out about concerns (7.0 percent). The ability to *write to a specific priest*

is comparable to consulting a specific clergyman. The opportunity to *compare opinions* is attractive because it is easier to do online than it is to go to different churches.

Interestingly, in some cases the priest's response in the online environment is viewed as more credible. The following statement seems indicative of this: "I am from an ultra-Orthodox family. To me it seems that I have been deceived about Orthodoxy for my whole life." This demonstrates that a person familiar with Orthodoxy since childhood and who knows how to locate a priest and speak with him, believes that the priests in real life lack the authority required to get at the truth. Therefore, the respondent turns to a completely unfamiliar priest with his or her most vital questions.

The desire to *reach out* is not associated with the lack of opportunity to communicate in the parish, but rather with the lack of a person to whom to voice one's concerns. An analysis of the questions on the website *foma.ru* received during the Nativity Fast reveals that 24.8 percent concerned difficult situations in interpersonal relationships (50.5 percent of questions in this category) and complex mental states (13.7 percent). Some appeals represent an attempt to reach out about painful things and to request empathy and prayer when there is no one else to turn to. This category includes, among other things, questions from people who are in an extremely difficult psychological state, including those on the verge of suicide, (i.e. questions such as "Father, bless my decision to kill myself" and "What do I do if I think about suicide?") Contacting the site may be the first encounter of people with the Church and it is essential that they turn to a priest.

It could be assumed that the desire to write to a specific priest and compare opinions indicates a yearning to reformat communication with priests, but this is not the case. In Orthodoxy, the Holy Scriptures, dogmas, and canons are irrefutable authorities, and saintly texts contain descriptions of personal spiritual experiences and strategies of spiritual life that a Christian can consult. The monk is entirely obedient to his confessor and the laymen has the opportunity to consult various spiritual authorities. By the late nineteenth century, the practice of going to elders for advice or writing letters to them, already supplemented confession in the parish. Without diving deeply into such interactions, this study notes that in the church community plural opinions could be sought out on secondary (nondogmatic and noncanonical issues). Thus, the desire to compare opinions is nothing more than a reproduction of a communicative paradigm that already existed in the Church.

The paradigm of mass communication includes responses about the ability to *read ready-made answers* (10.8 percent) and a desire to *make the answers public*. Such possibilities can only be realized through media and serve to transform communication with the priest from private to public when the content is shared. This is a conscious choice of the audience. Two informants wrote that they asked their question online because they thought the answer might be of interest to others. In the words of one: “I thought the answer to this question might be helpful to others.” This is of interest because the person immediately focuses on the paradigm of mass communication and perceives the answer to his or her question as addressed not only to him or her personally, but to the entire potential audience of the mass media through which the question was asked.

Of the respondents, 7.1 percent identified *spontaneity* as a reason for mediatized communication with a priest. These respondents accidentally entered the site and decided to ask a question without specifying specific motives. It is significant that they chose to ask an Orthodox priest specifically, rather than reading information on the Internet. This is consistent with Heidi Campbell’s conclusion. Based on her study of the Christian blogosphere, she concludes that while most earlier works have argued that the digital environment presents challenges for religious authority, “the Internet instead can serve as a source to empower religious authorities” (Campbell 2010, 269). We can observe this in the “Questions to the Priest” section of foma.ru, in which both the churched and the unchurched (44.3 percent of respondents) recognize priests as authorities. It is noteworthy that both churched and unchurched respondents considered priests authorities in matters unrelated to spiritual life: in fact, 56.1 percent of questions submitted to the site during the study period do not relate to church life. The priest is asked about difficult situations in the family and at work, overcoming trying psychological states, treatment of mental illness, etc. . . ., even though these questions should have been addressed to appropriate specialists. This suggests that the audience recognizes the priest as an authority in general, not just on Church issues. These data correlate with the results of sociological polls, which claim that among Russian society there exists a certain level of trust or, at least, interest in the Church’s opinion on various issues. Thus, it seems that the audience has a desire for pastoral guidance and communication with the priest, and that among both the churched and unchurched,

the priest appears to be a spiritual authority whose opinion is trusted and used for guidance.

At the moment, however, there are a number of barriers to clear, convenient, and accessible communication with the priest in the parish. Due to the special relationship between people and the priesthood, people experience psychological barriers, such as fear and timidity when in front of them. At other times difficulties arise when a person is physically unable to get to church or does not know how to talk to the priest either in the parish or by inviting him to his or her home. Furthermore, the organization of parish life in a number of churches is such that there is not sufficient time for a conversation with the priest. In some cases, the priest do not want or cannot answer people's questions and in others the priest in real life does not meet the person's expectations.

All this leads both to dissatisfaction among the audience with communications at the parish level and a search for ways to overcome that dissatisfaction. In the present, the audience turns to the possibilities of the Internet since it is a familiar and comprehensible communication tool. Thus, a desire manifests to communicate with a priest in a mediatized format, which is convenient, accessible, and capable of providing personal communication to the extent that people do not receive it in the parish. Online Communication with a priest is appealing to the audience and is a less costly way to obtain crucial information: one can get the opinion of a specific priest or compare the opinions of several without leaving one's home, and while maintaining anonymity which removes psychological barriers.

The answers reveal that the respondents are not critical of the possibilities of online communication. At the same time, the paradoxical request escapes the attention of the audience: it is impossible to get full-fledged personal communication by mediatizing it. In fact, mediatized communication does not have unlimited possibilities, but rather its own set of limitations.

Summarizing the above, the audience's demand for mediatized ministry consists of two components — a desire for personal communication with the priest and for that communication to take place in an accessible, convenient, and comprehensible format.

## **2. Reasons why priests communicate with parishioners online**

The reasons why priests communicate with parishioners online fall into two categories — responding to the audience's request for online

communication and responding to their own. All the reasons are presented in table 2.<sup>6</sup>

**Table 2. Reasons why the priesthood chooses online communication**

Responding to the audience's request	Desires of the priesthood
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Online ministry is part of missionizing.</li> <li>2. Response to inquiries from specific media and church administrations.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Desire to expand missionary opportunities.</li> <li>2. Desire to increase the audience.</li> <li>3. Desire to solve personal problems.</li> </ol>

The *response to the audience's request* is formed either directly, as the priest's response to the request (when answering questions online is considered part of missionary work), or indirectly (when representatives of specific media or the church administration ask the priest).<sup>7</sup>

All the priests who participated in this survey said that online answers were a continuation of their pastoral work in the parish. In the words of one: "Missionizing on the Internet is a fulfilment of the Commandment 'Go and make disciples of all nations'..., it is the natural continuation of pastoral ministry or a component of it." When discussing the demands of the audience, priests claim that today many people are accustomed to online correspondence and thus they try to conform to that format. In the words of one priest: "Obviously there is a need for this: people ask a lot of questions, indicating that for some reason they cannot get appropriate answers in their parish or simply decide not to come to the church; this is a response to the demands of time and the people."

6. Since the same answer often contained several reasons, it is impossible to calculate the percentage of responses for each reason, so the paper identifies the content of the reasons given.

7. Specifically, the "Questions to the Priest" section of the foma.ru site arose because the paper and the Synodal Department began to receive questions requesting the answer of a priest.

In some cases, beginning work on the Internet is done in response to direct requests from mass media or other projects in which people write “questions to the priest.” In fact, this is still a response to the demands of the audience, only it is mediated by media representatives and the hierarchy. As one priest testified: “I responded to a request from mass media; they contacted me from the ‘Father Online’ project and I responded with pleasure. Helping people is an important component of priestly ministry.” Representatives of the church administration also requested that priests answer questions online. According to one: “I was offered it by the hierarchy of our diocese, and I agreed!”

The priesthood’s own desires consist of three components — a desire to *expand missionizing*, to *expand the audience*, and to *solve personal problems*.

The *desire to expand missionizing* derives from the constant search for new forms to transmit Church tradition, which has existed throughout the history of the Church and is of utmost importance in priestly activities. Sometimes it is connected with the particular circumstances of the ministry of a priest in a parish, where opportunities for missionizing are limited. In the words of one priest: “I wanted to expand the audience for preaching, while serving on a remote island. It helps the people and myself. It gives me great experience, and for the people, Internet preaching is a step on the way to God and the Church. There is a lack of offline pastoral demand to realize the missionary itch and the call of Christ to go and teach all nations.”

The *desire to expand the audience* is related to the financial aspect of life in the parish in which a priest serves. When people talk about promoting a brand or person on social networks that usually entails a direct commercial benefit. Expanding the audience is relevant for pastors appointed as church rectors because it increases the opportunity of finding benefactors (sponsors) for the construction and maintenance of the temple. As one respondent said: “The opportunity to make new acquaintances supports fundraising for the restoration of the temple and diocesan social activities.” (At the same time, participation in projects that answer questions from the audience are carried out free of charge, [irregular or insufficient funding is one of the characteristics of Orthodox mass media]).

A *desire to solve personal problems*, for example, overcoming personal crises by helping people, is yet another reason why priests choose online communication. In some cases, it is even considered entertainment; according to one respondent, he chose to communicate online “out of boredom.”

Thus, the prerequisites for the mediatization of pastoral services on the part of priests consist of two components — the response to the audience's request (both direct or mediated by the media and the church administration) and that of the priest's own desire. The priest's own desire as well as the audience's request, are associated with a desire to overcome some of the limitations and crises of both parish and personal life.

It is essential that priests strive to ensure that the person eventually comes to the church. Unlike the audience, they do not see mediatized communication as a full-fledged substitute for personal communication; the mediatized form is perceived as a temporary, intermediate stage. In the answers they give on the Internet there is often a call to join church life in reality. Thirty-eight interviewed priests said that they had cases, when after communication on a site, personal communication ensued, and the person came to the church.

### **Discussion of results and conclusions**

The study of the prerequisites for the mediatization of pastoral activity in the Russian Orthodox Church has come to the following conclusions. The mediatization of ministry arises from a combination of two factors: a desire on the part of the audience (both the extant and potential flock) and from the side of the priesthood. Reasons from the audience rest on their desire for pastoral care in a mediatized form, and from the perspective of the priesthood, they are a response to both the desires of the audience and the priests.

The audience's request consists of two components: a desire for personal communication with a priest and for a comprehensive and convenient format for such communication. The audience's request for a mediatized format of communication is based on dissatisfaction with parish communication (associated with the crises of parish life and parish communications). That dissatisfaction is associated with the lack of time and incompetence of some priests. There are also psychological barriers that derive from the audience's perception of the priest as a special figure. In some cases, communication is also hindered by insufficient information on how to communicate with a priest. Turning to the media is an attempt to overcome these crises with the assistance of comprehensible and accessible tools which compensate for what is lacking in parish communication. This is not a radical transformation of extant communication — in many ways, the mediatized format is a continuation of parish communications, as people still bring their questions to priests.

The media is considered to be a tool that allows one to overcome the factors that hinder parish communication (associated with its organization, with its accessibility, and with its psychological limitations) and one that provides additional possibilities. If overcoming the shortcomings of parish communication is associated with the search for convenient personal communication with the priest, the search for additional possibilities in online communication led to, among other things, a transition to mass communication, in which one can read the answers to others' questions and in which the answer to one's own question will be public. In a number of instances, mediatized communication occurs spontaneously, when a person decides to take advantage of an opportunity discovered by chance.

The audience is not critical of the opportunities of media communications, but they overlook that this type of communication has its own limitations and serves as neither a substitute for full-fledged personal communication nor, most critically, for pastoral care.

The prerequisites for the mediatization of ministry on the part of priests are a response to the direct or indirect request of the audience and their own request, which is associated with the desire to overcome the limitations and the crises of both life in the parish and their own personal lives. In response to the audience's request and their own requests, the missionary opportunities that media provide are of utmost importance. In mediatized pastoral work, priests see a tool that makes it possible to realize their pastoral potential and ultimately lead a person to a traditional parish life. Unlike the audience, priests do not see mediatized communication as a full-fledged substitute for personal communication; the mediatized form of pastoral care represents a temporary, intermediate stage.

Thus, the prerequisites for the formation of sites with "questions to the priest" and the mediatization of ministry are associated with personal reasons on the part of the audience and priests, and with a certain crisis of parish communications in the Russian Orthodox Church. The actors of communication do not passively endure this crisis; rather they search for ways to overcome it using the possibilities of media. At the same time, there is a certain transformation of communications with the priest, in particular it shifts from personal to mass communication.

The question which is beyond the scope of this study is whether the use of media is the only model actors use to overcome this crisis, or have people employed other strategies as well, and which of these do they recognize as most effective. In the diachronic aspect, based on the materials

of this article, one can investigate the questions of how crises were overcome in previous eras and how typical are those models that the Church is implementing now. Further study of the sites on which the audience asks questions to priests can provide rich material in the field of psychology, the organization of parish life and pastoral care, the perception of the priesthood, the specifics of pastoral care in the media, and on a number of new topics, and as such, seems to be a promising area of research.

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## Appendix 1. Questionnaire for readers of the site foma.ru

1. Gender (male / female).
2. Age.
3. Education.
4. Place of residence.
5. Are you churched? (A. Yes, I participate in divine services almost every week, I confess and receive Holy Communion at least once a

month, B. Yes, several times a year I participate in services, I confess and receive Holy Communion. C. I go to church for Christmas and / or Easter, sometimes I go to light candles. D. Sometimes I go to church “according to my mood.” E. No, but I believe in God. F. I am an atheist. G. My own version).

6. Do you have a confessor (a priest to whom you regularly confess)? (Yes/ no)

7. What is the subject of your question? About what did you ask? (About spiritual life / Other)

8. Why did you decide to ask your question to the priest online?

## **Appendix 2. Questionnaire for clergy**

1. Your age.

2. Experience in the priestly ministry.

3. Place of service (city, town, village in Russia, Belarus, Ukraine, in a CIS country or in another country).

4. Are you a married priest, celibate, or a monk?

5. Do you answer questions online? (Several answers are possible.)

6. Do you answer questions online within the framework of your own project (your website / channel) / within the framework of a collective project in which priests answer questions / within mass media (several options are possible)?

7. In what format are your answers — text, audio, video? (Several options are possible.)

8. Why did you start answering questions online? What does this practice mean to you?

9. What are the main differences between answering questions online and in person? What are the pros and cons of online responses?

10. In your opinion, why do people prefer to ask a priest questions online and not in-person?

11. Do you notice thematic differences between the questions that you are asked in-person (in conversations, in confession) and online? Is there a tendency for online questions to focus on certain topics? What are these topics?

12. Were there any cases when, after online communication, a personal one was struck up (meeting, correspondence) or did you find that a person who had not previously been churching went to church?