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## Catholicism Online: How the Church is Communicating in the Visual Field

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Catholicism Online: How the Church is Communicating in the Visual Field

By

Alexandra Barfield

A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College

Oxford, MS

May 2023

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## ABSTRACT

Given the rise and importance of social media in the last two decades, religious institutions, especially the Roman Catholic Church, have an important place online to fulfill their mission and belief of spreading the Gospel message. Communicating this message on social media and with contemporary marketing practices is an opportunity and a challenge for churches, Catholics, and apostolates alike. In this study, I analyze a variety of Catholic-related Instagram accounts and interview individuals involved in Church management and content creation. This primary research is prefaced with secondary research exploring the status of the Catholic Church in the United States, the body of research on digital Church communications, the history of visual communications within the Church, and social media marketing best practices. Through my research into Church-related social media accounts and the experiences of people working to spread the Gospel, I was able to see the approaches that are creating compelling content.

Through the analyses, I saw there is a disparity between third-party apostolate content and engagement and Catholic archdiocesan content and engagement. The interview results showed that there is a lack of personnel dedicated to media and communications at the parish level which makes it difficult to devote the time and effort necessary to create compelling content. There are striking examples of high engagement rates both on the apostolate and archdiocesan levels which show that some content creators are resonating with their audience.

## PREFACE

This project merges my two areas of work and passion within my college years. My degree in Integrated Marketing Communications has laid a firm foundation in the principles of mass communication and forming a message. Secondly, my passion for the Catholic Church and its mission to spread the Good News has changed my life. I see this mission as fundamentally one of communication, and that of communicating the best message there is. Throughout my time living as a practicing Catholic in communal places on the internet, I have gained knowledge of space and accounts that are making an impact. This experience has informed this study tremendously.

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## TERMINOLOGY

Over thousands of years, the Catholic Church has developed its language and terminology around its operations that many may not be familiar with. I will often use these terms for accuracy. A glossary of terms will be found at the end of this paper for the reader's reference. It could be helpful to start there if one is unfamiliar with the terminology of the Roman Catholic Church.



## INTRODUCTION

In the Christian faith, as Jesus left his disciples, he gave them the instruction to “Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations...” (*The Catholic Study Bible*, 2016, Matt. 28:19). In following the direction of Jesus Christ to spread this message, the Catholic Church and its members have worked for thousands of years to achieve this goal. St. Paul’s conversion, subsequent travels, and letters are one of the earliest examples of the spreading of this message. The spreading of a message by any means is communication; therefore, at the heart of evangelization is communication.

Written and verbal communication has always been a part of the Church; however, the visual aspect of communication cannot be ignored. In early times, the Church was communicating to a world often unable to read or write. They did this through artwork and the construction of churches with instructive iconography. This iconography has developed different styles and motifs that are now common to a large amount of Catholic art and communications.

It is made clear by the Church through her documents and by papal teachings that it is the duty and responsibility of the Church, the Body of Christ, and believers, to communicate well and to branch out into the new media that has arisen in recent years. The Pontifical Council for Social Communications published *The Church and the Internet* (2002), saying

God continues to communicate with humanity through the Church, the bearer and custodian of his revelation, to whose living teaching office alone he has entrusted entrusted the task of authentically interpreting his word. Moreover, the Church herself is a *communio*, a communion of persons and eucharistic communities arising from and

mirroring the Trinity; communication therefore is of the essence of the Church. This, more than any other reason, is why ‘the Church’s practice of communication should be exemplary, reflecting the highest standards of truthfulness, accountability, sensitivity to human rights, and other relevant principles and norms.’ (Section 3).

In an era when phones and computers are an extension of minds and hands, it is easy to locate nations. They are on the Internet. Of the world’s eight billion people in 2022 (Hackett, 2022), over half use some form of social network with 4.6 billion social media users globally (We Are Social, 2023). The Catholic Church has approximately 1.4 billion adherents globally (Llywelyn, 2022). The Church has an opportunity to reach those people via online communication as well as to communicate with practicing Catholics to help build community locally.

With the rise of contemporary marketing practices, especially online and social media marketing, the Catholic Church can, and sometimes does, incorporate these strategies into its media plans. The strategies that Integrated Marketing Communications professionals use are outlined in more detail in the literature review but go as follows: market research including audience and SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) analyses, forming objectives, creating a message, planning media mix, creating a timeline and budget, and setting an evaluation process based on the objectives. Once the plan is in place and the media mix is created, the strategy is implemented, and the results evaluated. These campaigns are structured to share a message with a targeted audience. The message is integrated so that the audience receives consistent communication across the media mix.

While the Catholic Church has centralized leadership, its communications are not always vertically integrated. Parishes are responsible for maintaining their own communications, mainly

consisting of websites, social media, bulletins, and personal communications between employees and parishioners. Apostolates, which are third-party organizations, are sharing their faith through media as well.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Catholicism in the United States

It is important to understand the current landscape of Catholicism in the U.S., and in the world, when entering this study. The United States, as a colony of Great Britain, has a deep Protestant history. Catholicism first came over with Spanish and French immigrants and missionaries to the Southern and Western United States. Irish and German immigration in the 1800s raised Catholicism to the dominant Christian denomination, but these immigrants and their religion were not always received well by American Protestants. After the Civil War, Catholic immigrants came from Eastern and Southern Europe (McGuinness, 2016). And more recently, immigration from Latin America makes the U.S. Catholic population more Hispanic in ethnicity (Pew Research Center, 2013). This follows a trend in the United States that new Catholics are immigrating from majority-Catholic countries.

In the United States, though there are numerically more Catholics than in past decades, there are some warning flags as to the declining number of active Catholics (Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate [CARA], 2021). Between 1965 and 2022, the number of infant baptisms in the prior year declined by about half. This follows a trend in Western nations away from traditional religious practice. However, this trend does not hold globally. As of 2013, the Church has retained a similar proportion of members as compared to the total global population, but this is because of significant growth in areas like Sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America which balance the decline in Europe and Western nations (Pew Research Center, 2013). In the

U.S., there is also a steep decline in priests and professed religious vocations, but a marked increase in lay people who work in ministry for the Church (CARA, 2021). A study from Australia is relevant in the similar cultural background shared by the U.S. and Australia. Mollidor (2014) evaluated Mass-goers on their involvement in the parish, finding that only 24% of those surveyed were involved in their parish through small groups, and 17% were involved as lectors or extraordinary ministers of communion. She notes that the most involved group in the Church in Australia are those aged 70-79. Most elderly and retired people have more free time to devote to things like church involvement, but it can be troubling to see that faith could be dying with them as they age.

Many believers rely on the younger generation to grow the Catholic church. In the United States, 64% of teenagers identify as Christian, and mainly share their beliefs with their parents; however, they are more likely to say they have no religion (Pew Research Center, 2020). Thirty-two percent of American teenagers do not claim a religious affiliation (Pew Research Center, 2020). This is a significant percentage.

Overall, the Church is in a tough predicament. Involvement is low and the involved population is aging. There is a struggle to serve parishes with declining numbers of ordained priests. There is also a growing number of former Catholics (Murphy, 2015) and those who identify with no religion at all (Smith, 2021). Smith does make a point of showing that between 2014 and 2021, the U.S. Catholic population has held steadier than its Protestant counterparts. For a Church whose mission is to attract believers, this is a critical moment.

As media is an important part of any strategy to attract people to an organization, this study aims to look at how the Church is currently engaging in social media. When looking at the data, one can see that the internet is a place to communicate the message of the Gospel. The data

shows that teens may not be in church (Pew Research Center, 2020), but they are almost certainly on the internet. Ninety-seven percent of teenagers have access to the internet. Ninety-five percent of teenagers use YouTube, followed by TikTok, and 62% use Instagram (Pew Research Center, 2022). The study surveyed teens on how hard they thought it would be to give up social media, and many responded that it would be a significant challenge (Pew Research Center, 2022). Social media addiction and the morality of social media use for all ages is a compelling question and of interest to Church use of social media, but it is beyond the scope of this study.

### Church Teaching and Use of Digital Media

Now, it is important to consider Church teachings on communication and how leadership uses digital platforms. The official Church leadership is very clear that local churches and the faithful should be engaging online. At the advent of the internet era, the Pontifical Council for Social Communications published *The Church and the Internet* (2002) which states that the Church has an opportunity to engage online that outweighs the costs. They even go so far as to say, “Hanging back timidly from fear of technology or for some other reason is not acceptable, in view of the very many positive possibilities of the Internet” (Pontifical Council for Social Communications, 2002, Section 10). They outline some significant drawbacks to the internet we have seen become more prominent in recent years like the difficulty in determining truth online. Pope Francis himself has even addressed some pressing ethical matters regarding the use of social media. Wimmer (2022), in the Catholic World Report, quotes Francis as saying, “Sometimes and in some places, media sites have become places of toxicity, hate speech, and fake news” (para.6). Francis calls for the discerning use of social media to promote peace and for the inclusion of those excluded from the digital space (Wimmer, 2022, para 6).

At the highest level of the official Church hierarchy, Pope Francis is the second pontiff after Benedict XIV to be active on social media, using Twitter extensively, among other social media platforms (Solaro, 2014). Vatican.va is an outreach of the Vatican with many freely accessible writings of the Church including papal encyclicals and the Catechism of the Catholic Church, a compendium of everyday Church teachings. More locally, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops has an interactive webpage with resources for U.S. Catholics including a full-text digital Bible (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2023).

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) has social media guidelines for churches available to the public online, though they haven't been updated since 2014. It outlines three principles: visibility, community, and accountability. Visibility emphasizes using the right platform for the right message and audience, but also maintaining the online presence of the Church. Community stresses the need to establish engagement – the two-way communication that the internet offers. The guidelines stress that each locality should have online codes of conduct (Department of Communications, 2014).

One study to note was a look at parish websites in the early 2010s (Zech & Wagner, 2013). The researchers analyzed the content of specifically Catholic parish websites and conducted a survey of parishioners from the chosen parishes to find out what they desired from a church website. They found that most of the websites surveyed operated as a “digital bulletin” of church information and activities. Most sites weren't taking advantage of the interactivity that the internet allows (Zech & Wagner, 2013).

COVID-19 and subsequent limitations on gatherings impacted churches. Catholic Bishops across the globe dispensed the faithful from the obligation to attend Sunday Mass, which is normally a requirement for practicing Catholics. Parishes live-streamed Mass online for

months. A *Wall Street Journal* article looked at how the pandemic has impacted a Philadelphia parish; the article cites that church attendance is only 30-50% of pre-pandemic levels (Adamy, 2021). Churches turned to live-streaming options during the pandemic, and many people who stopped going because of the pandemic never returned. The article says churches are focusing instead on digital outreach and engagement in smaller group settings (Adamy 2021).

In Catholicism, fully online Mass attendance is not a substitute for Sunday Mass attendance. The Catechism of the Catholic Church outlines this by saying,

The Sunday Eucharist is the foundation and confirmation of all Christian practice. For this reason, the faithful are obliged to participate in the Eucharist on days of obligation, unless excused for a serious reason (for example, illness, the care of infants) or disposed by their own pastor. Those who deliberately fail in this obligation commit a grave sin (2019, para. 2181).

The Catholic belief in the true presence of Jesus in the Eucharist is essential to the emphasis placed on in-person worship because if Jesus is truly there in a physical way, one cannot receive Him via a screen. The Catechism of the Catholic Church describes the importance and centrality of this belief,

‘The Eucharist is the source and summit of the Christian life.’ ‘The other sacraments, and indeed all ecclesiastical ministries and works of the apostolate, are bound up with the Eucharist and are oriented toward it. For in the blessed Eucharist is contained the whole spiritual good of the Church, namely Christ himself, our Pasch’ (2019, para. 1324).

In a world where many things can and have been done fully online, it can be difficult to communicate the need for in-person worship while still having an engaging online community.

A study from Spain (Gauxachs, Aiguabella, & Bosch, 2021), which is not within the location frame of this study but relevant because of the global nature of the pandemic, showed that most dioceses in Spain were already using social media, especially Facebook and Twitter prior to COVID-19. Surprisingly, the percentage using those popular platforms declined as the pandemic began, and they turned to increasingly using YouTube and online meeting platforms like Skype and Zoom. The study says they were able to effectively transition online, though it isn't a substitute for in-person worship. The challenge going forward is to keep those online forms of communication running while transitioning back to mainly in-person events. Instagram was only used by only 53.7% of dioceses (Gauxachs, Aiguabella, & Bosch, 2021).

Overall, Church teaching stresses the need to use media to reach the public, and Church hierarchy is setting the example by branching into social media. The pandemic necessitated a shift online, but it gave another set of issues for the Church which requires in-person participation. In some localities, media use is far from universal, despite its prevalence in secular society. Social media marketing has become its own industry with its own set of best practices. Now we will take a look at social media marketing, especially marketing on Instagram.

### Social Media Marketing

Social media advertising in 2021 was a nearly \$60 billion industry (Statista, 2021). Statista compiled data on the state of social media marketing in a 2021 dossier. Almost 92% of marketers anticipated using social media in their marketing campaigns in 2021. Digital media is the largest part of marketing budgets today with social media being the second largest expense. The main goals of these campaigns are to increase brand awareness and grow communities (Statista, 2021). The ways that marketers use social media fall into three categories: paid advertisements on the platform, paid partnerships with influencers, and organic marketing. Marketers can pay to



promote a post or run an advertisement that will be shown in users' feeds. They can partner with influencers who are relevant to their audience and send them products to review or pay them to post promoting the product. Finally, businesses have their own social media accounts that are used to communicate with the target audience.

“Social media” refers to interactive media sites where account holding users can post content, interact with content with likes or comments, message other accounts, among other actions. The main players in the industry include Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter. Snapchat, Reddit, BeReal, Pinterest are also social media sites. YouTube is a media site that is more media than social but could be considered a social media platform. Instagram is the primary social network in this study because of its catch-all of content with features other platforms use as well. Reels correspond to TikTok, Stories to Snapchat, longer videos to YouTube, and traditional photo posts to Facebook and Twitter. If one can post it on Instagram, one can also post it across other social media channels. The media environment continues to change rapidly, creating more need for communications professionals within every sector to keep up consistent communications for the organization.

Instagram alone has over a billion users worldwide with half of those being aged 18-34 (Chen, 2022). Instagram ranked number four in the importance of media outreach in a 2020 survey, behind Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter (Statista, 2021). Instagram is the most popular platform for influencer marketing strategies (Statista, 2021). It is also the fifth most visited website worldwide, and it is the favorite social media platform of users worldwide (Kemp, 2022).

The main Instagram feed shows content to a user based on an algorithm. In a blog by social media management tool Later, Warren (2022) explains how Instagram's algorithm determines

the posts it shows a user by the engagements the user makes with accounts and topics as well as the timing of posts. If a user likes, comments, saves, spends more time, or taps on the profile more often on a certain account or under a certain genre, the algorithm will prioritize that type of content. The medium of the content is a contributing factor to algorithm recommendations – whether the content is a video, photo, or photo montage and if the video or photo is of low quality (Warren, 2022). The average engagement rate for posts on Instagram is .98% while the most engaging format is carousel photo posts (Chen, 2022).

Instagram is shifting more to video content over its origins as a photo-sharing platform. Video on Instagram as of February 2023 can fall into four categories: Stories, Reels, Live, and Instagram Video (Macready, 2022). In April of 2023, video is changing, and Instagram Video is housed under Reels. This again shows the rapid changes in the media environment. Stories have their place at the top of the news feed, and they have their own algorithm that prioritizes posts. Stories have a 15-second time limit, but multiple Stories can be posted consecutively which can amount to a longer video. Stories are full screen, like the new Reels feature. Reels range in length from 90 seconds to 15 minutes. Instagram not only shows Reels within the traditional feed but also in a separate Reels feed if the user switches to this view. In 2021, Instagram video replaced IGTV. Users can post videos up to 60 minutes in length that are viewed in the traditional news feed (Macready, 2022).

Within the past year, Instagram Reels have been prioritized by Meta, the Instagram parent company, as it seeks to compete with the rising popularity of TikTok. Reels, like TikTok, allow for the use of trending sounds, duetting another user's content, and adding in-video captions as well as a text caption to the video which can include hashtags. Reels are the fastest-growing part of Instagram (Kutuchief, 2022).

A blog article from the social media marketing tool Hootsuite details the practical steps businesses can take to market themselves on Instagram. The recommendations for use include posting regularly, using high-quality imagery, using a consistent brand theme, writing engaging captions, and using Instagram's features like Stories, Reels, and IGTV (Newberry & Sehl, 2021). Posting regularly helps keep the brand's content in a user's feed. Recency is still an important factor in Instagram's feed organization, though it has switched to being algorithmically driven (Warren, 2022). High-quality imagery is a factor in the algorithm's choice of posts (Warren, 2022) while also creating a more enjoyable experience for the viewer.

A common Integrated Marketing Communications technique is to have a brand style guide that details the fonts, colors, and voice of the brand to guide marketers. This corresponds to having a consistent theme on social media which helps the viewer associate the visual communications with the brand (Macready, 2023).

Caption writing is a way to engage with the audience creatively and get them involved in the posts. An article by Jasper indicates brands can do three things to write engaging captions: use the brand's personality, create a story, and use the brand's voice consistently (Distel, 2023). The first sentence of a caption is the one users are most likely to read, so brands should make that count. Additionally, they can use hashtags, write a call to action, tell a story, and write like the spoken word (Distel, 2023).

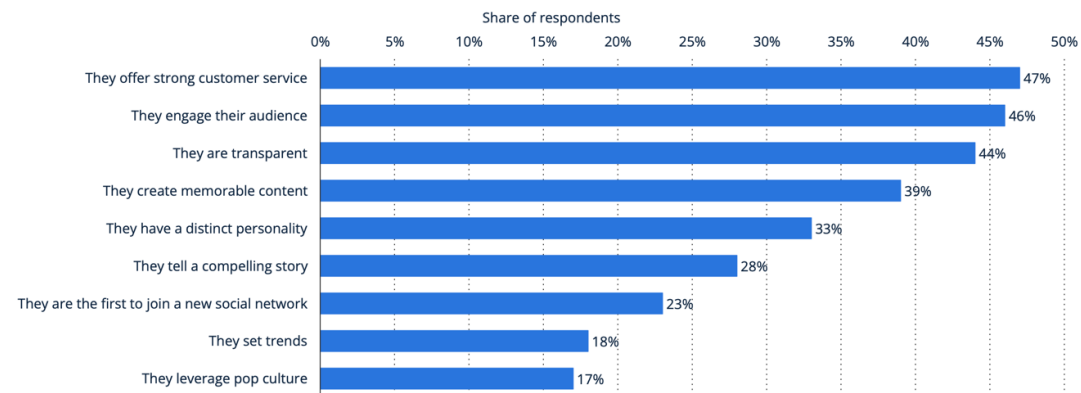
Additionally, a value for many marketers is to make sure their social media posts are accessible to those with disabilities. Creators can add captions to videos for those with hearing impairments and add alternate text to describe the posted photos for those with sight impairments (Wester, 2022). Marketers can make sure that text is easy to read, without contrasting colors or difficult fonts (Wester, 2022).

Figure 1

*Features of social media marketing making a brand attractive for consumers in the United States as of April 2021 (Statista, 2021).*

### Features of social media marketing making a brand attractive for consumers in the United States as of April 2021

Features of social media marketing making a brand attractive in the U.S. 2021



38 | Description: During a 2021 survey carried out among consumers from the United States, 44 percent of respondents stated that transparency made a brand best-in-class on social media. Strong customer service ranked first, named by 47 percent of interviewed consumers. Brands invested nearly 48 billion U.S. dollars in social media advertising in the U.S. in 2021. [Read more](#)  
Notes: United States; March 30 to April 6, 2021; 1,002 respondents  
Sources: Lucid, MarketingCharts, Sprout Social



Consumers value what brands do on social media (Statista, 2021). At the top of the list are strong customer service and audience engagement. Transparency ranks third. Creating memorable content, having a distinct personality, and telling a compelling story all relate to brand voice - the personality the brand takes on in its communications. This comes across in the way captions are written and how the visuals communicate.

Specifically, this study is interested in the visual communications of Catholic social media accounts. The next section will speak on Catholic visual design generally as well as the visual nature of social media.

## Visual Communications and Catholicism

Photos, videos, graphic design, and art are all forms of visual communication. Pictures can communicate an idea without any written or verbal communication.

Catholic content creators have a long line of visual communications they can reference. Christian art was used as a way of educating the laity, most of whom could not read or write for most of Church history. Religious art, including that of other religious traditions, often develops motifs and portrays stories that can be “read” in a way (Encyclopedia of Religion, 2022).

Figure 2

*Adoration of the lamb from the Ghent altarpiece [Oil on panel] (van Eyck, 1432).*



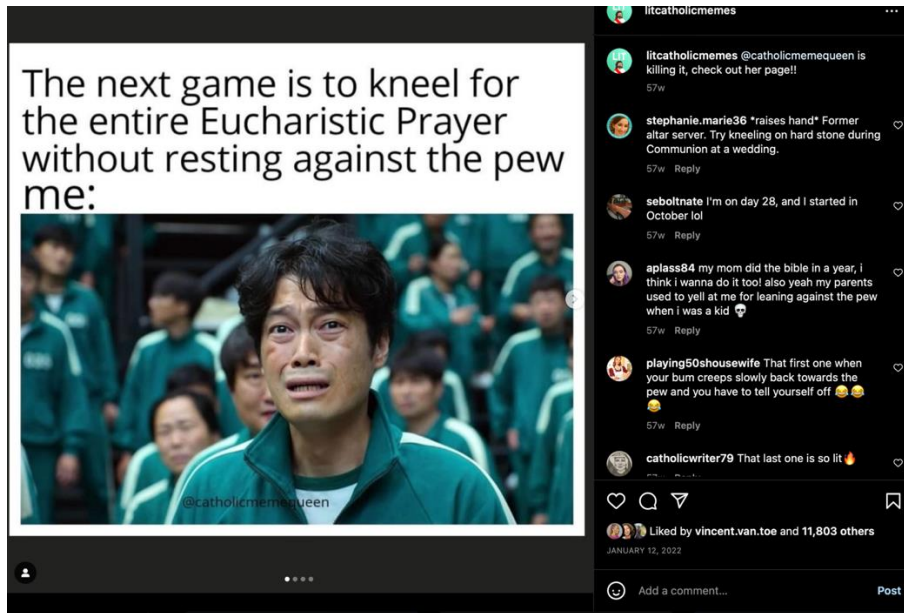
Figure 2 shows an example of Christian art from the 15<sup>th</sup> century (van Eyck, 1432). It has several motifs that can be “read.” This piece of art would sit behind the altar of the church. The altar is the place of the paschal mystery where Catholics still celebrate the sacrament of the Eucharist discussed in Chapter 2 which they believe transubstantially becomes the body of Christ. This artwork seeks to reinforce this teaching through its content. This panel shows the

adoration of the Lamb, a symbol for Jesus, on an altar, just as Jesus will be present on the altar in the form of bread during Mass (van Eyck, 1432). The iconography draws on the Book of Revelation in which visions of heavenly worship describe believers adoring the Lamb (*The Catholic Study Bible*, 2016, Rev. 5:1-14). This work merges Biblical readings, Church teaching, and visual design to communicate this message.

The internet also has a visual language. Emojis are images used amid text to express emotion, code messages, or otherwise communicate meaning. Similarly, memes also utilize their visual aspect to communicate. Like *Adoration of the lamb from the Ghent altarpiece*, memes often reference other phenomena in culture to create meaning. For example, there is a Catholic meme account that produces pop culture memes that meet the Catholic experience. Figure 3 is an example of this. It is a traditional text–image meme that refers to the Netflix show *Squid Game* to joke about the way Catholics sometimes kneel for long periods of time at Mass.

Figure 3

*@catholicmemequeen is killing it, check out her page!! [Photograph] (@litcatholicmemes, 2022).*



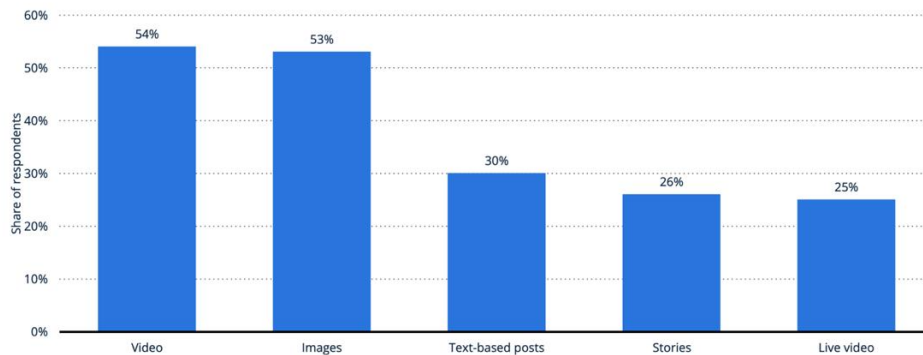
According to a Statista data compilation, video and image media are the most valuable content for social media marketers today (Statista, 2021). Content creators can use the visual aspects of video and photos to communicate their message. The visuals can also help engage the audience and thereby aid the creator since the algorithm is more likely to show posts with high engagement and high-quality imagery (Warren, 2022). Macready notices that the design of the social media page includes all posts, stories, profile images, graphics, and visuals which make up the content strategy (Macready, 2023). The writer emphasizes using consistent visuals and visual language for the brand on social media.

Figure 4

*Types of content valuable for social media marketing goals according to marketers in the United States as of April 2021 (Statista, 2021).*

## Types of content valuable for social media marketing goals according to marketers in the United States as of April 2021

Content types valuable for social media marketing in the U.S. 2021



15 | Description: During a 2021 survey carried out among marketers from the United States, 30 percent of respondents stated that text-based stories were a valuable type of content for social media marketing. The most commonly named type were videos, with 54 percent. Brands invested nearly 48 billion U.S. dollars in social media advertising in the U.S. in 2021. [Statista.com](#)  
Note(s): United States, March 30 to April 6, 2021, 1,081 respondents  
Source(s): Lucid-Spinet Social

statista

Basic design principles like color theory and the rule of thirds are commonly used on social media to enhance content. Among other design principles, these are listed as ones that brands should use (Macready, 2023). Different platforms have different image aspect ratios that affect the way the post will be viewed by the user; awareness of image size and aspect ratio is important for content creators (Macready, 2023). Text on images can be overwhelming, so being concise and making sure text is readable are important along with selecting a color scheme in line with color theory. Finally, the visuals should also be accessible and representative of diversity, according to the blog (Macready, 2023).

Catholic content creators, churches, and apostolates have a lot to keep in mind when creating their online communications. This study looks at the way this labor is done and how this content is communicated.

The main research questions are:

1. What are the similarities and differences in the visual content of apostolate and archdiocesan Instagram accounts?



2. How do engagement rates compare across Instagram accounts at the apostolate and parish levels?
3. What are the challenges to creating a messaging strategy at the parish level?
4. What content strategies are Catholic creators using on their Instagram accounts?
5. How does an effective communications strategy concretely impact the Church?

## METHODOLOGY

I used two different methodologies: personal interviews and Instagram content analyses. The content analyses served as a quantitative data range to explore the specific ways in which creators are communicating visually. This method allowed for less subjective input. The interviews served to answer the deeper questions behind Church leader and content creator perspectives which could not be accounted for with raw data.

### Interviews

I chose to conduct personal interviews of about an hour in length with four people involved in Church communications. These were interviews of convenience, and I had a personal connection of some kind with each of the interviewees. Each person was chosen based on his/her job and how his/her insight from that role would impact the study. The interview questions I developed centered on how each person approaches communication for the Church online. I tailored the questions to the interviewee and his/her role. Because of this, I asked different questions in each interview.

A sample list of questions is included at the end of the study. Commonly, I asked about their educational background and how they became involved in their line of work. Then the questions become more specific to their role. I asked each about the challenge they thought faced the Church within the realm of communications, but also their personal challenges. I commonly explored if there was any oversight or guidance from upper levels of Church leadership within the communication strategy.

I interviewed Deacon Terry and Mindy Irwin. These are the parents of my primary advisor Dennis Irwin. They are involved in Church leadership at St. Kateri Tekakwitha parish in Santa Clarita, California. Deacon Terry has a business background and manages the neighboring parish

Our Lady of Perpetual Help. His background in business informed my decision to interview him about the business side of an employee managing a church's media output. Mindy Irwin works in Family Faith Formation at St. Kateri Tekakwitha parish. She is involved in the day-to-day operations of the parish, and she has insight into running a typical parish's communications. I chose to interview Deacon Terry and Mindy Irwin together as they are married. Mindy converted to Catholicism after they married, and Deacon Terry cites her fervor as bringing him back into a deeper faith life. In this conversation, I explored the typical communications output of a parish and how the labor is organized. They are both older and represent the demographic that is most involved in Church operations, which is another valuable perspective.

I chose to interview Jay Martin, the Marketing and Media Manager at St. Anthony of Padua Catholic Church in the Woodlands, Texas. He studied journalism at the University of Florida. I met Jay while working as a videographer at Life Teen's Camp Covecrest. Like me, Jay was a summer missionary several years ago. He ran the audio and visual equipment for several summers before becoming a full-time missionary. He worked for Life Teen's web department before transitioning to parish communications at St. Anthony of Padua. Jay currently manages the social media output and content creation for the parish. Jay is mainly self-taught in his media work. I chose him for his unique role as having a background in apostolate and parish communications. Jay is the younger and tech-savvy counterpart to Mindy and Terry. As his direct role is parish social media, I found him to be a valuable source. The line of questioning varied from what parish communication looked like during the pandemic to the strategy behind St. Anthony's Instagram accounts, to the value of parishes employing a communications role.

I chose to interview Fr. Mark-Mary Ames from the Franciscan Friars of the Renewal. Fr. Mark-Mary is originally from Anaheim Hills, California but lives in the Bronx, New York. He

joined the Friars in 2009 after a reversion to his faith in college. His decision happened after reading the constitutions of the order. He says, “I read our Constitutions, which is like our way of life, what we say we do and what we were about. And it was everything I was looking for. And so, it was just like all my desires on a piece of paper.” He went on to study philosophy at the Franciscan University of Steubenville and was ordained a priest in 2018.

I connected with Fr. Mark-Mary through his brother, Br. Mariano whom I met while working as a videographer for Life Teen’s Camp Covecrest. Fr. Mark-Mary is a Catholic influencer in a way. He is a published author. He stars in YouTube videos for Ascension Presents, a Catholic media apostolate. He and the friars have the top two videos on the channel, both “pray with us” videos and measuring 3.8 million and 3.3 million views respectively. Fr. Mark-Mary leads the brothers’ podcast entitled “Poco A Poco” which is produced by Spirit Juice Studios, another Catholic media apostolate. Beyond these two media outreaches, Fr. Mark-Mary is also the director of communications for the CFR order, helping to run the popular Instagram account and other media outreach done by the brothers. Because of these roles, I found him to be an important source to speak to Catholic content creation. My questions for him rested on each of the media outputs of the CRFs and their strategy and his thoughts on Catholic content broadly and the issues faced there.

Between these interviewees, I was able to get a broad picture of Church media. They were even geographically located to encompass the country, from California to Texas to New York, though their personal experiences cannot be applied to the entire American Church. I had hoped to interview Mari Pablo, a Catholic speaker I met at camp, but she did not respond. The time constraints of the study, the length of the interviews, and the using of two methodologies

limited my ability to interview more people. Nevertheless, the four I picked offered the perspectives needed for this study.

### Instagram Analyses

Additionally, this study analyzed the content of Catholic Instagram accounts. I chose Instagram as it is the first place I would start as a marketer. While other social media platforms have more users or are more up-and-coming, Instagram remains an influential area online. If one can post a piece of content on Instagram, it can be translated onto almost any other platform. Instagram is a very visual medium as well with its origins as a photo posting app. This makes it suited to a study of visual motifs in Catholic media.

Early in this study, my advisor and I developed a tool that I used in a sense, to “grade” Instagram accounts based on Instagram marketing best practices. The account would be rated from a 1-5 on the use and quality of their Instagram bio, theme, stories, imagery, captions, frequency, multimedia use, Reels & IGTV use, and accessibility. This would then give a total number at the end. Those characteristics correspond to Instagram marketing practices outlined in the Literature Review. However, Instagram changed so much over the course of this study that data from those analyses were not current. The study began in 2021, and as of 2023, IGTV no longer exists on the platform. Also, I found that this study is not meant to tell whether a social media output is good or bad. It is more interested in the messaging and images sent through Catholic media and the commonalities across accounts in those areas. Catholic media, as I have learned, varies drastically in resource and personnel dedication from apostolate to parish. One parish may be doing well with what it has. A successful social media account for that parish may not be a successful social media account for a different audience that wants different content. In

this way, it is not right to say whether an account is doing well or badly based on the myriad of Instagram marketing techniques outlined in the Literature Review.

Instead, I developed an analysis tool to track imagery motif frequency, design type, content type, message, and engagement rate. I determined the motif categories by looking through three social media accounts on Instagram, @blessedishe, @cfr\_franciscans, and @ap\_church, and comparing them to my own experience in the Catholic social media field. These offer a wide range of content from the local parish to a religious order, to a national apostolate. As I was analyzing accounts, I came across motifs and messages that weren't previously included, so I added those and edited past responses for unity.

There were several categories that seemed to be the most common imagery types, so I quantified them in the study:

1. Eucharist: This would include adoration or imagery of the Eucharist during Mass.
2. Mass: Any point in the ceremony would apply.
3. Adoration: Eucharistic imagery outside of the Mass
4. Cross or Crucifix
5. Church Interior
6. Church Exterior
7. Artwork: If the post used some kind of drawn/painted/stained glass artwork it fell into this category
8. Statue: Statues are separate from both artwork and a sculpted crucifix
9. Bible: The image had to include
10. Speaker: This category included an image of a speaker at an event or someone speaking to the camera.

11. Talking to Camera: This is a video format in which the speaker is talking directly to the audience online.
12. Individual: A singular person not within a group
13. Group: Two or more people together

The analysis also included if the post was formatted as a photo, Reel, or carousel of photos. In addition to visual motifs, I recorded the text design of the post. They fell into three categories: text only, text atop a photo, or text and a photo in a graphic design, but not atop each other. Finally, I analyzed the message of the post if it fell into a few categories: spiritual reflection, event invitation, quote (which could overlap with spiritual reflections), and memes.

I analyzed two different sets of Instagram accounts. I chose to analyze apostolate Instagram accounts for several reasons. Apostolates are often led and operated by lay people who are employed in the work of evangelization. These accounts tend to have a larger following and adhere to marketing practices more closely. The audiences for these accounts are wide, and their *raison d'être* is often to reach a large audience of people and communicate the faith. I chose 10 of these accounts to analyze. Most were based on their prominence in the online community in my own experience online and because of their high follower count. I chose not to analyze Life Teen's social media, not because they are not prominent, but because I worked there myself as a content creator.

1. The first apostolate is Ascension Media. Ascension Media is a company producing books, podcasts, and YouTube videos including Fr. Mike Schmidt's "Bible in a Year" Podcast and Fr. Mark-Mary's YouTube videos.
2. Blessed is She is a national women's ministry that hosts retreats, and creates prayer materials, among others to give Catholic women a space to be together.

3. The Carmelite Sisters of the Most Sacred Heart in Los Angeles, I chose as a women's counterpart to the CFRs as they have a relatedly high follower count, though they are less prominent online. They are a religious order of women in LA.
4. Catholic Answers is a company structured to answer the internet's questions about Catholicism.
5. The Franciscan Friars of the Renewal are a religious order of men with friaries throughout the Americas and Europe.
6. Eternal Word Television Network (EWTN) is a TV channel and media outreach.
7. The Fellowship of Catholic University Students (FOCUS) is an apostolate that trains and sends missionaries to college campuses and hosts the SEEK conference yearly for college students.
8. Hallow is an app focused on prayer and creates mainly audio media for their app.
9. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) is the bishop's organization and leadership of the U.S. Church.
10. Finally, Word on Fire is the media apostolate founded by Bishop Robert Barron that, like Ascension, produces podcasts, YouTube videos, books, etc.

I also analyzed archdiocesan accounts. Archdioceses are larger geographic areas that contain larger numbers of Catholics than a normal diocese (Kosloski, 2019). Most of the time, these are in large metropolitan areas. I analyzed 10 accounts, picking the largest metro areas in the U.S. along with other areas of high-density Catholic populations like St. Louis and New Orleans.

I analyzed the most recent nine posts on each account because these would appear first when pulling up an account either on the app or on the desktop version of Instagram. I also



included the pinned posts in this analysis. Instagram allows users to pin posts to the top of their profile to ensure new viewers to the page see that information. As they are located at the very top of the page, I included them in the count of nine posts analyzed. The posts were the previous nine on the traditional page, not on the account's Reels page or the tagged photos page. Users have the option of including their Reels on their main profile page, so any Reels or videos analyzed come from that page. I used HypeAuditor's engagement rate calculator for the engagement rate information on each account. HypeAuditor is a third party analytics tool that allows one to see the engagement rate for any Instagram account. It was used as a time-saving measure and for increased accuracy over calculating engagement rate by hand.

## RESULTS

### Interviews

#### Mindy and Terry Irwin

Each of my interviewees had insight into the way Catholic media content is produced. They had a wide range of perspectives from parish life and the business side of operations to daily content creation and apostolate media insights.

While Deacon Terry and Mindy Irwin do not primarily work in digital communications, there is an overlap. Terry is a deacon at St. Kateri Tekakwitha parish in Santa Clarita, and he works as the business manager at the neighboring Our Lady of Perpetual Help parish. Mindy works with coordinating the faith formation and sacraments at St. Kateri parish, but communication is a large part of her role. As she says, “So I on a daily basis, I’m communicating with families because that’s just a nonstop thing that happens.” Mindy noted as well that her use of social media during the pandemic was much greater than her current use of social media.

I learned that St. Kateri uses multiple means of communication with the parishioners. Email and the bulletin are the primary modes, and some resources are used like the email system Constant Contact for the parish, Flocknote emails occasionally for faith formation communications, and Learning Stream for registration. They also switched to a web-design platform called E Catholic. These are all third-party communication platforms meant to aid in outreach. They employ a few sound techs and website support personnel. Mindy did say that the parish uses social media, but without a communications or public relations employee. Meaning,

the youth minister operates the youth ministry page and the young adult ministry page. Mindy has also noticed that it has gotten harder recently to reach the parents, but she isn't sure what the difference is between now and the past.

Both Deacon Terry and Mindy are master catechists of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, meaning they have completed training, and they train other catechists, those who teach the faith. He expressed frustration that there are faith formation resources readily available that are just not utilized. "And so, a lot of the really good resources out there, they just don't draw upon them." "Despite my urging, one of my frustrations is, you know, we just don't use all these tools that are sitting right here at our fingertips." Our Lady of Perpetual Help does offer catechesis in both English and Spanish for their parishioners, making this accessible and open to their bilingual parishioners.

Our Lady of Perpetual Help does employ a part-time events coordinator and social media manager, however, Terry noted that she is currently assigned a lot more business work than communications work. He says, "So the problem is, is I don't have enough staff, so I'm giving her more business management office stuff to do and she's not doing a lot of what her job title says she's doing." He noted that there are not enough personnel to effectively do all the work facing the parish. Mindy noted that at St. Kateri, they have been asking for a communications person, "But, we keep bugging the business manager at our parish and our pastor to hire us a communications person, even a part-time one because most of us are...we just don't know how it works. And it's not even just that we could learn it. We just have so much already going on in our plate where our focus is diverted that that becomes a lower priority."

As to what is communicated, Deacon Terry says, "The pastor controls all the messaging here," which adds another level of approval to the communications that go out to the parish. This

is a different approach than what seems to be happening at St. Kateri. Terry notes that St. Kateri seems to have more communication overall than Our Lady of Perpetual Help, and he thinks this is a contributing factor to what parishioners express as a lack of cohesiveness in the community. This is an interesting point because while communications are integrated, they are not used as often. They do not use a parish-wide message system like Constant Contact or Flocknote, but they do have a Facebook account that live streams Mass weekly.

With this lack of time comes conflicting underlying philosophy that the current mode of communication seems to be doing what it needs to. Terry says, “As far as all these other Twitter and Instagram and this, you know, Mindy said, you know, she does what she knows best and like and I kind of agree with that goal. If I saw a real need for our stuff, I might. But I go, you know, whatever I'm doing seems to be okay.” And yet, Mindy quotes a conference she went to recently in response to Terry, “...good is the enemy of great. Why do good when you can make it great? Don't settle for good.” At the end of the day, Mindy says, what they are trying to “sell” is a person, Jesus Christ.

Mindy says, “Sometimes you find in most cases those families are here because grandma said, ‘get that child to the sacraments.’ And, you know, I have a small minority of families that I see at Mass on a regular basis. They're there because they want to be there, and they want their children to celebrate the sacraments. They're not the ones I'm worried about. It's the ones I can't reach. And I, I want that magic bullet, you know what I mean? And I think the key is in communication, but I have no idea what that could look like, so I guess I keep trying.”

Jay Martin

Jay Martin and I began working in Catholic media at the same summer camp, Life Teen's Camp Covecrest. He began by managing the audio and visual equipment: microphones for

musicians and speakers along with visual slides with song lyrics and Mass responses. He then worked at Life Teen as a full-time missionary and later joined their web team. Right before the COVID-19 pandemic, he switched to working in a parish setting at St. Anthony of Padua Catholic Church in the Woodlands, Texas, which boasts about 7,000 registered families, according to Jay.

During the pandemic, Jay's role focused on live streaming. "So, I come in every Sunday, and we'd stream Masses, probably about 20,000 people a weekend." The parish was published in the local newspaper because of this outreach, "So ya boy's in the paper because we balled out so hard and made like the news because so many people were watching our streams."

Jay noted the phenomena described in the Literature Review of the potential of Catholics to see a live-streamed Mass as a substitute for attending Mass in person. He struggled with it spiritually, as part of his role included live streaming mass. He wondered if doing his job excellently contributed to Catholics missing Mass when they shouldn't, but he determined that the value in live streaming a few Masses is important. "I realized pretty easily that a higher quality streaming system, well, it automatically, inherently, creates higher quality content."

Having a high-quality stream allows for content to be made from the existing video without extra work. At the same time, his philosophy is, "So the priority is now, has been, and always will be creating a space for people to encounter God face to face." Any content he creates on top of that is just an added benefit. "Like, the important part is mass and the Sunday encounter with God you know, the coming and having a beautiful Sunday where someone can come and pray in peace and enter into the Mass will always be more important, like a cool clip or a pretty picture."

St. Anthony of Padua moved to only two live-streamed weekly Masses after the pandemic, as opposed to during, when they were streaming 16 masses per week. “So, I think livestream Masses, while they were a great accessibility point, I think they definitely shifted the landscape of the church where there's going to be a whole generation of kids that spent really formative years of their Catholic life watching Mass on TV and what the implications of that will be,” he says.

Jay notes that his parish is open to providing the monetary resources he needs to create content and upgrade systems. However, he also says he is doing a job that would be divided among three or four people in the general marketing field. Another lack is a creative guide or overseer in the role. He says, “No one really knows what I'm working on till they see it on YouTube, you know?” And since no one knows the ins and outs of his role, it can make it easier for him to get those monetary resources. However, Jay notes that “Any creative in a Catholic realm, [for] any creative in a Catholic parish to be really successful, they need accountability.”

Like Mindy in California, Jay recently attended a communications conference held by his archdiocese, the Archdiocese of Galveston-Houston. Jay and his former boss Nate presented there about digital storytelling. The archdiocese otherwise does not have oversight of parish communications though they do request that archdiocesan events or outreaches be published in St. Anthony's media, like any other parish outreach.

In creating content, Jay has three main categories of messaging: go to something, give us something, or you should know about this. These are supplemented by other fun or prayerful content that doesn't require a call to action. Jay himself is the primary content creator for photos and videos.

As to the importance of parish communications, “Parishes that rely on the effort of the parishioner to find out the important information are going to have a low return rate of parishioners knowing information,” Jay says. When parishioners know what’s going on, they will be more able to get involved and give to the parish.

Fr. Mark-Mary Maximillian Ames

Finally, I interviewed Fr. Mark-Mary Ames of the Franciscan Friars of the Renewal (CFR). The Franciscan Friars of the Renewal are a relatively new religious order founded in 1987 and now boasting over 150 friars across 15 friaries in the Americas and Europe (Sudano, n.d.). They live by vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience with a special charism of working with the poor. The CFRs began to be involved in producing media content early in Fr. Mark-Mary’s tenure there. He pitched an idea for a basketball-style trick shot video which he says gained about half a million views on Facebook at the time which was the beginning of his media work for the order.

Fr. Mark-Mary’s guiding principle behind his work is Romans 12:2, “Do not conform yourselves to this age but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and pleasing and perfect” (*The Catholic Study Bible*, 2016, Rom. 12:2). He says the battle for the mind is that of capturing eyes and ears, which is something secular media does well. “That’s kind of how like we’re kind of getting our butts kicked in, like, the culture war because we’re essentially, like we’re losing the media battle in many ways,” he says.

In his early days as a priest, he enjoyed the formation and preaching he got from the other friars and desired a way to share that with others. Fr. Mark-Mary started recording videos with Ascension Presents, a Catholic media apostolate that produces 10–15-minute videos on

YouTube, which became very popular. The two most popular videos on the page are both pray-with-us-styled videos by Fr. Mark-Mary and the CFRs, each gaining 3.8 million and 3.3 million views respectively. He says that YouTube videos and other media are an effort to reach people where they're at. "It's just like trying to get where people are, like particularly, like their phones, their computers, their YouTube. Stuff like that - their Instagram feed - to have some contact with them to offer something good," he says. Offering this content, for him, is a way to give an alternative to worldly content that people would be consuming anyway.

Fr. Mark-Mary spearheaded an effort of the friars to form a podcast that was first released during the COVID-19 pandemic. The "Poco a Poco Podcast" hosts Fr. Mark-Mary, Fr. Innocent, and Fr. Angelus, along with Fr. Pierre-Toussaint (PT) and other guest friars. They release weekly episodes that range between 45 minutes to an hour. The friars partner with Spirit Juice Studios, another Catholic video company, which records the podcast's video and audio.

The friars use the concept Jay Martin detailed of reusing content. The podcast's audio and video are repurposed for social which drives people to listen to the podcast. "And so really, like if you use like a marketing funnel or something like that, like the bottom of the marketing funnel, like we're, we're really trying to drive people as far as the digital space goes is the podcast because, like those are the most invested and that's where we are really going deeper," says Fr. Mark-Mary.

Fr. Mark-Mary is the voice of the CFR's Instagram account. From 2018 to 2022, Fr. Mark-Mary managed the social media single-handedly using content and photos from others, especially photographers and videographers who would come to visit the friars. In 2022, he started partnering with Fillan Co., a media company started by the former social media manager for the Fellowship of Catholic University Students (FOCUS). Fr. Mark-Mary says this is an

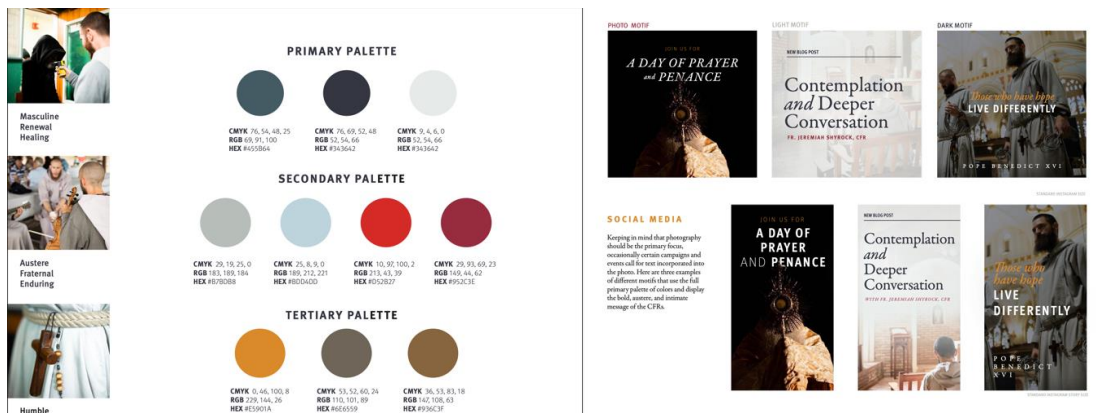


effort to lessen his role, as friars are typically moved and reassigned often, he needs to be replaceable in his work. The brand voice on social media is one thing that Fr. Mark-Mary still must do. “But still, every word comes from me and we that, we experimented with like other writers and stuff because it would be really helpful for me not to have to write everything, but just the nature of it. Is that what we write is the fruit of the life we've lived. And you can't just like imitate that without having lived it. And so that seems to be the one thing that will continue to have to be a friar,” he says. The CFR’s Instagram has tapped into the authenticity that audiences crave with this voice which is authentically a Franciscan friar.

Like Jay’s parish, the friars have a branding guide with excerpts pictured in Figures 5 and 6.

Figures 5 & 6:

*CFR Franciscans’ brand style guide infographic.*



The messaging strategy falls into three categories: evangelization and deepening prayer life, vocations to order, and donor engagement. Most of the content falls into the first two categories. There are Catholic media apostolates with the purpose of evangelization through apologetics, but the friars differ in promoting prayer. Fr. Mark-Mary’s visual priorities are

Instagram, YouTube, and the podcast as far as making sure those are on point and high quality. Like Jay, Fr. Mark-Mary recognizes the mix of using marketing strategies for a purpose that isn't a traditional brand. "Like, so I used to refer to our branding kit, like our digital habit," he says, because it's the way they present themselves to the world.

Something striking about the CFR's media work is all the partnerships and team efforts they have undertaken. This group effort has made the friars very successful and given them the resources they would not have had on their own to succeed at the work. It also goes back to the roots of the Franciscans as a begging order – they are dependent on others and on God.

While Fr. Mark-Mary is obedient to his superiors and the archbishop, he does not get much direction from his superiors, like Jay. There is talk of creating a board of directors of some sort because, he says, "the reality is like it is just a one-man show for the most part right now, which isn't ideal for the size of the thing we're doing, like accountability and other sorts of people is helpful." Jay makes the same note when speaking about his own lack of oversight and the need for accountability.

As far as Catholic media as a whole, Fr. Mark-Mary realizes the Catholic Church is often behind in using new technology and platforms. "We're going to discern things more slowly. And so, we're not going to adopt things that maybe we haven't discerned if they're good or not. Also, we're very like particular, the Catholic Church is a very, very large organization and large organizations move and adapt slowly." He says the world has an advantage in that they are not as concerned about the ethics of a medium and that the Church cannot compete with the overly resourced productions, and perhaps it is not meant to.

A challenge he sees is that “we, particularly at the local level, we don't value it [communications and media work] and there's not going to be a business or there's going to yeah, there's not going to be a business that's...that's growing that doesn't have a marketing budget and actually like probably a very large marketing budget. And they do that because they know the import, like they know the value and the importance of that.” He compares local churches to nonprofits as they operate similarly. Nonprofits get their budget up front, so there is often less incentive to create a product that people enjoy as opposed to for-profit companies that rely on consumers enjoying their product to operate. This is a reason Fr. Mark-Mary chooses to partner with third parties because it helps ensure the quality of the product. He says that parishes and local places will likely have to see the fruit of a good communications strategy before they invest resources in it, just like the CFRs did at the beginning of Fr. Mark-Mary’s work. Now that the fruit is evident, he gets more resources.

Just like Jay, and Mrs. Mindy’s work with her families, Fr. Mark-Mary says it’s the in-person encounters that are the most important. “The best things that happen to me and the things that really move my heart, particularly my, my priestly heart are like in-person one-on-one things.” He makes the point that there are a lot of good things happening in Catholic communities that aren’t documented and can’t be. For example, the Missionaries of Charity working with the poor don’t have a media outreach, but their work speaks for itself. For a priest who has built a very strong media presence, Fr. Mark-Mary says, “profoundly, like overwhelmingly, the things that matter the most to me have nothing to do with digital.”

## The Instagram analyses

### Apostolates

The message sent by each account varied based on the organization's goal. For apostolates, some were focused on prayer while others were focused on apologetics or selling their product.

Figure 7

### *Occurrences of messaging motifs in apostolate Instagrams*

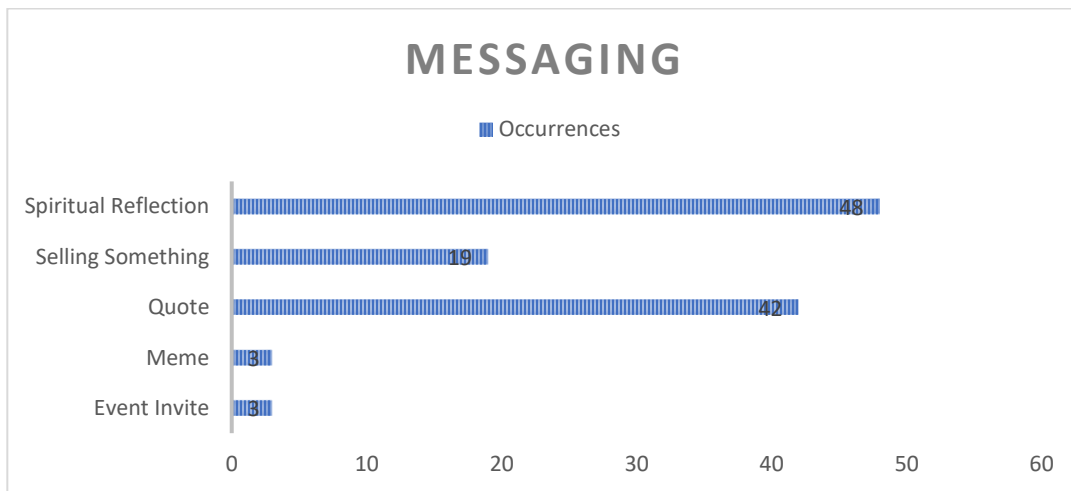


Figure 7 shows the results of the apostolate social media analyses. The messaging fell most commonly into the categories of spiritual reflections and quotes (though some quotes were spiritual reflections) and selling something. Word on Fire was notable in that all of its nine posts had a call to action for the viewer to buy something. Hallow was similar as many posts ask the viewer to download the app or to stream an audio piece.

Figure 8 shows the most common image motifs across the apostolate social media accounts analyzed were an individual person and a person speaking either to the camera or to a crowd. The next most common was an image of someone praying. It was not uncommon for a

single post to use multiple forms of design by utilizing Instagram’s carousel post format and video formats. When a post used multiple forms of an image motif, it was counted for each motif used. Interestingly, I anticipated a greater use of Eucharistic and Mass imagery than what I encountered, especially at the apostolate level.

Figure 8

*Occurrences of visual motifs in apostolate Instagram posts*

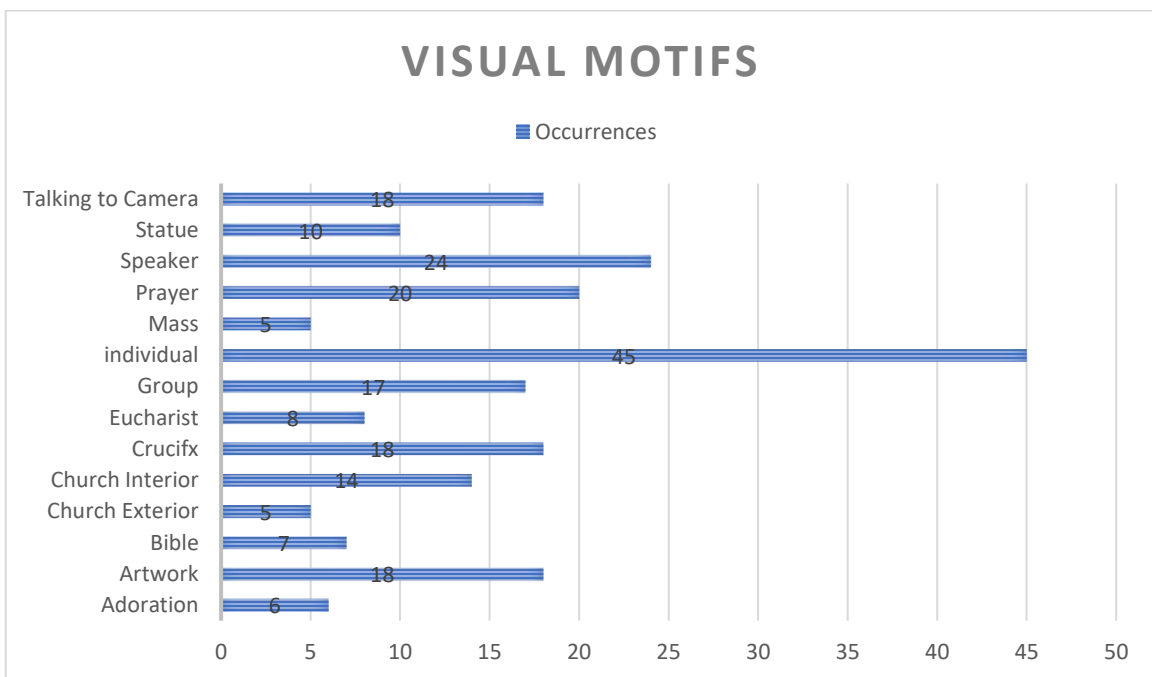


Figure 9 shows the engagement rates of each of the accounts analyzed. The average engagement rate across all the analyzed accounts was 1.78%, which is higher than the average .98% engagement rate on Instagram (Chen, 2022). A surprising finding on accounts is the engagement rate for the Fellowship of Catholic University Students (FOCUS). It was much higher than the Instagram average and the rates of the other accounts. Word on Fire and Hallow had very low engagement rates compared to their follower counts. All other accounts were about average or higher than average. I see a potential explanation in the engagement rates for Word on

Fire and Hallow in their messaging: all of Word on Fire’s posts included a call to action that involved buying a product. Hallow similarly included a call to action to stream their content in the app which often required a paid subscription to access. Users get tired of calls to buy something, and I see this as a contributing factor to the low engagement rates, though more research can be done to determine correlation and causation.

Figure 9

*Engagement rates of apostolate media from HypeAuditor’s calculator*

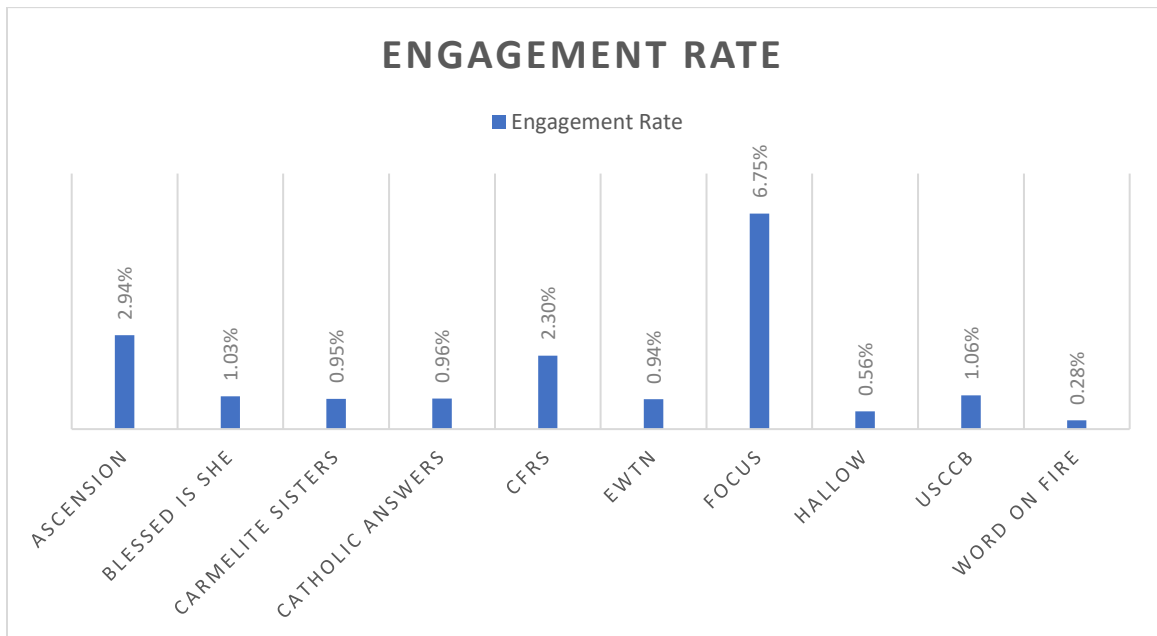
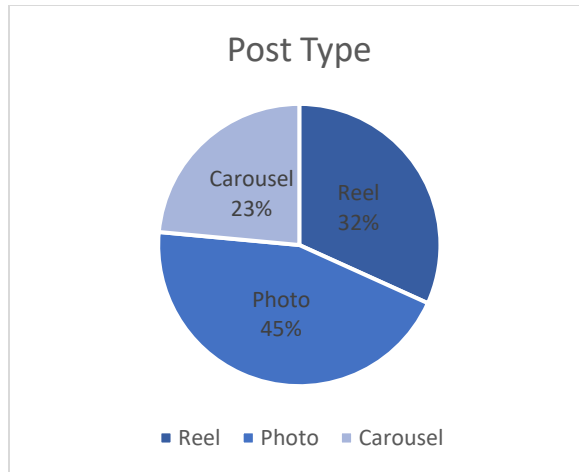


Figure 10 summarize the data on types of posts. The apostolates analyzed are using photo posts more often, followed by Reels and then carousel posts. This varied between apostolates. Word on Fire used only photos in their last nine posts while the CFRs used many Reels.

Figure 10

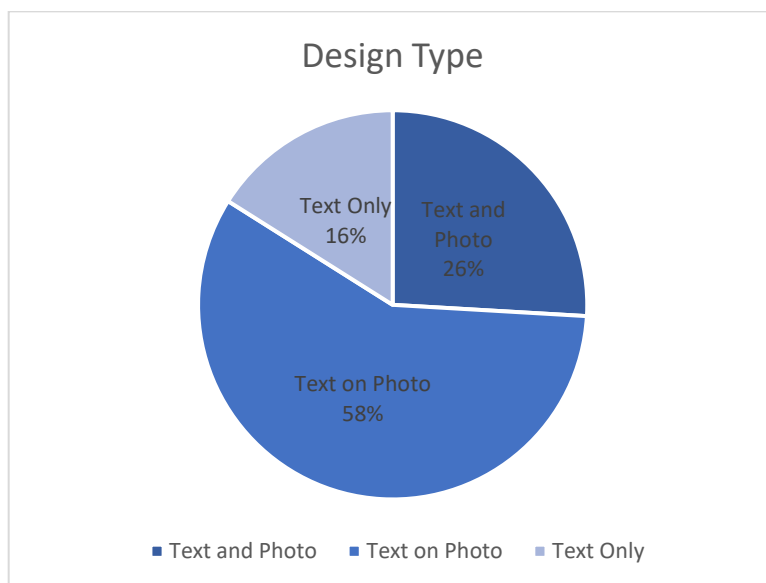
*Apostolate Instagram post type out of total analyzed posts*



Finally, Figure 11 shows the design types of the posts. The design was most often a photo with a text overlay. The second most common was a graphic design of some sort that included both text and photo or video but was not overlaid, and the least common was a post that was text-only without some sort of imagery.

Figure 11

*Design type of post on apostolate Instagram*

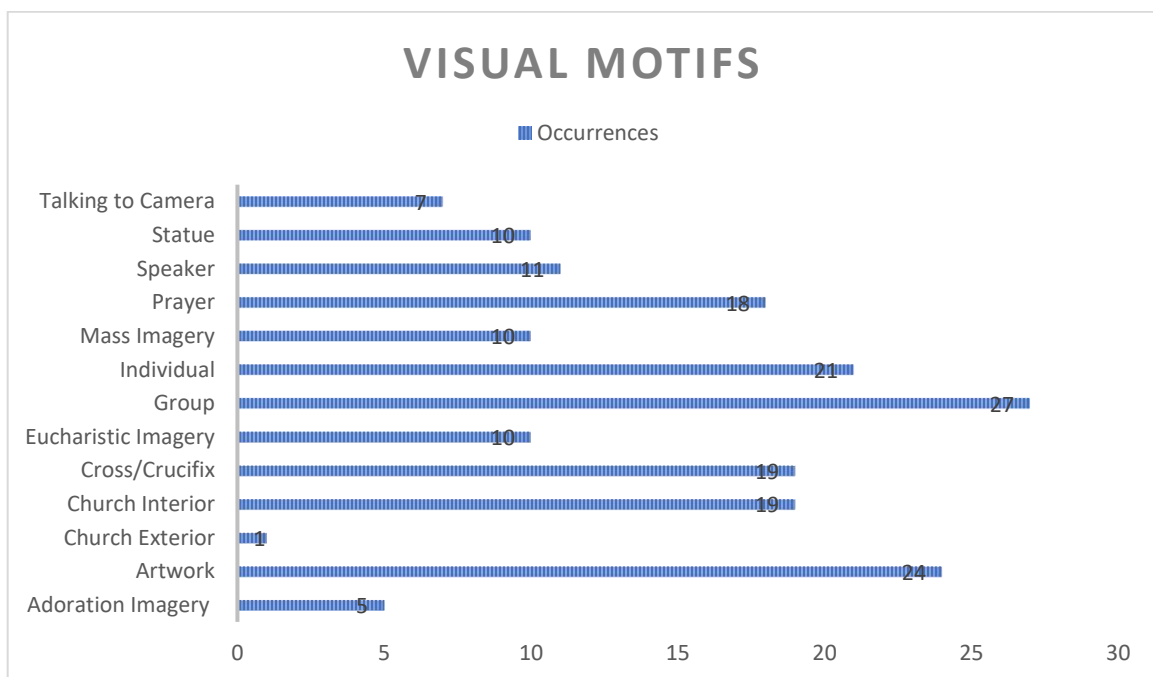


## Archdioceses

Archdiocesan accounts often had fewer followers than the apostolate accounts analyzed. The analyzed apostolates had an average of about 183,000 followers compared to the archdiocesan average of about 5,800 followers. These accounts are speaking primarily to the audience of Catholics in their geographic area while apostolates have a wider audience of Catholics generally and are not bound by location.

Figure 12

### *Occurrences of visual motifs in archdiocesan Instagram accounts*



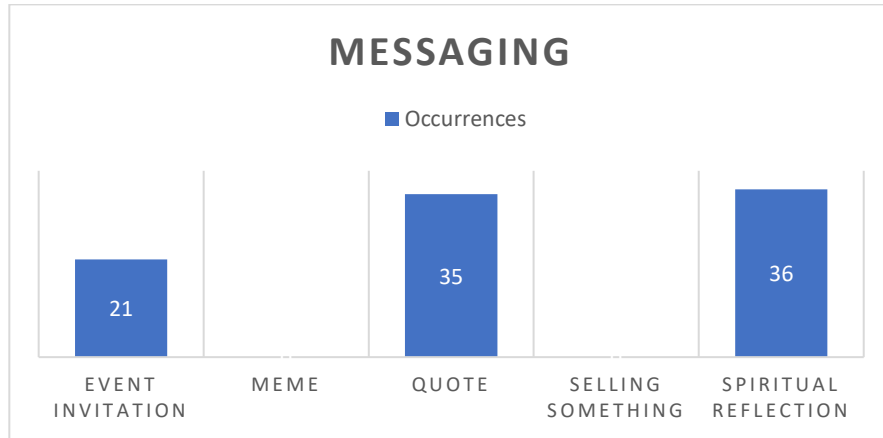
Differently from apostolates, the archdiocesan account I analyzed most frequently used a group of people (two or more bodies in the frame), followed by using imagery of Catholic artwork like Figure 2. Archdiocesan accounts used the imagery of an individual person 53% less frequently than apostolate accounts while Apostolate accounts used Catholic artwork 25% less frequently than archdiocesan accounts. Again, I was surprised at the relative infrequency of



Mass, adoration, and Eucharistic imagery; however, these remain relatively consistent between the apostolate and archdiocesan levels.

Figure 13

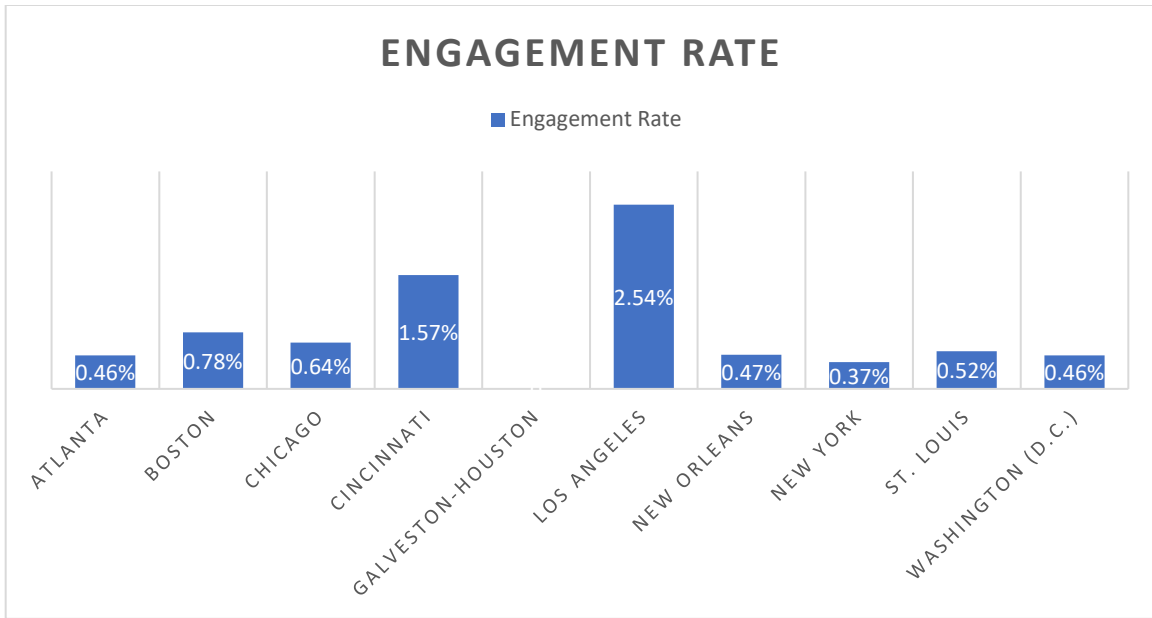
*Occurrences of messages in archdiocesan Instagram accounts*



Of the types of messaging analyzed, the most common was a spiritual reflection which often included or took the form of some kind of quote either from the Bible, a saint, or other quotes. More frequently at this level, there were event invitations that go along with the more local nature of these accounts. As the study progressed, I realized a category that was not measured but was common was the use of education in the faith or apologetics.

Figure 14

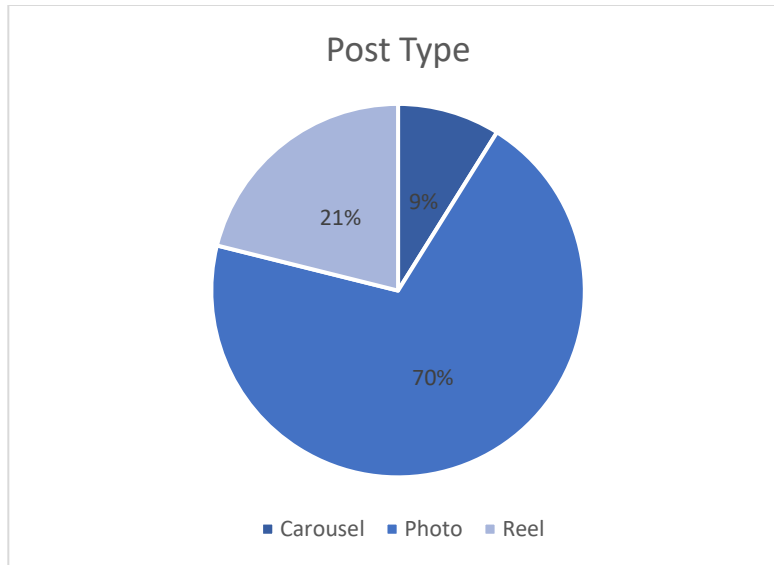
*Engagement rate of archdiocesan Instagram accounts*



The average engagement rate for an Archdiocesan account was much lower than that of the apostolates: .87% as compared to 1.78%. Six of the nine accounts were significantly lower than the Instagram average of .98% while two accounts, the Archdiocese of Cincinnati and the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, had significantly higher engagement rates. HypeAuditor could not find the account of the Archdiocese of Galveston-Houston, so its data is not included here.

Figure 15

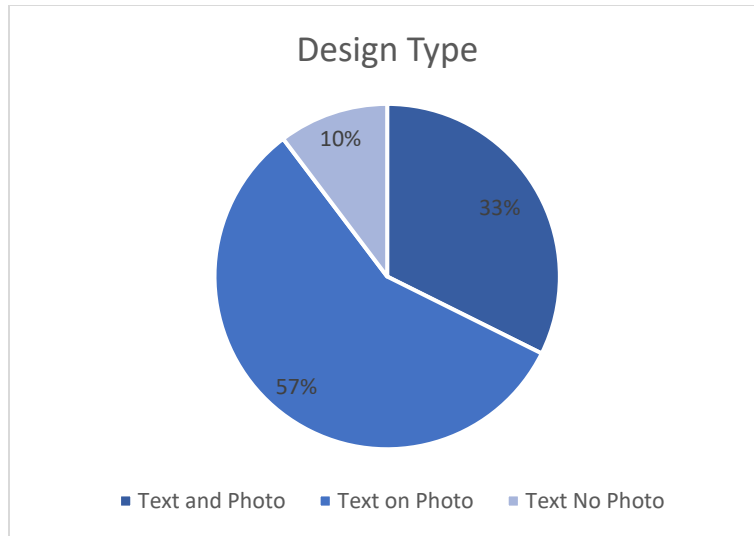
*Frequency of post type in archdiocesan Instagram accounts*



The archdioceses used single photos as their primary posted content. Those made up 70% of the posts analyzed compared to 45% of the apostolate posts. Carousel photos follow and Reels make up only 9% of the analyzed posts. This shows that the analyzed archdioceses are a step behind the changes in Instagram content as carousel posts are the most interacted with (Chen, 2022) and Reels are the biggest area of growth on the platform (Kutuchief, 2022) – but they are not utilizing either of these forms of content.

Figure 16

*Design type of posts on archdiocesan Instagram accounts*



The type of design of the archdiocesan posts is in similar distribution to the apostolate posts. The most popular category was text on top of a photo followed by a graphic design with text and imagery that do not overlap.

An important note in this set of analyses is sometimes these accounts did not take into consideration the way that Instagram works as a platform. For example, every post from the Archdiocese of Galveston-Houston puts links in the caption, which cannot be clicked on by a user because Instagram does not support that formatting. The Archdioceses of Atlanta, Boston, and Cincinnati also put links in the captions of at least one post. The Archdiocese of Atlanta posted several graphics with a QR code in them, which cannot be scanned by someone's phone as they are using the app on their phone. These show a clear misunderstanding of the way the platform works generally, or perhaps, a disregard for how the platform works if understood. Also of note is that the Archdiocese of New Orleans has not been active on their account since 2022.

A positive finding is that some archdioceses are posting in multiple languages as they see the diversity of the Catholic community in their area. For example, the Archdiocese of Chicago

would post in English, Polish, and Spanish. Several other archdioceses would post in Spanish and English. This is an extra layer of accessibility for those communities.

### Indications

Archdioceses have fewer average follower counts, and their intended audience is smaller. However, it is apparent that archdioceses are not capturing their intended audience. For example, the bio of the Boston Archdiocese says they serve 1.8 million Catholics there, but their follower count indicates an online engagement with only .19% of those Catholics. This becomes more apparent when comparing the engagement rates, which are much higher among apostolates than archdioceses as seen in Figures 9 and 14. I looked to the content analyses to see if there was a potential explanation for this gap in audience engagement.

Figure 9

*Engagement rates of apostolate media from HypeAuditor's calculator*

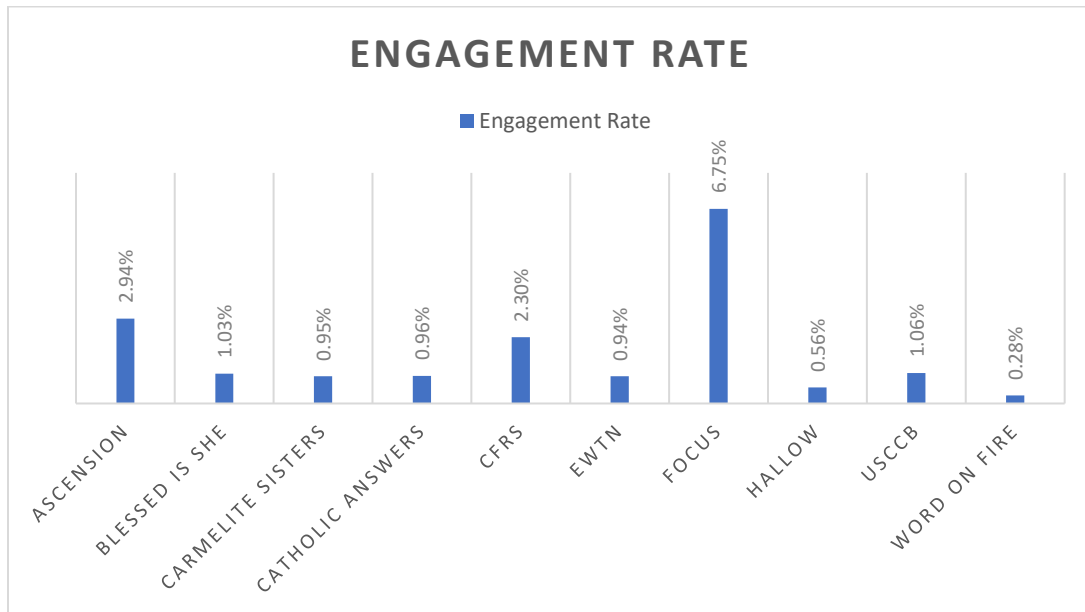


Figure 14

*Engagement rate of archdiocesan Instagram accounts*

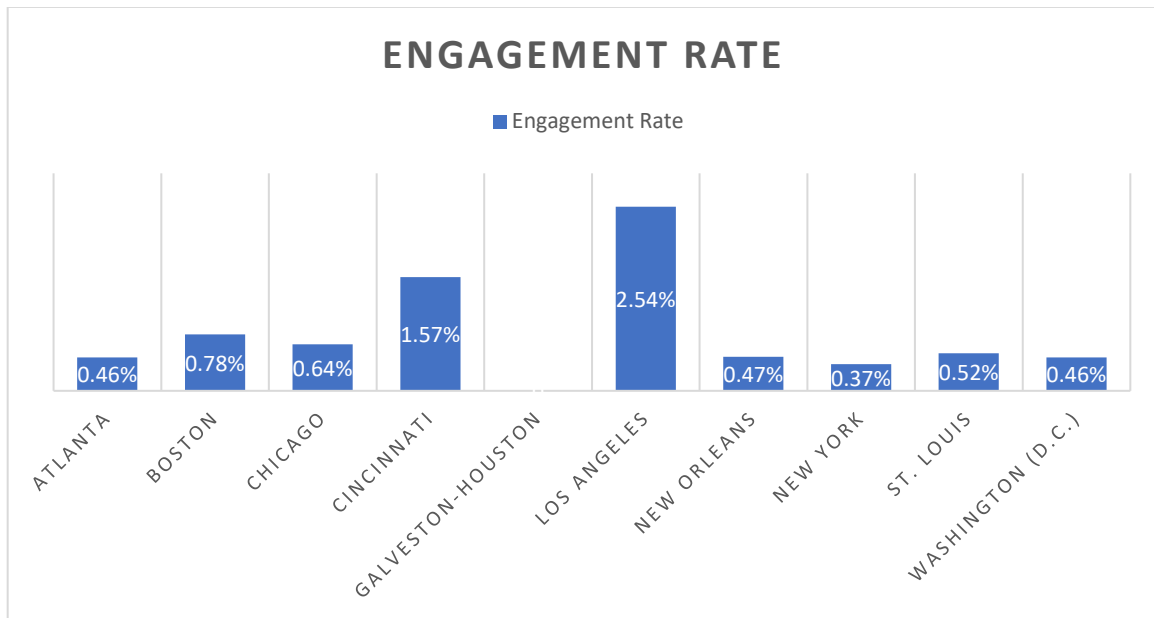
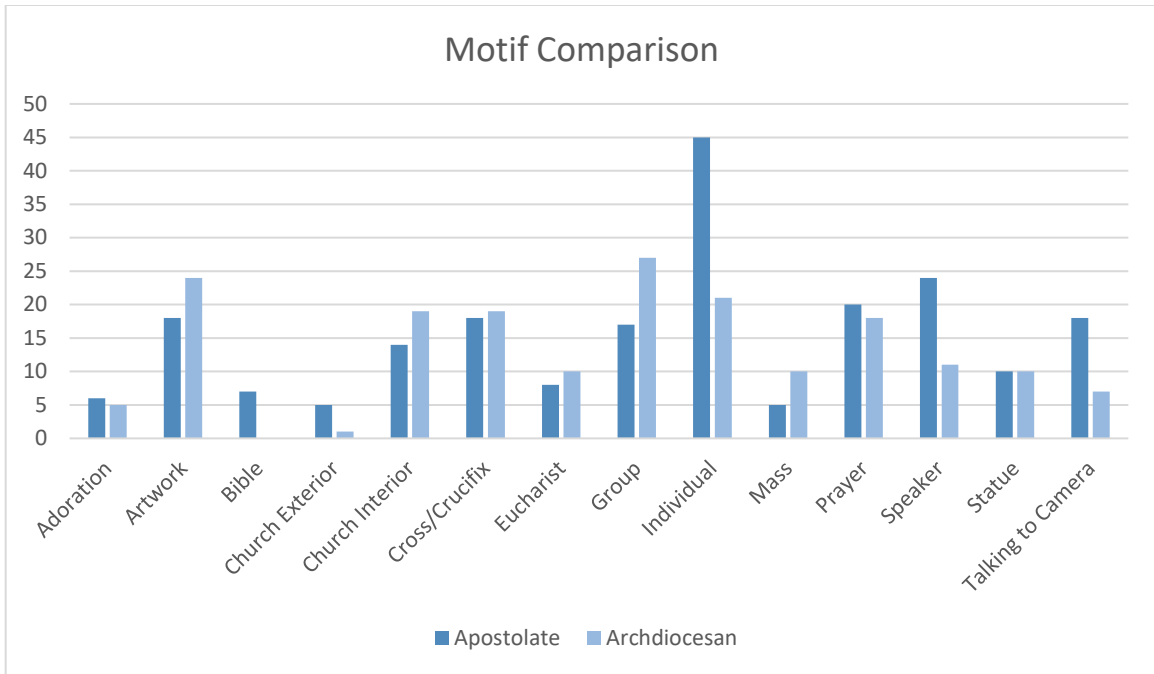


Figure 17

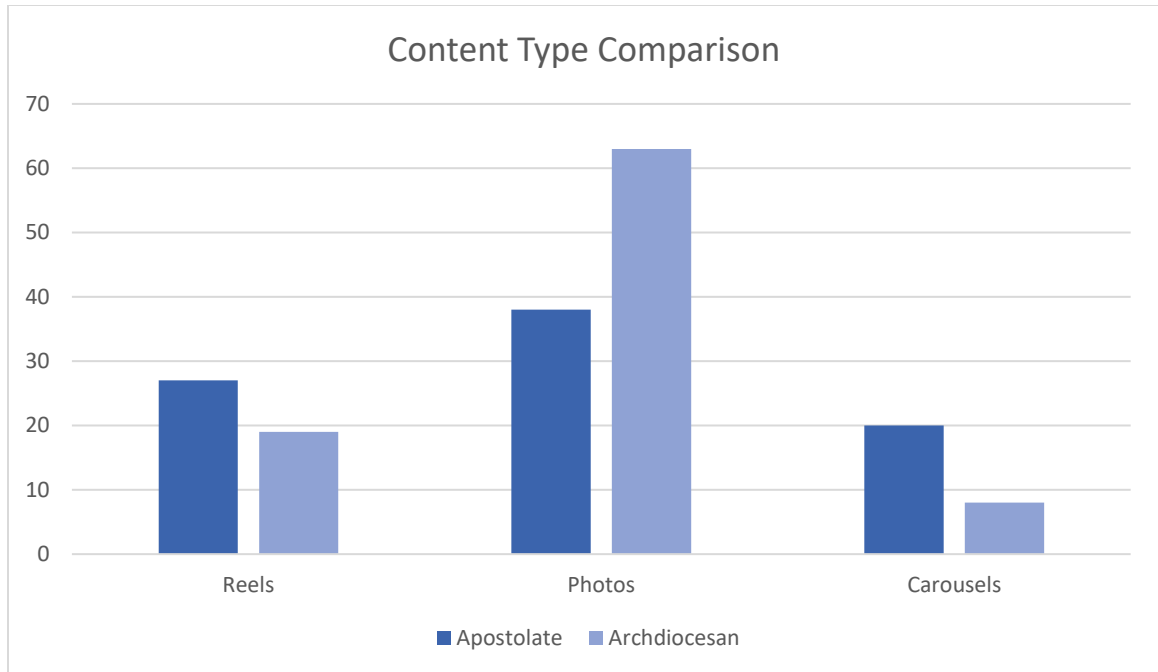
*Comparison of visual motif frequency between apostolate and archdiocesan accounts*



There are no notable differences in the rate of design types between apostolate and archdiocesan accounts. Figure 17 shows the comparison between visual motif frequencies. Apostolates used imagery with individual people much more often. People tend to like images of people more, which might contribute to greater engagement at the apostolate level. More research would need to be done on this to determine correlation and causation. I was struck by the infrequency of the use of adoration, Mass, and Eucharistic imagery, as well as the infrequency of images of the Bible. Artwork remained a high one which is likely because of its ease of access. Creators can easily take a copyright-free image of an old piece of artwork and use it in a graphic design or other post type. Apostolates far more frequently had images of a speaker and/or someone speaking to the camera.

Figure 18

*Content type comparison of apostolate and archdiocesan posts*



Another potential contributor to the increased engagement at apostolate levels is the content type. The comparison can be seen in Figure 18. Archdioceses use photos at a much higher rate while apostolates have a more balanced content profile. As carousel posts are the most interacted with on Instagram (Chen, 2022) and Reels are the area of growth (Kutuchief, 2022), archdioceses could implement a more diverse content profile to reach a larger number of non-followers. Archdioceses have other problems with their output like the infrequency of posts mentioned with the Archdiocese of New Orleans and the potential misunderstandings in how the platform works in posting QR codes and links in captions.



## CONCLUSIONS

In summary, of the Catholic Instagram accounts analyzed, those at the apostolate level have a higher relative engagement than those at the archdiocesan level, with a few outliers in each. This indicates that apostolates are generally connecting with their audience better than archdiocesan accounts. The two accounts use approximately the same design proportions with apostolates using more Reels and photo carousel content types. Apostolates use significantly more imagery of individuals. These content differences can be explored as potential causes for the engagement rate differences. Archdiocesan communications can be more accessible with language but less user-friendly in their use of Instagram.

At the parish level, messaging has several barriers. These include the lack of personnel resources to do the work or a complex division of communication labor across several people whose main role is not media. The interviewed content creators have different strategies tailored to their audiences. Jay Martin at the parish level mixes his content to invite the parishioners to events, inform them of news, ask them to donate, and keep them engaged with beauty. Fr. Mark-Mary aims to push the audience to listen to the brothers' podcast to go deeper in faith. The larger strategy of both is to draw the audience into a personal encounter with their faith through in-person encounters.

The interviewees answered the question of how a communication strategy concretely impacts the Church. Jay notes that when parishioners know things, they are more likely to become involved or to attend an event, which would build community. Terry Irwin connects the feeling of lack of community to a lack in the communications output of his parish. This distinction shows that communication helps build community.

In a larger sense, the study shows that the Church is right in its teaching on communications – that it is of the utmost importance to her functioning. The Church is using media and social media, which is a first step. But there is room to grow in quality with the potential to incorporate Integrated Marketing Communications techniques to reach more people online.

This study is limited in scope. The sample size of apostolate and archdiocesan Instagrams is relatively small. The categories of messaging are not totally inclusive. Another category that would have been a useful one to add is that of education – is the post teaching or explaining an aspect of Catholicism to the viewer? This was not measured in this study. The analysis categories often overlapped, which confused the data slightly. Similarly, the rapid pace at which the internet changes means that this data may become obsolete within a few months of publishing. I (the researcher) myself am limited in my knowledge and understanding of research best practices, so I know that it may have fallen short.

This study is a starting point for research into the Catholic Church's approach to social media. As there are few to no studies on the subject, this study adds to the body of literature. However, much more research could be done on the topic with expansion into Catholic influencers and parish accounts. More research can be done on Catholic communications on YouTube and other social media networks. An interesting path to follow would be how online communication impacts in-person community. There are many more trends to discover and follow in this topic, and I would love to see more research.

## GLOSSARY

**Apologetics:** the area of study and discussion of explaining and defending the Catholic faith

**Apostolates:** These are organizations that are not a direct outreach of the Catholic Church but seek to conform to the mission to “make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:19, *Catholic Study Bible*). These have many forms. They are often led by lay people or clergy. Examples include the Fellowship of Catholic University Students (FOCUS) which trains and sends missionaries to U.S. college campuses and parishes, Word on Fire, which is a media apostolate led by Bishop Robert Barron, and Ascension Press, which is a media organization producing Catholic content.

**Archdiocese:** a part of the geographic organization of the Church that is similar to a diocese but encompasses a larger metropolitan area or an area with a large population of Catholics.

**Catechist:** a person whose role is to teach the faith.

**Church:** Catholics believe the Church to be many things, and I may refer to her in ways that have different meanings.

1. **The Church** is the Body of Christ. This is a common interpretation of St. Paul’s writings in the Bible. It means that all believers who are in communion with the teachings of the Catholic Church are in union with each other and are therefore referred to collectively as “The Church.” In this sense of the word, female pronouns are used and the word is capitalized.
2. **The Church** is the administrative hierarchy. The Roman Catholic Church is organized with a system with leaders at various levels and physical locations. These leaders have the authority to define doctrine, and they do so in various writings and declarations. “The Church” as used in the phrases “Official Church Teaching” and “Official Church Communication” equates

“The Church” with its authority. In this sense of the word, female or gender-neutral pronouns are used and the word is capitalized.

3. **The Church** is local. Across the world, there are Catholic churches or parishes that serve the faithful where they are located. To say that the Church communicates means that not only does the Vatican and the Pope offer words to the world, but also the bishops and archbishops, the local parish, priests and religious, apostolates, and even lay Catholics can all be voices that communicate the “brand” of the Roman Catholic Church to the world. In this sense of the word, gender-neutral pronouns are used and the word is not capitalized.

**Diocese:** a geographic organizational area consisting of parishes that are headed by a bishop

**Eucharist:** the sacrament of the Catholic Church which is confessed to be the physical Body and Blood of Jesus Christ.

**Evangelization:** the spreading of the Gospel, the work of converting others to Christianity.

**Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC):** an approach to marketing that emphasizes creating a consistent messaging strategy across media output channels as part of a marketing plan.

**Laity:** Refers to lay people as a whole.

**Lay Person:** A lay person is a general church-goer who has not made a vow of religious life. They are mostly employed outside of the Church, though Church function often hinges on lay employees. They are families, children, and single people.

**Mass:** the Sunday celebration of Catholics which incorporates readings from the Bible, a reflection by the priest, the consecrating of the Eucharist, and receiving communion.

**Parish:** The parish is the local Catholic Church. For example, the nearest Catholic Church to Oxford, MS is St. John the Evangelist Catholic Church. It could also be called St. John's parish.

**Parishioners:** Parishioners are the local church attendees. Those who go to St. John's are parishioners of St. John's.

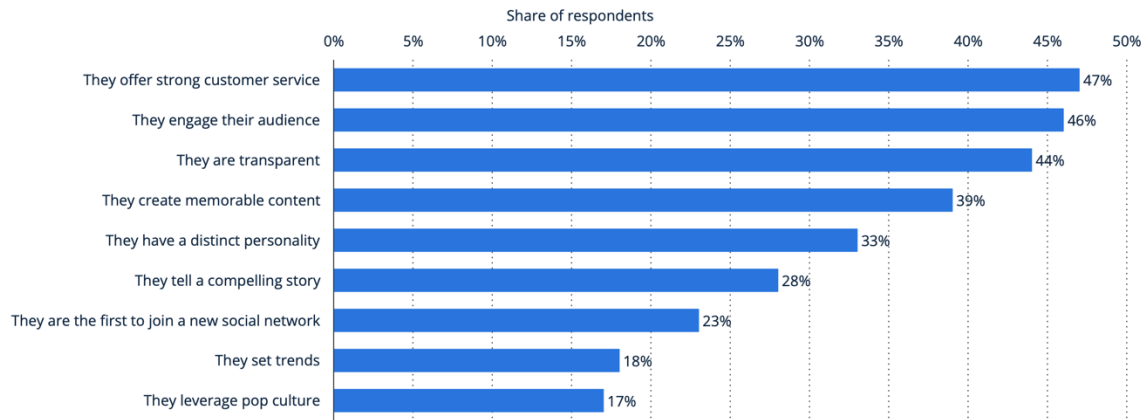
**Religious:** When used as a noun, this term refers to people who have vowed their lives to God through specific functions in the Church. They include nuns, religious sisters, monks, religious brothers, consecrated single people, priests, and others.

**Social Media:** Internet sites that allow users to make accounts, post content, interact with content, and offer comments.

## FIGURES

### Features of social media marketing making a brand attractive for consumers in the United States as of April 2021

Features of social media marketing making a brand attractive in the U.S. 2021



36 | Description: During a 2021 survey carried out among consumers from the United States, 44 percent of respondents stated that transparency made a brand best-in-class on social media. Strong customer service ranked first, named by 47 percent of interviewed consumers. Brands invested nearly 48 billion U.S. dollars in social media advertising in the U.S. in 2021. [Read more](#)  
Notes: United States; March 30 to April 6, 2021; 1,002 respondents  
Sources: Lucid, MarketingCharts; Sprout Social

statista

Figure 1: Statista. (2021). *Features of social media marketing making a brand attractive for consumers in the United States as of April 2021*. Retrieved 2023, February 20 from <https://www-statista-com.umiss.idm.oclc.org/study/105913/social-media-marketing-in-the-united-states/?locale=en>



Figure 2: *Adoration of the Mystic Lamb* by Jan van Eyck 1432. Wikimedia Commons

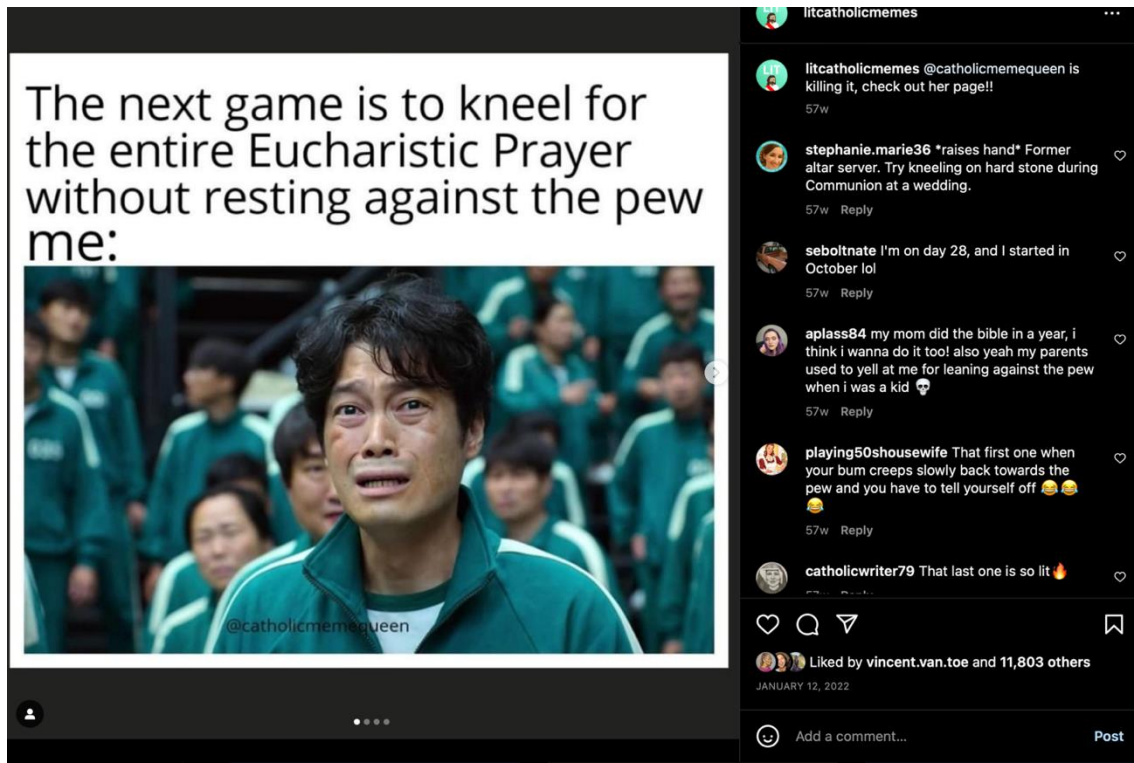


Figure 3: [@litcatholicmemes]. (2022, January 1). @catholicmemequeen is killing it, check out her page!!. [Photograph]. Instagram. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CYoxQ33IE0H/>

## Types of content valuable for social media marketing goals according to marketers in the United States as of April 2021

Content types valuable for social media marketing in the U.S., 2021

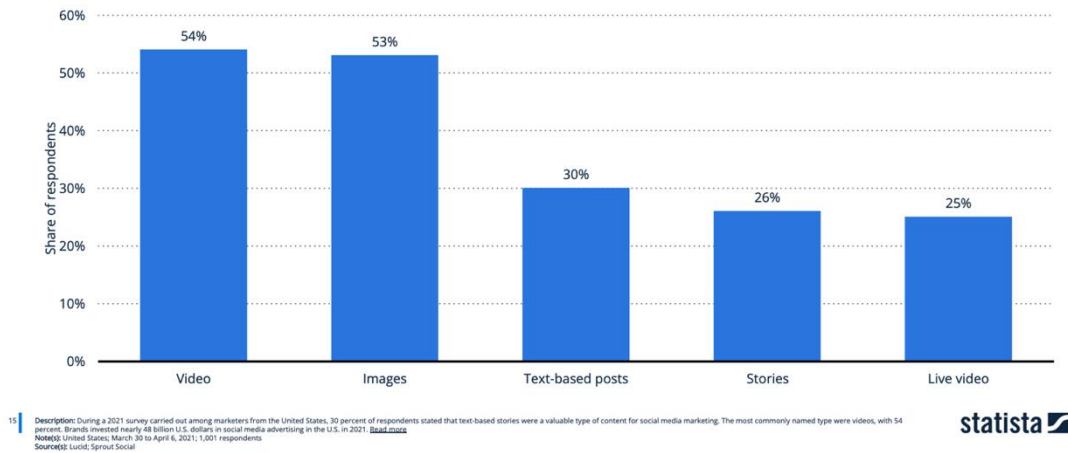


Figure 4: Statista. (2021). *Types of content valuable for social media marketing goals according to marketers in the United States as of April 2021*. Retrieved 2023, February 20 from <https://www-statista-com.umiss.idm.oclc.org/study/105913/social-media-marketing-in-the-united-states/?locale=en>





Figure 5: CFR Franciscans. [Brand style guide infographic]. Retrieved March 9, 2023.

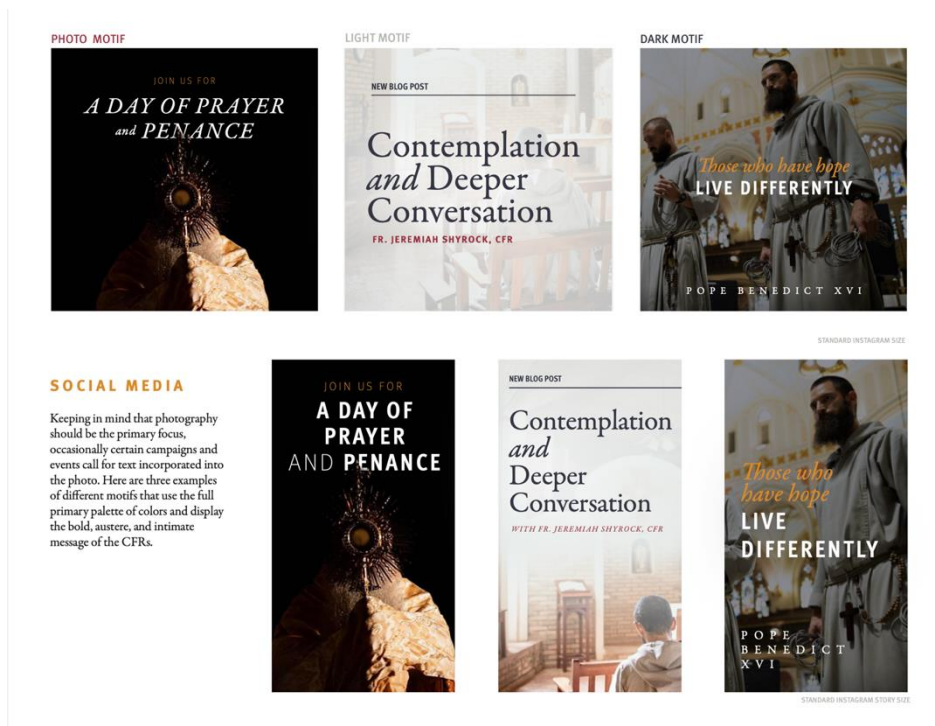


Figure 6: CFR Franciscans. [Brand style guide infographic]. Retrieved March 9, 2023.

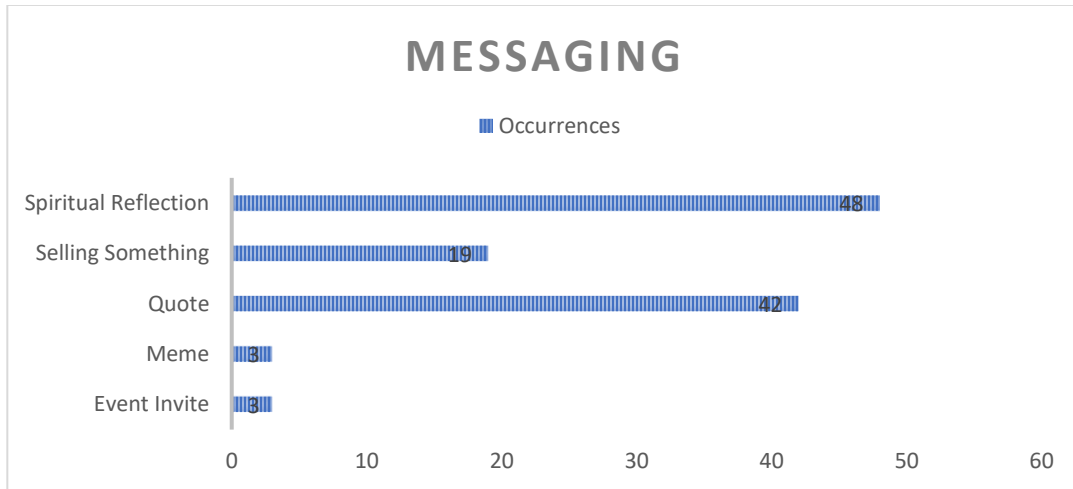


Figure 7: Occurrences of messaging motifs in apostolate Instagrams

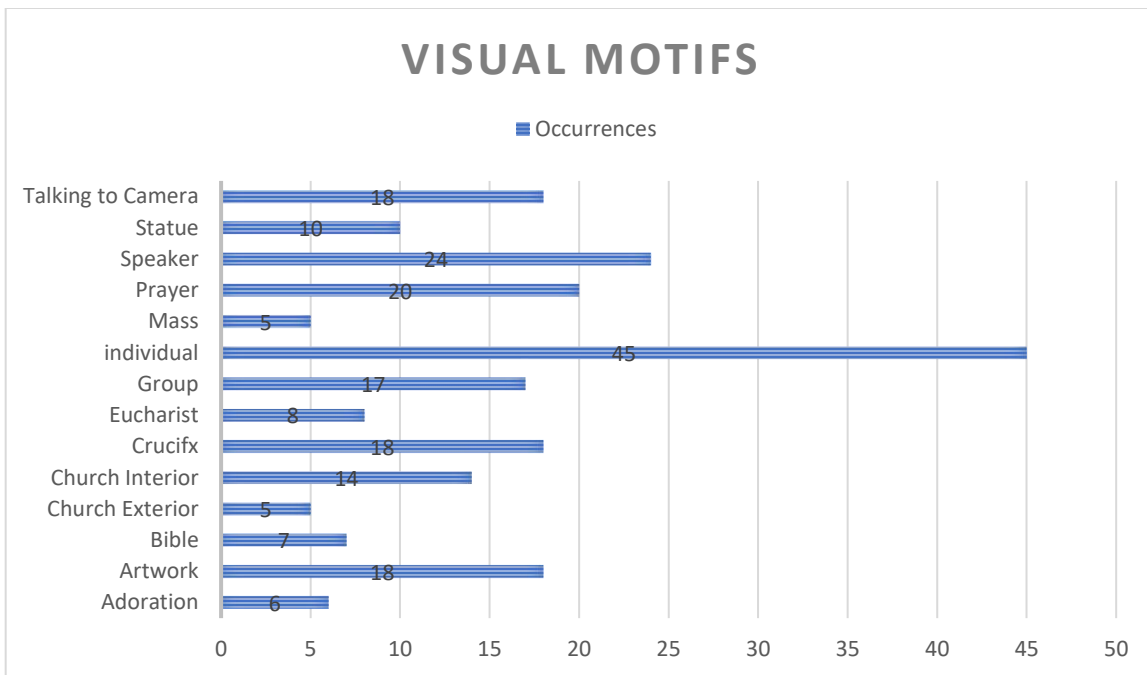


Figure 8: Occurrences of visual motifs in apostolate Instagram posts

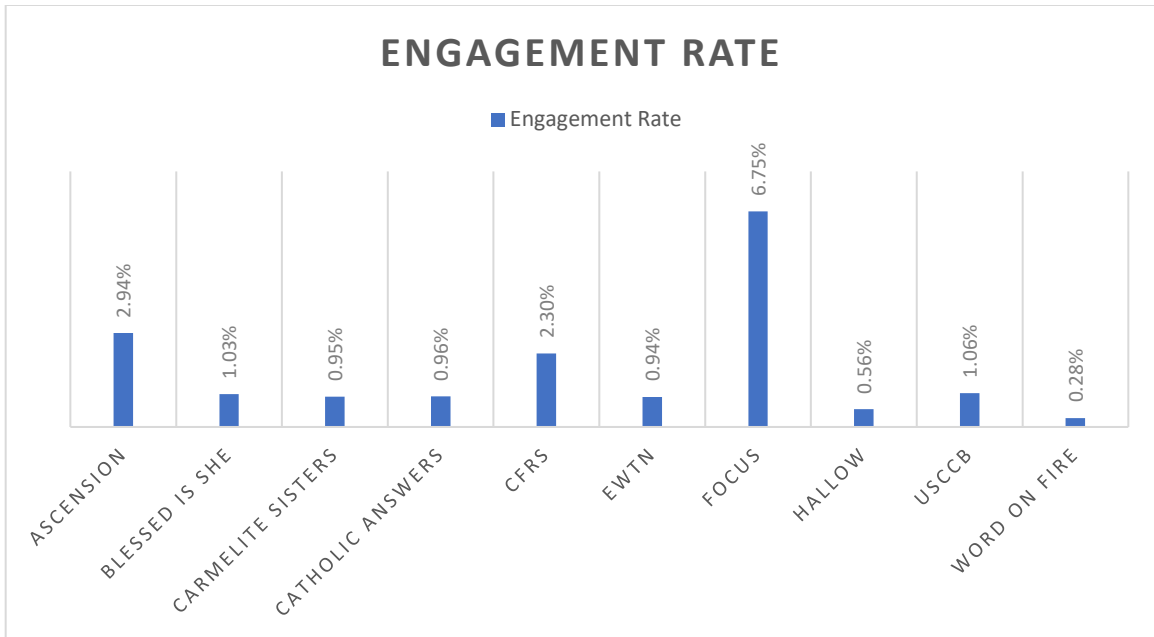


Figure 9: Engagement rates of apostolate media from HypeAuditor's calculator

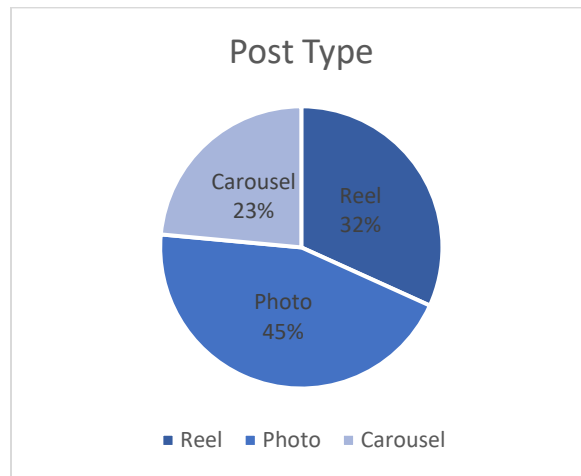


Figure 10: Apostolate Instagram post type out of total analyzed posts

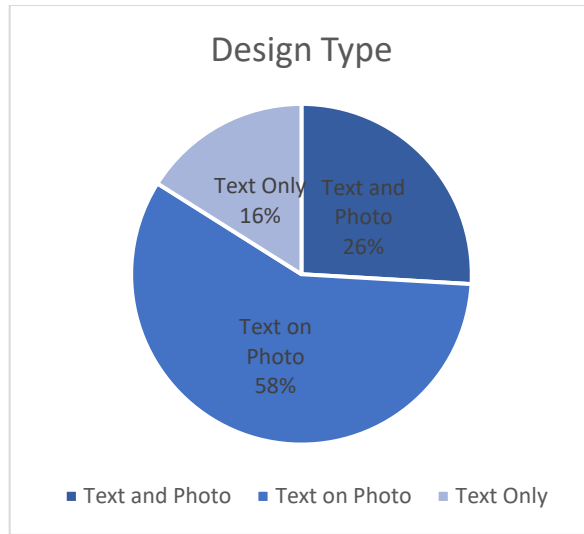


Figure 11: *Design type of post on apostolate Instagram*

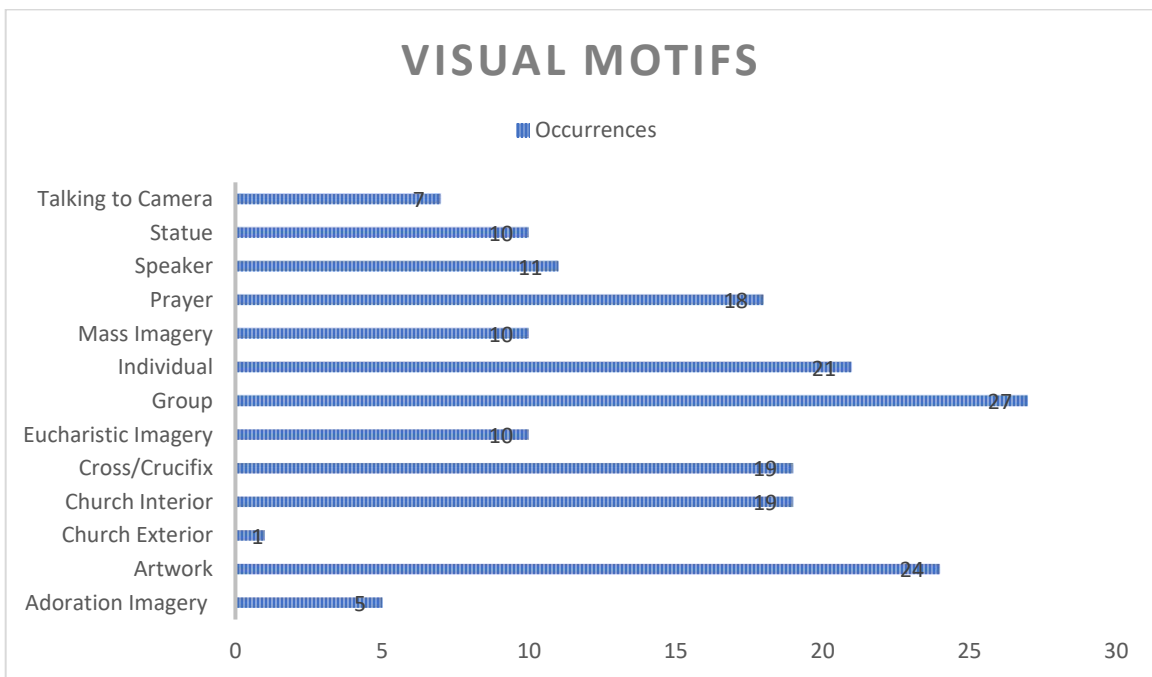


Figure 12: *Occurrences of visual motifs in archdiocesan Instagram accounts*

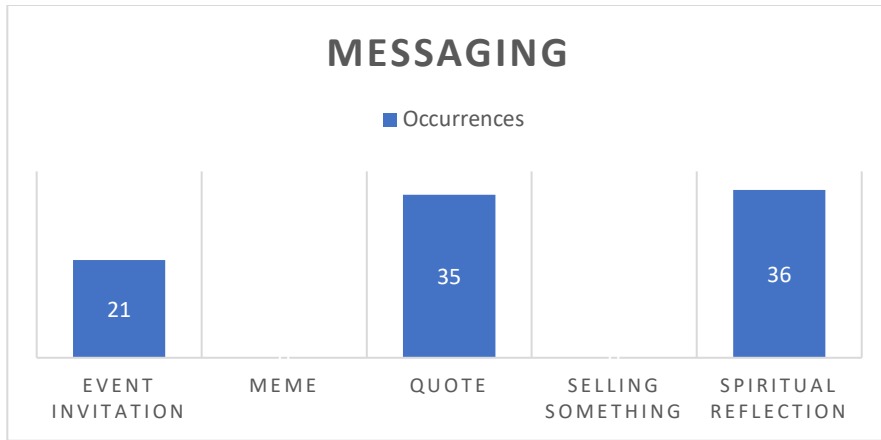


Figure 13: Occurrences of messages in archdiocesan Instagram accounts

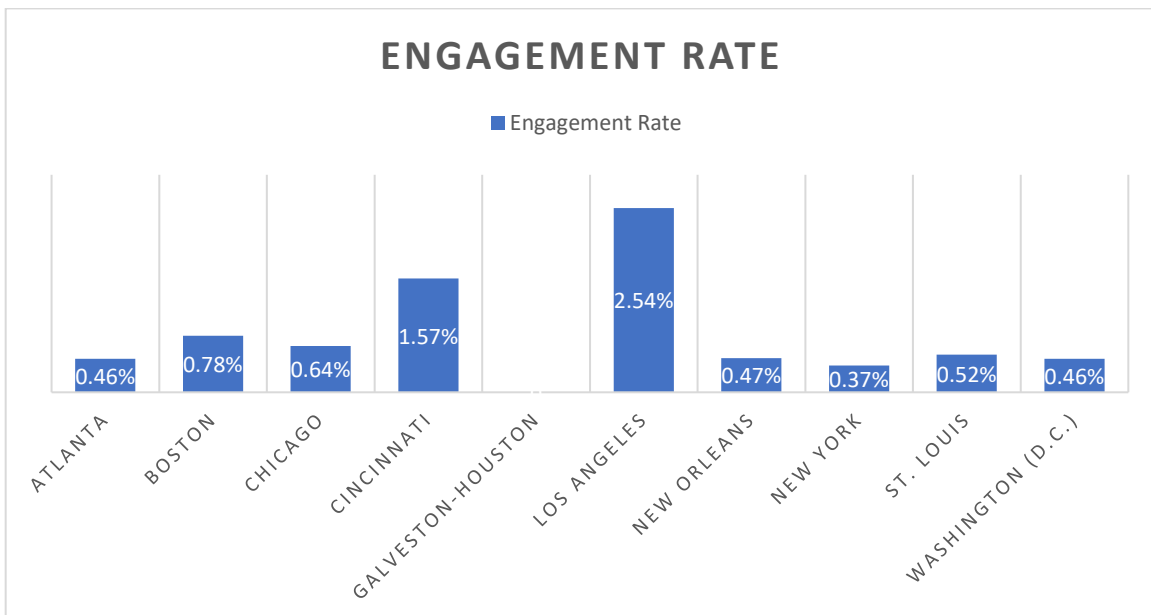


Figure 14: Engagement rate of archdiocesan Instagram accounts

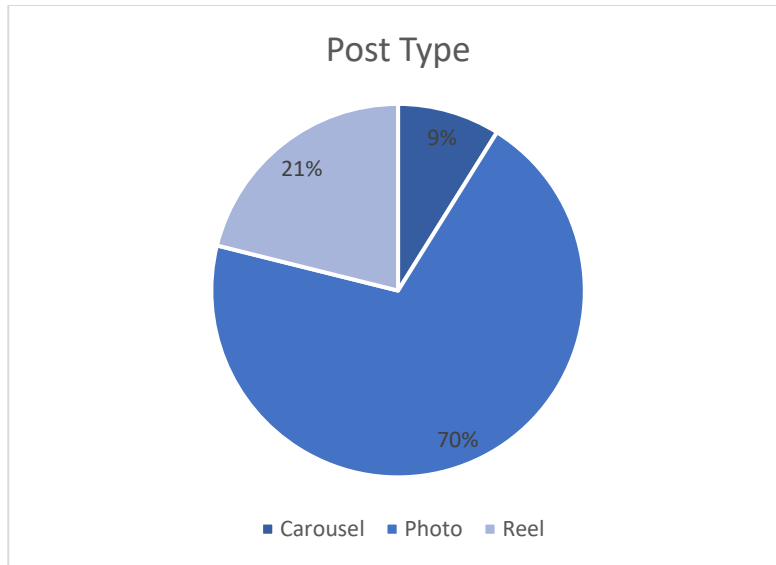


Figure 15: *Frequency of post type in archdiocesan Instagram accounts*

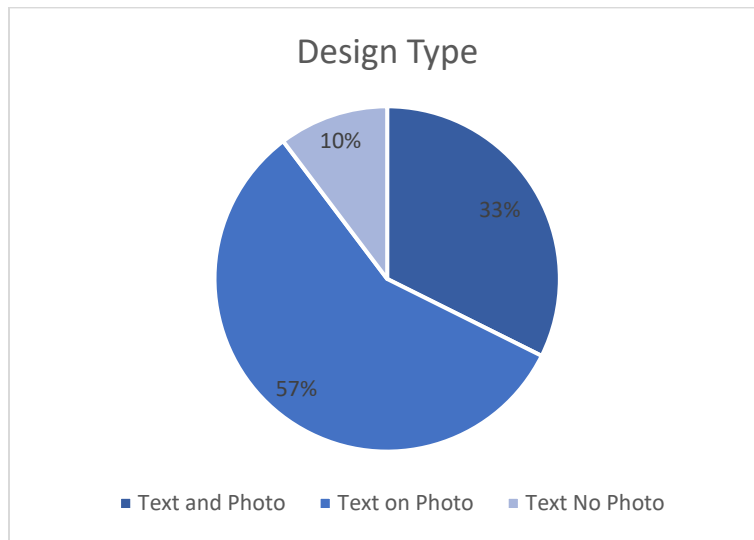


Figure 16: *Design type of posts on archdiocesan Instagram accounts*

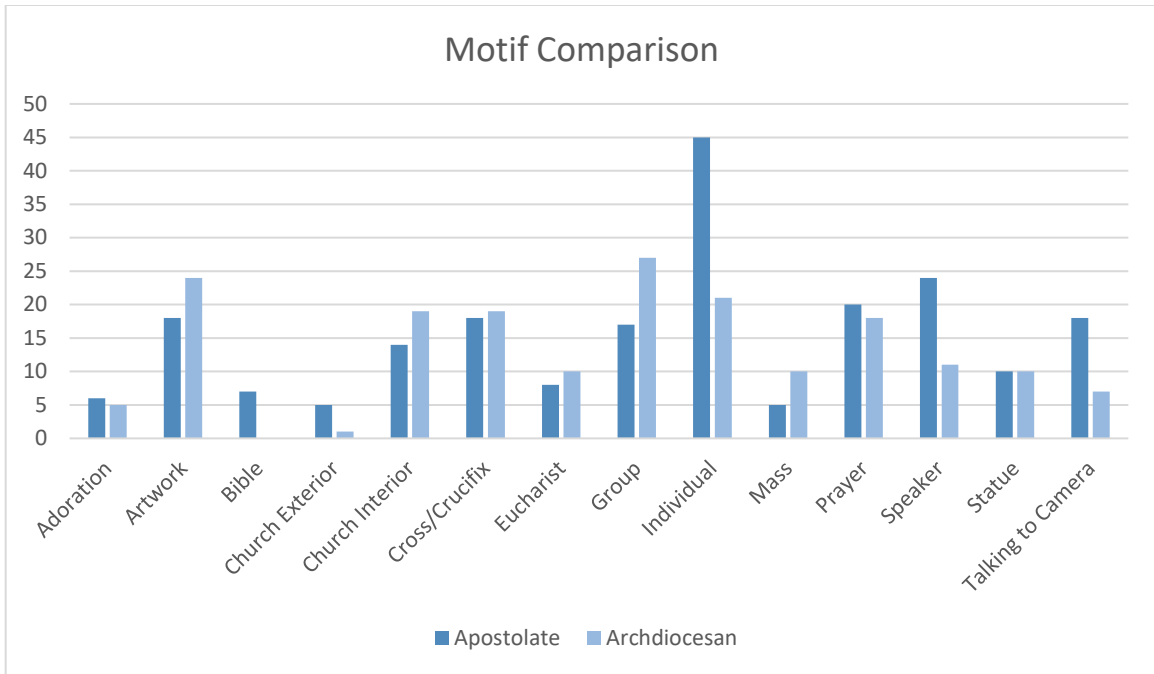


Figure 17: Comparison of visual motif frequency between apostolate and archdiocesan accounts

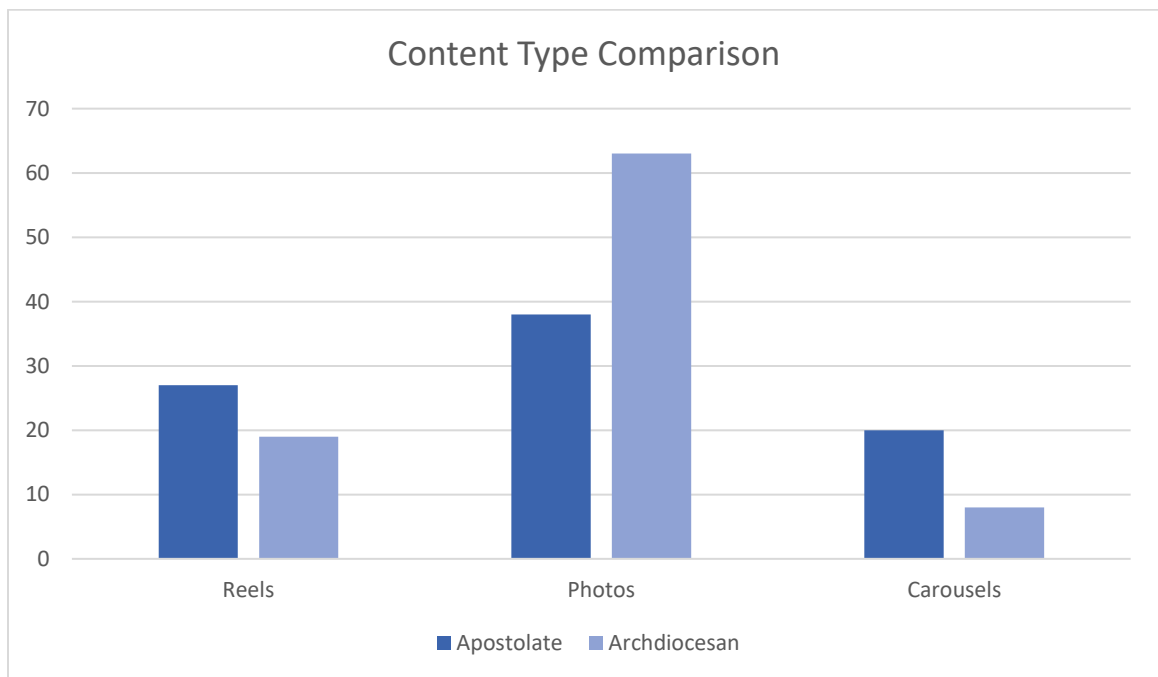


Figure 18: Content type comparison of apostolate and archdiocesan posts

## SAMPLE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

These are the types and genre of questions I asked of each interviewee. During the interview, I edited the questions slightly, merged them, skipped them, or asked new questions based on the line of thought we were pursuing.

Mindy and Terry Irwin

1. What is your educational background in?
2. How did you decide to become a deacon (Terry)? And how did you become involved with faith formation at St. Kateri (Mindy?)
3. What do you do on a daily basis?
4. How has your role impacted your faith and personal life?
5. Does your church have a designated communications person?
6. Do you know how the communications normally work at St. Kateri? Is there a social media person on staff or someone who helps with the bulletin?
7. Would employing a communications person be an investment you think most parishes could/should make (Terry)?
8. How did St. Kateri do during COVID? What were the services like?
9. What is the demographic of people working at and for St. Kateri currently?
10. Is there a challenge of getting young people involved more in church operations?
11. In what areas is the Church/parish struggling and needing more help regarding communications?



12. Where do you think the Church/parish is succeeding in communicating online?
13. Within the social media of different Catholic orgs, it is easy for the communications to turn into something that “has” to be done or a digital bulletin of upcoming events. There are online pages that are different in that the visuals and captions spark deeper prayer. What do you think of local church communications and their role? Should they be more reflective, fun? Or mainly informative?
14. Is there anything else you think I ought to know as I pursue this topic?
15. What resources are dedicated to communications?

Jay Martin

1. What is your educational background in?
2. When did you start working in Catholic media and what drew you to it?
3. What did you do while working for Life Teen?
4. What was the communication strategy/brand strategy/goals at Life Teen?
5. What do you do on a daily basis now?
6. How does your parish run its communications? How many parishioners and employees do you have? Have are the demographics of the employees?
7. What is the strategy or approach you take, the guiding purpose behind your work?
8. What are the main topics you help to communicate to the parish? Do you think the communications are more of a “digital bulletin” or do they focus more on evangelization?
9. How much guidance do you get from the diocese?
10. What platforms is your parish on?
11. How did the pandemic impact the way your parish communicated online?

12. How do you see the dynamic between apostolate and parish communications?
13. What are the challenges you've experienced in your job at the parish? At Life Teen?
14. How has your role impacted your faith and personal life?
15. What do you see as the role of lay people in Church communication online?
16. In what areas is the Church/parish struggling and needing more help in regard to communications?
17. Where do you think the Church/parish is succeeding in communicating online?

Fr. Mark-Mary Ames, CFR

1. What is your educational background?
2. How did you come about being a friar and then a priest?
3. How did you get the communications job for the CFRs?
4. What do you do on a daily basis?
5. How does the dynamic of a contemplative life of prayer and service to the poor interact with your role in media production?
6. Your access to technology can be quite limited sometimes, how does that work?
7. How do the other friars interact online?
8. What do you see as the role of consecrated religious in communicating online?
9. How did you get involved with Ascension presents?
10. Can you describe the experience?
11. What is your favorite part about doing YouTube with Ascension?

12. What are the challenges you've found with it?
13. Let's talk about the podcast, I've been a listener since the very beginning so I've seen it develop from that side (can confirm the audience is college/young adult missionaries).  
How did it come about and how have you seen it develop?
14. What has the interaction with Spirit Juice been like?
15. How was the decision made to transition to both audio and a video version online?
16. What's been the response to the podcast?
17. What do you hope it becomes in the future?
18. The CFR Instagram has a high engagement rate, interesting visuals, and prayerful captions, how do you plan it?
19. Do you do the editing and photography? If not, how do you coordinate with other creators to curate the visual?
20. The CFRs have a specific "branding" online with colors, fonts, photos, and voice. How did that "brand" come about? Does it have to do with the charism of the order?
21. Within the social media of different Catholic organizations, it is easy for the communications to turn into something that "has" to be done or a digital bulletin of upcoming events. The CFR page is different in that the visuals and captions spark deeper prayer. What do you think of local church communications and their role? Should they be more reflective, fun?

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