

Article

Questioning the Pope: US Conservative Catholics and the Online Polarization of the Debate about the “Church of Bergoglio”

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Abstract: The pontificate of Pope Francis is proving to be one of the most controversial within the Catholic world, particularly because of the several objections and protests it has raised in the most traditional currents of Catholicism. This theological and political opposition to Bergoglio’s pontificate has been the subject of many studies, which have focused, in particular, on the growing harshness of this debate in North American Catholic circles. Following these studies, the present contribution aims to study how this polarization spreads and is amplified through the online communication of these groups by providing an analysis of a specific case study: a tweet published by the account of the Pontifical Academy for Life (PAL). The PAL is a Vatican institution founded by John Paul II and renewed by Pope Francis in its membership and purpose (Global Bioethics). The Academy is perceived as the cutting edge of Pope Francis’ “progressivism”, especially regarding sensitive issues such as marriage, family, and euthanasia. For this reason, the Twitter account of PAL is considered the ideal platform to observe the languages, expressions, and content that characterize the opposition to Bergoglio’s pontificate today.

Keywords: Christian communities; digital religion; Pope Francis; Catholic community; media and internet; US and Europe; US conservative



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1. Introduction

In recent years, the media and online presence of Pope Francis has been widely studied (Narbona 2016; Campbell and Vitullo 2019; Cardoso and Barraco 2019; Golan and Martini 2020; Vitullo and Mastrofini 2023). The Pope’s media resonance and visibility contributed to transforming him into a real religious “celebrity” (Kim and Chen 2020; Lanuza 2017) and made him gain different nicknames—“selfie Pope” (Campbell and Vitullo 2019), “rock star Pope” (Lanuza 2017), “the Pope is a social network” (Spadaro 2013)—which stress his extraordinary communicative power linked to the incisive themes that the Pope has been stressing during his pontificate. On the other hand, several times Bergoglio publicly declared his incapacity to use social media and he much more than his predecessor underlined in various public speeches and papal documents the risks and distortions hidden in the virtual communication and in the “technocratic paradigm”¹ (Vitullo and Mastrofini 2023).

The Church of Bergoglio is particularly projected toward the peripheries of the world and is attentive to social justice issues, and sometimes, it is perceived by the more conservative groups of Catholicism as a Church that is moving away from its traditional doctrine (Zanatta 2020; Neumayr 2017). On the other hand, this Bergoglio “progressivism” is also gaining the consensus of the more liberal Catholics or even of the non-Catholics (Vitullo and Mastrofini 2023; Li et al. 2016; Federico 2021; Pew Research Center 2021; Ivereigh 2019).

Over the years, this original and charismatic pontificate of Bergoglio has been raising polarized positions that go beyond the religious sphere and also involve the political and media scenario (Faggioli 2018; Neumayr 2017). The main criticisms against the Pope are

based on his apparent lack of clarity in traditional doctrine and on the loss of papal integrity because of some unconventional practices and messages that are deemed to belittle his role. Some of the most recent controversial episodes include the blessing during the 2022 Maundy Thursday, during which Bergoglio washed and kissed the feet of some detainees, the wearing of an Indigenous headdress during his visit in Canada, the permission of Communion—under specific circumstances—for re-married people or the opening of the Synod to women (Argárate 2022; Borghesi 2021; D’Antonio et al. 2001; Pedrioli 2017).

In recent years, disapprovals against Bergoglio have exacerbated worldwide within the same Catholic community (Driessen 2021; Cekiera 2020; Case 2019; Douthat 2018; Michnik 2014), but it is especially in the US that traditional Catholic groups² find the widest media resonance, especially because they are often aligned with politically conservative media outlets (Raven 2016; Lynch 2018; Lyon et al. 2018; MacGregor 2015).

Although the debate between the more conservative and liberal wing within the Catholic Church in particular and inside Christianity in general has been studied for a long time (D’Antonio et al. 2001; Weaver and Appleby 1995; Wuthnow and Liebman 1983), still few studies have explored how this debate is articulated today on the communication level, especially exploring how the online presence of these actors is structured (Guzek and Słomka 2021; Evolvi 2019). In fact, as will be shown by the following paragraphs, the US traditional Catholic milieu represents an interesting field of study especially because it is characterized by a plethora of actors who actively use websites and social media pages aimed at publicly arguing about the Pope’s decisions and leadership.

Considering this context, this contribution aims to explore through a specific case study how the de-valorization of Bergoglio’s authority is communicated online. In doing so, this research analyses how the diffusion of fake news by some of these traditional Catholic websites has raised a wave of reactions on the Twitter account of a Vatican Institution, the Pontifical Academy for Life³ (PAL). In doing so, this research highlights how the valorization of the figure of Bergoglio passes through a precise communication strategy that unfolds between online information platforms and social pages, spreading some specific anti-Bergoglio narratives.

The PAL’s Twitter⁴ account has been chosen for this study precisely because through its work, the Academy addresses some of the most discussed crucial ethical questions in the religious debate. Moreover, in 2016, Bergoglio approved PAL’s new statute, broadening the discussion on several topics such as abortion, euthanasia, and other medical and technological issues that have strong resonance (biotechnology, nanotechnology, artificial intelligence, and robotics). As can be noticed from the complexity of the issues covered by PAL, the institution is easily exposed to controversial debates online. Analyzing the reactions to one of its most interacted-with tweets will certainly reflect some of the dynamics, languages, and actors that characterize the current US Catholic opposition to Bergoglio’s Pontificate.

2. The US Conservative Catholics: Media and Content

In the last few decades, several studies have been dedicated to the difference between liberal and traditional Catholic movements (D’Antonio et al. 2001; Weaver and Appleby 1995; Moen 1992; Wuthnow and Liebman 1983), which have intensified since the election of Bergoglio as a pontiff who emblematically represents some key issues of this already existing fracture (Argárate 2022; Borghesi 2021; Kollman 2018; Faggioli 2021; Gaillardetz 2015). Historically, the Second Vatican Council is considered the starting point of this division (Weigel 2019). Although liberal Catholicism endorses and develops the social doctrine of the Church emerged from the work of the Council, conservatives prefer the pre-Council liturgy (Lynch 2018; Lefebvre 1998), contesting the modernist approach of the Church post-Council⁵, especially stressed in four documents: *Lumen Gentium*⁶ (1964), *Gaudium et Spes*⁷ (1965), *Nostra Aetate*⁸ (1965), and *Dignitatis Humanae*⁹ (1965).

Nowadays, for traditional Catholics, Pope Francis represents exactly this process of modernization, which according to them represents an incorrect adaptation to the conditions of late modernity (Douthat 2018; Lyon et al. 2018; Lawler 2018). Recently,

the more traditional streams of Catholicism have strongly opposed some of the most progressive positions of the Popes expressed in some official documents or events, such as the encyclicals *Laudato Si'* or *Fratelli Tutti*, the Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, the Amazon Synod, the Synods for the Family, etc. In general, these criticisms accuse Bergoglio of endorsing a religious syncretism and of exceeding the traditional theological interpretation (Borghesi 2021; Evans 2006; Raven 2016).

Today, the most conservative wings of Catholicism are part of a dense international network of “religious right groups” composed also by Protestants and Jews, which relates to media to running culture wars against pornography, abortion, migration, LBGTQ+, and gender issues (Cekiera 2020; Case 2019; Mudde 2019; Minkenberg 2018; Fetner 2008), and sometimes against evolution (Alumkal 2017).

In the United States, religious conservatives have often aligned with politically conservative media outlets to criticize the Pope over a host of issues such as climate change, immigration, social justice, his calls for gun control, and his opposition to the death penalty (Chelini-Pont 2022; Wetzel 2020; Kollman 2018; Gehring 2016). Although some of the most influential Catholic voices manifesting exacerbated anti-Bergoglio positions are based in the US, scholarship to date has not addressed the issue of media usage made by these groups.¹⁰ The US Catholic opposition to Bergoglio registers authoritative and notorious names of priests, bishops, and cardinals from his own Curia, such as Gerhard Müller, Raymond Burke, Joseph Strickland¹¹, and Robert Barron. In general, this opposition to Bergoglio is played on common topics that assert that he was not rightly elected, that Benedict was the real Pope who followed the righteous legacy of John Paul II, while Pope Francis represents a corrupted version of a wrong and misinterpreted tradition. These positions are publicly and firmly exposed by all these Catholic actors through letters, videos, and documents available online on their website or other social media pages. For instance, Strickland frequently used to post the image of Benedict or John Paul II on his X-Twitter account as a symbol of resistance to Francis’s reformist papacy (See Figure 1). On August 2023, Strickland also shared a letter online stating: “The evil and false message that has invaded the Church, Christ’s Bride, is that Jesus is only one among many, and that it is not necessary for His message to be shared with all humanity. This idea must be shunned and refuted at every turn (. . .) Regrettably, it may be that some will label as schismatic those who disagree with the changes being proposed [by the Pope]. Be assured, however, that no one who remains firmly upon the plumb line of our Catholic faith is schismatic. We must remain unabashedly and truly Catholic, regardless of what may be brought forth”¹². In 2023, Cardinal Raymond Burke also used his personal website to offer a 19-point critique against the Pope’s decision to strictly control the use of the Latin Mass¹³. Bishop Robert Barron uses his personal website with the evocative name Word on Fire to question several aspects of the Pope’s leadership, and chat on the related YouTube Channel with the right-wing activist and writer Chris Rufo¹⁴. Certainly one of the most famous controversies that involved Bergoglio was raised by the retired Vatican ambassador to Washington, Ambassador Carlo Maria Viganò, who in 2018 asked for the Pope’s resignation: “In this extremely dramatic moment for the universal Church, he must acknowledge his mistakes and, in keeping with the proclaimed principle of zero tolerance, Pope Francis must be the first to set a good example for cardinals and bishops who covered up McCarrick’s abuses and resign along with all of them”¹⁵.

The authoritative voice of these actors is usually echoed by a galaxy of influencers and multimedia platforms, which amplify and intensify their messages questioning the leadership of Bergoglio. Just to mention some names among the most active: the broadcaster Catholic Eternal World Television Network (from now EWTN), websites such as “First Things” “Return to Tradition”, “The Pillar”, “Life Site Catholic”¹⁶ (See Figure 2), and other Catholic bloggers such as Joe McClane or Fr. James Altman, who in 2023 posted a video calling for Francis to be thrown “into the Deep Blue Mediterranean Sea”.¹⁷



Figure 1. Strickland's tweet supporting John Paul II legacy.



Figure 2. Catholic Twitter account amplifying the virality of Strickland's messages.

These Catholic actors, while publicly exposing their positions against the Church of Bergoglio online, clearly arouse considerable involvement and reaction from their audience, which actively comments on social media pages, YouTube channels, and websites with even more harsh demonstration of their distrust of the authority of Bergoglio.¹⁸

In order to show in depth some of the effects and the dynamic which characterize this debate around the de-valorization of the Pope, this paper reconstructs the diffusion of fake news published to the detriment of the PAL. The PAL has been chosen as a key study because it represents one of the subjects most targeted by conservative Catholic movements

in the US precisely because its president, Archbishop Vincenzo Paglia, embodies one of the voices most in line with the positions taken by Pope Francis. Following and analysing the reactions on its Twitter account allows a partial reconstruction of the main topics and the communication strategies that characterize the opposition to Bergoglio and how a precise narrative of an “outrageous” pontificate gain its media resonance.

3. The Case Study: “An Image That Is Worth a Speech”

The PAL was established by John Paul II in 1994 and renewed by Pope Francis in 2016. The work of the PAL addresses some of the most crucial ethical questions concerning human life. In 2016, Bergoglio approved the PAL’s new status¹⁹, broadening the discussion on several topics such as abortion, euthanasia, and other medical and technological issues (biotechnology, nanotechnology, artificial intelligence, and robotics). As it could be noticed from the complexity of the issues covered by the PAL, this institution is also extraordinarily exposed to controversies which involved, in particular, the institution and, more generally, the Pope’s mandate (Mastrofini 2023). Criticisms concern especially the approach followed by the PAL, on the indication of Pope Francis, to broaden the field of action and reflection also to themes of moral theology. For several commentators in the traditional Catholic area, PAL’s work is perceived as a “betrayal” of the traditional moral vision of the Catholic Church as expressed by John Paul II.²⁰

From the point of view of external communication, in 2016, PAL chose to have a Twitter profile to communicate its mission and research activities, but differently from the various institutions of the Roman Curia, who also have their presence online, especially on Twitter. PAL’s Twitter account use to interact with its users by engaging in conversation, by commenting and tagging its followers. As can be imagined, this social engagement easily exposes the Academy to numerous online controversies, which attracted the interest of this study by offering an original dataset to analyse how criticisms and opposition to the current leadership of the Roman Catholic Church is played online.

After a year from its creation, @PontAcadLife already had 1010 followers (31 December 2017), and according to the last update (31 October 2023) they are now 7.893. PAL’s tweets normally concern its institutional activities, synthesis of homilies, re-tweets considered of interest for the PAL’s mission, and Pope’s interventions, especially those related to bioethics issues. As can be imagined, the topics touched by PAL are very sensitive within the Catholic community debate. For instance, in 2017, Archbishop Paglia was accused by the website National Catholic Register, part of the EWTN group, of changing the nature of the Pontifical Academy as understood by John Paul II. He was invited to answer some questions in this regard by the same website, but the interview only worsened the level of criticism against him and the institution.²¹

To offer a deeper analysis, therefore, of the communication strategies and narratives that characterized the opposition to the mission of the PAL and more in general to the leadership of Pope Francis, this work analyses how hatred discourse raised after the publication of a PAL’s tweet on 12 September 2020, which results to be one of the most interacted and contested tweets posted by PAL so far (Mastrofini 2023).

On 12 September in Italy occurred the funeral of Willy Monteiro Duarte, an Italian boy (21 years old) of Cape Verdean origin, which was brutally killed by two neo-fascist brothers in a locality near Rome. The murder generated strong reactions in Italy, especially for the violence used against this person who lost his life just for trying to break up a fight. Willy immediately became a symbol for asking the Italian government for more commitment against violence and racism.

The relevance of the episode also gained the attention of the PAL, which, through its Twitter page, posted a modified image of the Pietà of Michelangelo—already available online—in which the Christ lying is represented with black skin. The text of the tweet stated, “An image that is worth a speech” (Figure 3).

Over the next 48 h, the tweet immediately caught the attention of some influential conservative Catholic websites in the US who mistakenly interpreted the tweet as an

endorsement in favor of the Black Lives Matter (from now BLM) movement, ignoring the specific Italian episode for which the image was intentionally published.



Figure 3. The retouched image of Pietà posted by PAL.

The articles published by these online magazines immediately triggered the reactions of several users who converged on PAL's Twitter account by harshly commenting on the image. In fact, during September 2020, the United States were in the middle of the presidential campaign, and the echo of the murder of George Floyd committed by a police officer—happened just a few months before—was a critical issue for the candidates.

The tweet's misinterpretation made by these websites considered the PAL's tweet as an endorsement for the Democratic candidate Joe Biden and as an expression of support for a movement considered Marxist, anarchist, pro-abortion, and LGBTQ-friendly.

In the following paragraphs, this research shows how the osmosis between the communication of these Catholic websites and their followers provoked the spread of a disinformation campaign (Pierri et al. 2020) perpetrated at the detriment of the PAL Twitter account, but which also ended up de-value the authority and leadership of the Pope himself.

4. Methodology

The corpus of tweet selected for this analysis have been extracted within a period of time which starts from the publication of PAL's tweet on 12 September and ends a month later on 12 October. A month has been considered a sufficient amount of time to observe the immediate and most significant reactions to *Pietà's* image. The textual analysis of the comments was conducted both automatically and manually. The computational textual analysis was used in the preliminary stage of the research to create a corpus of significant tweets, which have been analyzed in the following hermeneutical analysis. To proceed with the initial preparation of the corpus, T-Lab language analysis software has been used. The software was used to exclude non-textual expressions or repetitions (i.e., eliminating tweets which contained images, memes or emoticons only²² or tweet which contained identical sentences copied from previous comments) by keeping significant terms useful for the subsequent automatic sentiment analysis. The tweets resulting from this first selection have therefore been divided by the software into two categories, dividing the positive from the negative expressions. After this preliminary textual analysis, 211 comments were considered valid for the hermeneutical analysis: 99 of them were written in Italian, 77 in English, 35 in Spanish. To answer the specific research question of this research, the following analysis will focus only on the corpus of negative comments published in English, which are considered the most suitable to include the interactions generated by a

US audience. The final corpus resulting at the end of the preparatory stage is composed by 23 comments that significantly contain negative reactions to PAL's tweet. Our following hermeneutical analysis has enucleated these comments in 3 further predominant narrative areas, which isolate the topics used to de-valorize Pope's authority and which correspond to the same discourses arose by the US websites that spread the fake news first.

Finally, it should be noted how the final corpus valid for the analysis remarks a prevalence of positive comments in support of the academy and in general of the message conveyed by its tweet. However, considering the purposes of this research, these positive reactions will not be analysed. Anyway, the relevant information emerged here is that these positive counternarratives did not gained the same virality caused by the tweet supporting the fake news. This further aspect will be deeper discussed in the conclusion.

5. Comments' Analysis

Before starting the content analysis of the 23 negative reactions to PAL's tweet, it should be considered that the majority of these comments arrived from users who were not followers of the PAL Twitter account before the publication of the contested tweet. These users received the news about the PAL's tweet directly from some US Catholic websites and social media pages that shared Pieta's image along with its misinterpretation. The first article posted on Twitter in this regard was published by *Novus Ordo*²³, who commented PAL's tweet the same day it was posted. The article states:

The useless so-called *Pontifical Academy for Life*, no stranger to controversy, sent out a tweet today showing a photoshopped image of Michelangelo's famous *Pietà* sculpture (. . .) What is very wrong, however—in fact, a sacrilege—is to take this holy image of the *Pietà* and hijack it to promote the Marxist Black Lives Matter movement. Although the tweet in question says nothing about that political group, it is obvious that that is the intended allusion, given the context of recent events and the political climate in the Vatican. But then, that is how Liberation Theology works, which is experiencing a veritable renaissance under Bergoglio, who is the Vatican's Marxist-in-Chief²⁴.

On 14 September, the controversy was accentuated by another reinterpretation of the tweet made by the online magazine *Church Militant*²⁵ which stated:

The Pontifical Academy for Life (PAL) is sparking a fresh wave of outrage after it posted a doctored image of Michelangelo's *Pietà* portraying Jesus as black, ostensibly in support of the Marxist Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. Catholics, as well as secular art lovers, blasted the Vatican for blasphemy, philistinism and race-baiting, accusing the august pontifical body of "manipulating art for politics" after it tweeted the picture on Saturday (. . .) Devotional art should never be used for political ends: it cheapens and desacralizes it and is an offense against God and His Saints who alone should be its subject²⁶.

Additionally, the website *Breitbart* linked to Steve Bannon, former political adviser to President Trump²⁷, reshared the episode:

In an article titled 'Pontifical Academy for Life makes powerful anti-racism statement with 'Black Lives Matter' *Pietà*,' the Catholic news agency *Novanews.com*²⁸ praised the work and associated it directly with the Black Lives Matter movement. Several Catholic prelates have not been so supportive of BLM, however, including the South African Cardinal Wilfrid Fox Napier, who accused the movement of betraying the black community. Black Lives Matter is 'committed to dismantling the very values, structure and institutions'²⁹.

In the following weeks, the controversy continued moving from these websites to their social media pages, including Twitter, causing an exponential increase in comments on PAL's Twitter account, as shown by the summary data of September 2020 (Figure 4).

Figures 4 and 5 highlight how during September 2020 the Twitter account of PAL published 97 tweets and more than half of the views obtained in that month (199.549 over

336.000 in total) could be traced back only to the *Pietà*'s tweet published on 12 September (Mastrofini 2023). Another interesting data is the PAL Twitter account during that month gained 356 new followers, compared to the average of 100 new followers achieved each month by the account (Mastrofini 2023).



Figure 4. In detail Pietà's tweet analytics.



Figure 5. In detail Pietà's tweet analytics.

In general, the articles published by the US Catholic magazine about PAL's tweet recalled the topics typically used by traditional Catholic groups to discredit Bergoglio's leadership and already presented in the previous paragraphs: they accuse the Pope of making an outrageous and instrumental use of the "Word of God" by making references to the wrong doctrine, such as Liberation theology, which is inclined to Marxist ideology and is leading the Church towards a deviated—even "pagan"—version of Catholicism.

All comments to PAL's tweet registered between September and October 2020 have been processed through the T-Lab software and then manually analysed to explore the topics used by these negative narratives to discredit the Vatican institution and the Pope and to retrace if there was any correspondence with the arguments raised by the articles which initially spread the fake news. At the end the hermeneutical textual analysis presents a selection of tweets enucleated in three predominant thematic areas:

1. The first thematic area is characterized by tweets of indignation against PAL and the Pope for representing a fake and dangerous version of Catholicism³⁰ and by promoting an inauthentic and outrageous use of the image of Christ (See Table 1).

Table 1. Tweets thematic area 1.

If that’s what you find appalling about the Vatican, then God save you.
He already has, pagan.
I doubt that.
This is blasphemous.
Shame on you
Is this profile even catholic?
VADE RETRO ³¹
Monstrous.
Horrible
That’s blasphemy
Give me Joseph Ratzinger.

These comments revoke the narrative of an evil version of Catholicism proposed by the PAL and the Vatican institution in general, claiming the restoration of a true authority which can be found also in some passages of the previous article such as: “Catholics, as well as secular art lovers, blasted the Vatican for blasphemy, philistinism” or “What is very wrong, however—in fact, a *sacrilege*—is to take this holy image of the *Pietà* and hijack it”.

2. A second thematic area is represented by the comments that confirm the political collusion of the Vatican with the BLM movement, sometimes using racist and xenophobic comments against the BLM or accusing the Pope of endorsing Marxist ideology (See Table 2).

Table 2. Tweets thematic area 2.

If 500 years ago, in Africa, there was someone capable of doing something similar to what Michelangelo did, there would have been no problem today.
BLM{xe “BLM”} is based on Ifá, a Yoruba religion and system of divination, practiced throughout the Americas, West Africa, and the Canary Islands, in the form of a complex religious system, and plays a critical role in the traditions of Santería, and Vodou!
The problem is not with the Black man there, the problem is the use of this image, following the BLM{xe “BLM”} liar tendency. This is against Trump{xe “Trump Donald”}, this is against the life.
As each name is recited at the BLM{xe “BLM”} rallies, Dr. Abdullah ³² poured libations on the ground as the group chanted “ <i>Àsè</i> ”, a Yoruba term used by practitioners of Ifa, a faith and divination system that originated in West Africa. This ritual, Dr. Abdullah explained, is a form of worship.
Indeed. I do not think that the Black Lives Matter movement is the issue here. What is appalling is that any branch of VATICAN would alter the image of The Pieta to make a political point. God, save the Church.
BLM{xe “BLM”} is not the issue, although I understand why people are particularly infuriated that the Vatican is promoting this BLM movement. What’s outrageous is that the Vatican has altered the image of The Pieta to make a political point. Jesus wept.
Because when has the Church ever involved itself in social justice, particularly or politics, in general? Unheard of! Please. BLM{xe “BLM”} is totally the issue.
This idea can pop up only in a racist mind, where skin color matters.

The comments underline the political intromission of the Vatican within the US electoral campaign while missing the real values that the Church should look for. Moreover,

in this area, even if not predominant, is the topic of endorsing a movement that is erroneously suspected of having an esoteric origin. This affirmation corresponds also to articles' statements, such as: "The Pontifical Academy for Life (PAL) is sparking a fresh wave of outrage after it posted a doctored image of Michelangelo's *Pietà* portraying Jesus as black, ostensibly in support of the Marxist Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement" or "What is very wrong, however—in fact, a *sacrilege*—is to take this holy image of the *Pietà* and hijack it to promote the Marxist *Black Lives Matter* movement. Although the tweet in question says nothing about that political group, it is obvious that that is the intended allusion, given the context of recent events and the political climate in the Vatican."

3. In the last thematic area there are comments more focused on stressing the manipulation of Jesus' image for political purposes, demonstrating the lack of respect of the Vatican for its own tradition (See Table 3).

Table 3. Tweets thematic area 3.

I did not assert that the Church never has or should get involved in political issues; I posited that an image of Christ NEVER should be altered to make a political statement.
These paintings reflected cultural biases, but they were of and about CHRIST. This photo of a statue of Mary holding Christ was altered to make a political point that had nothing to do with Christ. It is disgusting that an office affiliated with the Vatican did this.
Jesus was the Son of God who died for our sins and rose from the dead so that all who believe in Him may have eternal life. He was not some wayward punk who fought The Man.
John 3:16 is the Gospel distilled. I am not debating the Son of God with people who want to defile His image to promote domestic terrorism. Burn buildings down and murder people without my help.

Here again, the words previously published by the online journals resonate in some comments: "the august pontifical body of 'manipulating art for politics' after it tweeted the picture on Saturday" or "What is very wrong, however—in fact, a *sacrilege*—is to take this holy image of the *Pietà* and hijack it"; "Devotional art should never be used for political ends: it cheapens and desacralizes it and is an offense against God and His Saints who alone should be its subject".

In general, the comments that followed the first articles published on these Catholic websites foster a narrative that opposed a true and respectful use of the "Word" and the image of God/Christ to a fake and outrageous manipulation of the religious message done by an institution that no longer represents the real Christian values. Both in the articles and tweet's comments, the de-valorization of the authority of Pope Francis is articulated by using a narrative that opposes a true interpretation of the Catholic faith against a manipulative and corrupted use of it. In this context the PAL—considered as a direct emanation of Pope's Francis power—is a pretext for reinvigorating the already existing rhetoric about the restoration of a Vatican order preceding the Bergoglio election.

Finally, it should be noted that this Twitter controversy has been found exclusively on a misinterpretation of the PAL tweet. In this "informative disorder" (Benoit 2018; Greifeneder et al. 2020) generated by these Catholic websites, any English-speaking users referred along a month to the real context for which the modified *Pieta*'s image was published and what was its real purpose.

6. Final Remarks

On September 14th, a few days after the fake news about PAL's tweet was published, the Academy commented with a press release on the Italian news agency Ansa³³ denying the connection of the tweet with BLM. For the English language, PAL's version was picked up by *The Wall Street Journal*³⁴ and shared on Twitter through its correspondent for Vatican City. However, this tweet received very limited attention, as shown in Figure 6. In the following days, the misleading interpretation of *Pieta*'s image continued to spread through

other websites and social media pages, as happened for the website *Breitbart*, which the day after PAL's denial perpetrated the pro-BLM interpretation.³⁵



Figure 6. The tweet posted by the correspondent of *The Wall Street Journal* for Vatican City.

It should, however, be underlined that during a month of observation, positive reactions to PAL's tweet exceeded the negative ones, especially among commentators aware of the context and meaning of that image. Isolating the negative comments allowed this research to identify a precise communication chain promoted by those platforms already active in the conservative Catholic debate, which through their audience arose a hate storm on the PAL Twitter account. All these actors replicate the already known narratives concerning the inadequacy of Bergoglio's pontificate, its illegitimacy, and its corruption.

Moreover, as many media and communication studies have already demonstrated, contrary to positive and informative messages, fake news and violent contents are more likely to be shared and trusted by those people who already support a precise position or ideology fostered by these messages (Diehl and Lee 2022; Moravec et al. 2018). Fake news can indeed reinforce and corroborate prejudice regardless of its manipulative intent (Flintham et al. 2018). This is also likely the reason why the fake news about PAL's tweet received such a huge resonance among certain users.

Furthermore, a general overview of all the negative tweets (including also those eliminated from the corpus of the analysis) highlights how only the comments that immediately follow articles' publication present original and articulated argumentation, while more belated comments—appeared days or weeks later—frequently contain emoji only or texts copied from previous comments. In this case, our hypothesis concluded that belated comments are probably written by users who have never read the articles with the tweet's misinterpretation or are more likely originated by fake accounts or bots, which would suggest an even more articulated communication strategy.

Aware of this fragmented and controversial online scenario, Bergoglio, during his pontificate, continues to stress the importance of social media warning about the “pitfalls to be avoided” (individualistic spaces, extreme behaviors) and the importance of “building relationships”.³⁶

Fake news and disinformation have always been an urgent concern for Pope Francis, who usually does not hesitate to use strong words against media spreading hate, as happened during the Belgian Catholic Week in 2016: “I believe that the media should be very clear, very transparent, and not fall prey—without offense, please—to the sickness of coprophilia, which is always wanting to communicate scandal, to communicate ugly things, even though they may be true”.³⁷

In October 2022, the Vatican’s Secretary of State, Cardinal Parolin, addressed a message precisely to the Steering Committee of the EWTN: “Catholic media, as you well know, have an important role in the task of the new evangelization. Therefore, it is good that they feel that they are an active part of the life of the Church, first by living in a spirit of communion with the Bishop of Rome. This is all the more urgent today in a time marked by overly dramatic debates, also within the Church, which do not even spare the person and the Magisterium of the Pontiff”.³⁸

The topic addressed by this research can be explored from different perspective especially to understand how the online multifaceted platforms, contexts, and expressions are used to exercise a de-valorization of traditional authorities. Regarding especially the religious power while several studies have already deeply explored how religious institutions can shape and renegotiate their presence online (Golan and Martini 2022; Nardella 2019; Cheong et al. 2012; Campbell 2005, 2010), future studies should be focused more on how online communication is increasing the emergence of alternative religious actors who question the official narrative of religions by challenging their concept of truth and uniqueness (Echachibi and Hoover 2023; Peterson 2022). Observing these new emergent voices will also allow to observe wider cultural and political changes, which find in the online communication one of the most fertile grounds to proliferate.

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Notes

¹ See: https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/20231004-laudate-deum.html (accessed on 11 March 2024).

² According to Borghesi (2021), the three architects of this ideology who attempted to “hijack” the ideas of Francis’ predecessors were Michael Novak, Fr. Richard John Neuhaus and George Weigel. In *Catholic Discordance*, Borghesi shows how these three men “literally appropriated” John Paul II and disfigured his most nuanced thinking on economics. The author offers a telling example to support his claim: he details how Neuhaus, Novak, and Weigel deliberately misinterpreted the crucial encyclical *Centesimus Annus* (1991). The papal text is overtly critical of capitalism, warning of “the risk of an ‘idolatry’ of the market”, and declaring point-blank that “it is unacceptable to say that the defeat of so-called ‘Real Socialism’ leaves capitalism as the only model of economic organization”. According to Borghesi, however, the neocons twisted the document to make it a premarket endorsement.

³ See: <https://twitter.com/PontAcadLife> (accessed on 3 November 2023).

⁴ This research recurs to the old name of the Twitter platform, since all the studies occurred before its acquisition by X-Corp.

⁵ National Catholic Report, <https://www.ncronline.org/news/vatican/pope-francis-significant-number-us-catholics-want-gag-vatican-ii-reforms> (accessed on 28 November 2023).

⁶ See https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html (accessed on 28 November 2023).

⁷ See: https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html (accessed on 28 November 2023).

- 8 See: https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html (accessed on 28 November 2023).
- 9 See: https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651207_dignitatis-humanae_en.html (accessed on 28 November 2023).
- 10 The articulated presence of this traditional Catholic scenario can also be reconstructed by observing the daily news that populates the most famous US newspapers and websites. See for example: <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/pope-francis-laments-reactionary-politicised-us-catholic-church-2023-08-28/>; <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/09/01/us/pope-francis-conservative.html>; <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/08/29/pope-francis-us-catholic-church-conservatives/>; https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/pope-benedict-in-retired-seclusion-looms-in-the-opposition-to-pope-francis/2018/09/02/f4d262b2-aaca-11e8-9a7d-cd30504ff902_story.html; The Washington Post: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/pope-benedict-in-retired-seclusion-looms-in-the-opposition-to-pope-francis/2018/09/02/f4d262b2-aaca-11e8-9a7d-cd30504ff902_story.html. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/09/17/latin-mass-pope-francis/> (all links have been accessed on 12 December 2023).
- 11 In November 2023, Pope Francis dismissed Bishop Joseph E. Strickland of Tyler, Texas, after he refused to step down following a Vatican investigation: <https://www.reuters.com/world/pope-francis-dismisses-conservative-us-bishop-strickland-2023-11-11/> (accessed on 14 December 2023).
- 12 See: <https://vanthuanobservatory.com/2023/08/28/pastoral-letter-from-bishop-strickland-august-2023/> (accessed on 28 November 2023).
- 13 See: <https://www.cardinalburke.com/presentations/traditionis-custodes> (accessed on 6 November 2023).
- 14 See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=90apd-BBE7w&t=3s> (accessed on 1 January 2024).
- 15 See: <https://online.wsj.com/media/Viganos-letter.pdf> (accessed on 12 December 2023).
- 16 In the following paragraphs some of these most active online magazines and platforms in this regard will be introduced and analysed (such as: Church Militant; Ordo Novus; Life Site; Breitbart News). The relationship between conservative Catholic positions and financial groups in the United States was analyzed by the *National Catholic Reporter*. See Roberts T. (2019), Editorial: Money shapes the US Catholic narrative, *National Catholic Reporter*, <https://www.ncronline.org/news/accountability/editorial-money-shapes-us-catholic-narrative> (National Catholic Reporter), Available on line (accessed on 10 September 2023).
- 17 See Throw Bergoglio into the Deep Blue Sea: https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=James+Altman+pope+francis+deep+blu+sea (accessed on 28 November 2023).
- 18 To see some examples, visit the ETWN website or Joe McClane, or Fr. Altman YouTube channel <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yN056utgATg>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vZgX7gbGnZA>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5APWoK6fRo4> (all links accessed on 2 January 2024).
- 19 See URL: <https://www.academyforlife.va/content/pav/en/the-academy/documents-of-the-academy.html> (accessed on 3 January 2024).
- 20 See, for example, the statement of Christian Brugger, a moral theologian active on the Catholic conservative front. In the online magazine “The Catholic Thing” he wrote, “the Pontifical Academy for Life is no longer what it was under Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI” or in an article by George Weigel, the biographer of John Paul II, in “The Catholic Weekly”. See: Throwing St. John Paul II Under the Bus, «The First Thing», available on line: <https://www.thecatholicthing.org/2022/08/13/throwing-st-john-paul-ii-under-the-bus/> and *A second shot at assassination?*, «The Catholic Weekly» available on line: <https://www.catholicweekly.com.au/george-weigel-a-second-shot-at-assassination/> (all links accessed on 8 November 2023).
- 21 See: Edward Pentin, *Archbishop Paglia* (Paglia Vincenzo) Lays Out His Vision for the Pontifical Academy for Life. *The archbishop also fields some ‘hardball’ questions related to criticisms of some of his actions*, «National Catholic Register», 6 June 2017, available on line: <https://www.ncregister.com/interview/archbishop-paglia-lays-out-his-vision-for-the-pontifical-academy-for-life/> (accessed on 8 November 2023).
- 22 Although these are considered important elements for evaluating user-oriented languages, these types of expressions would have implied specific tools and methodology of analysis related to the field of visual analysis, which is not foreseen in this contribution.
- 23 The Twitter account @NovusOrdoWatch defines itself as “Unmasking the Modernist Church of Vatican II”. It has 20,986 followers (31 October 2023). The group’s presentation on the website states: “Novus Ordo Watch is a lay-led internet apostolate whose primary goal is to educate the public about the true Roman Catholic religion and the institution we refer to as the “Novus Ordo Sect” (or “Vatican II Sect”), a Neo-Modernist sect which falsely claims to be the Roman Catholic Church and has illegitimately occupied the official Catholic structures in the Vatican and throughout the world since its *de facto* founding by Cardinal Angelo Roncalli after the death of Pope Pius XII in 1958” See: <https://novusordowatch.org/about/> (accessed on 10 November 2023).
- 24 See: <https://novusordowatch.org/2020/09/introducing-pontifical-academy-for-blm/> (accessed on 2 January 2024).
- 25 The site defines itself as Church Militant, that is, the section of the Church that wants to bring the Gospel message to the world, in this case in the world of social media, through a re-presentation of the traditional vision of the three types of Church. Twitter has 51286 followers https://twitter.com/Church_Militant (accessed on 31 October 2023).

- ²⁶ See: Church Militant, Vatican vandalism imitates mad iconoclast László Tóth, URL: <https://www.churchmilitant.com/news/article/pontifical-academy-profanes-pieta> (accessed on 2 January 2023).
- ²⁷ Steve Bannon was a founding member of the board of Breitbart News, a far-right news, opinion, and commentary website. In March 2012, after founder Andrew Breitbart's death, Bannon became the executive chairman of Breitbart News LLC. During his employment at the White House under the Trump presidency, Bannon interrupted his work at Breitbart, which he then resumed from August 2017 to January 2018. See: <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Steve-Bannon> (accessed on 2 January 2024).
- ²⁸ The website is no longer available.
- ²⁹ Thomas D. Williams, *Vatican Academy Tweets Image of Virgin Mary Holding Black Jesus*, «Breitbart{x}e "Breitbart" News», URL: <https://www.breitbart.com/faith/2020/09/15/vatican-academy-tweets-image-of-virgin-mary-holding-black-jesus/> (accessed on 2 January 2023).
- ³⁰ The tweets have been left in their original versions.
- ³¹ This Latin expression has been included in the corpus of the analysis because it is also commonly known by an English-speaking public. Moreover, it has been written by a North American user.
- ³² This reference relates to the rituals performed by the BLM during a demonstration protesting the death of George Floyd, the young black man killed by a police officer in 2020. The demonstration occurred in front of the Los Angeles Mayor's residence on 2 June 2020. The report mentions Dr Abdullah, without any other qualifications, and the Yoruba chant 'Asé'. The demonstration was described, among others, by the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace and World Affairs, which is affiliated with Georgetown University. See: <https://berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/responses/the-fight-for-black-lives-is-a-spiritual-movement> (accessed on 2 January 2024).
- ³³ See: https://www.ansa.it/sito/notizie/cronaca/2020/09/14/tweet-accademia-vita-con-gesu-nero-si-scatena-la-polemica_799af96b-929f-47eb-97a8-353a2eaa7f60.html (accessed on 4 January 2024).
- ³⁴ See: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/what-should-jesus-look-like-11595541904> (accessed on 7 March 2024).
- ³⁵ <https://www.breitbart.com/faith/2020/09/15/vatican-academy-tweets-image-of-virgin-mary-holding-black-jesus/> (accessed on 3 January 2024).
- ³⁶ Dicastery for Communication (2023), *Towards Full Presence. A Pastoral Reflection on Engagement with Social Media*. https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/dpc/documents/20230528_dpc-verso-piena-presenza_en.html (accessed on 23 December 2023).
- ³⁷ The Pope's interview for the Belgian Catholic weekly, *Tertio*. See: <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2016/12/07/161207a.html> (accessed on 30 November 2022).
- ³⁸ Holy See Press Office, Address of Cardinal Secretary of State Pietro Parolin—EWTN dinner Villa Tuscolana (Frascati), 19 October 2022. See: <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/vatican-city/news/2022-10/cardinal-pietro-parolin-ewtn-gala-dinner-full-speech.html> (accessed on 30 November 2023).

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