

# Website as an Instrument of Evangelization in Parishes in Poland

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Present sociocultural situation demands a deep and systematic reflection on strategies of communication in Polish parishes, that wish to proclaim Gospel to each person. Dynamic development of the Internet, information and communication technologies pose a huge challenge to Polish parishes. Today's website is not only an important element of public relations shaping the image of a parochial community but above all an important instrument of new evangelization. Abandoning the idea of having it or neglecting duties concerned with administering it is comparable to lack of due care about proclaiming Good News. The Internet is still an insufficiently used opportunity for the Polish parishes to take full advantage of the contemporary areopagus of new evangelization. Thanks to the website, the addressees of new evangelization should be able to come to know better their parish and eventually come to discover again the way to God and Church.

*Keywords:* Internet, the Catholic Church, parish, parishes in Poland, parochial website, ministry, new evangelization

## Parish as a place of evangelization

Evangelization (gr. *euaggelizein* – to convey, to announce something as good news) means preaching Jesus Christ and proclaiming His Good News (Acts 5:42; 11:20). It is not supposed to be occasional or temporary work, but a constant duty and essential need of the Church. Christ gathered his pupils, including the Twelve, in order to send them into the world: "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation" (Mark 16:15). Since the beginning, the Church was aware of its duty to evangelize, which is confirmed in the words of Saint Paul: "For when I preach the gospel, I cannot boast, since I am

compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!" (1 Cor 9:16). Thus, evangelization constitutes a basic and inalienable right of the Church to convey a Christian message to all the people through the Word of God, the Sacraments and Testimony of Active Love.<sup>1</sup>

Evangelization always happens in a concrete place and at a concrete time. One of the most important places of realizing evangelization is a parish, which is a fundamental element of the Church structure. It is usually defined as a specific community of the Christian faithful established on a stable basis within a particular Church; the pastoral care of the parish is entrusted to a rector as its own shepherd under the authority of the diocesan bishop.<sup>2</sup> Parish is not instituted by God but by the historic Church.<sup>3</sup> It constitutes a pastoral response of the Church to the given circumstances and is subject to permanent changes throughout the ages of the history of the Church. What remains invariable is only its theological and pastoral aim – evangelization. Nowadays, attempts of the parish to meet the challenges of the present times are the continuation of its historical evolution.<sup>4</sup>

A parochial community is the basic unit and a fundamental structure of the evangelizing work of the Catholic Church. Pastoral ecclesiology reminds that although the diocese, whose superior authority is bishop, is the basic Church reality, this reality is comprised of parishes. A parochial community as a link of basic level has all the attributes of the universal Church. We can repeat after Rahner that through the parish the faithful come to know, what the Church is at bottom.<sup>5</sup> It remains the fundamental ground of evangelization, realization and materialization of the saving mission of Jesus Christ through the Church.<sup>6</sup> For the faithful, it is an important place of meeting Christ and his message of salvation. Here they benefit from the work of redemption – they listen to his words, benefit from the means of grace i.e. the Sacraments

1 Cf. LIPIEC, D.: Teologiczne podstawy ewangelizacji. In: *Ewangelizacja odpowiedzią Kościoła w Polsce na wyzwania współczesności*. Ed. W. Przygoda, E. Robek. Sandomierz, 2011, p. 17; PRZYCZYNA, W.: Ewangelizacja. In: *Leksykon teologii pastoralnej*. Ed. R. Kamiński. Lublin, 2006, p. 254; RYŚ, G.: Jezusowa nowa ewangelizacja. In: *Nowa ewangelizacja: Kerygmaticzny impuls w Kościele*. Ed. P. Sowa, K. Kaproń. Gubin, 2012, p. 13.

2 Cf. *Kodeks Prawa Kanonicznego*, kan. 515, § 1; *Katechizm Kościoła Katolickiego*, no. 2179.

3 As Christianity was developing very dynamically, a need arose to build new communities. At the turn of the 4<sup>th</sup> century in big cities, around them and in villages began to exist so-called titular churches (helping, ancillary) and the term describing them was "paroikia". There was also a need to assign to them permanent priests. After some time, those churches were given their own priests ordained by their bishops. The parochial system was commonly fixed in the 6<sup>th</sup> century. On the decrees of the Council of Trent (1545 – 1563), parochial organization was consolidated and strengthened, which is taking place to date. Cf. OLSZEWSKI, M.: *Duszpasterstwo parafialne*. Białystok, 2005, p. 73–75; FALAK, T.: Parafia w nauczaniu Magisterium Kościoła. In: *Współczesna koncepcja parafii*. Ed. T. Wielebski, M. Tutak. Warszawa, 2011, p. 10; KAMIŃSKI, R.: Parafia. In: *Leksykon teologii pastoralnej*. Ed. R. Kamiński. Lublin, 2006, p. 587.

4 Cf. KAMIŃSKI, R.: *Działalność zbawcza Kościoła w teorii i praktyce pastoralnej*. Lublin, 2007, p. 133.

5 Cf. RAHNER, K.: *Das neue Bild der Kirche*. Schriften zur Theologie, vol. 8. Einsiedeln; Zürich; Köln, 1967, p. 336.

6 Cf. NARECKI, Z.: *Duszpasterstwo zwyczajne w parafii a urzeczywistnianie Kościoła*. Lublin, 2001, p. 67–73.

(especially the Eucharist) and enter into the emission of the active love of the Church – Caritas.

## Internet – contemporary areopagus of evangelization

Proclaiming Good News is always done in particular history conceived as “kairos”, the use of which should lead to continuous pastoral activity restoration, sensitive to a human being and effective teaching of Gospel. The Church tries to conduct its evangelizing mission fruitfully with regard to the circumstances of the time and investigating signs of the time, whereby contributing to the restoration and transformation of the world. Among the signs of the time one cannot omit the appearance of the Internet and information (network) society as a cultural change, in face of which the Church cannot remain indifferent.<sup>7</sup>

The development and constant evolution of both: the Internet<sup>8</sup> and social communication media in general are one of the aspects of progress of contemporary society. One of the Vatican Council documents was devoted to this issue. In the introduction of this document Council Fathers note, that: “Among the wonderful technological discoveries which men of talent, especially in the present era, have made with God’s help, the Church welcomes and promotes with special interest those which have a most direct relation to men’s minds and which have uncovered new avenues of communicating most readily news, views and teachings of every sort.”<sup>9</sup>

John Paul II taught that “all ways lead to man”<sup>10</sup> and if all, that means also ways of computers, information technology and the Internet. Thus, clergymen and laymen equally cannot be indifferent to these means of communication.<sup>11</sup>

7 Cf. KRZYSZTOFEK, K.: Internet uspołeczniony : Web 2.0 jako zmiana kulturowa. In: *Nowe media i komunikowanie wizualne*. Ed. P. Francuz, S. Jędrzejewski. Lublin, 2010, p. 44–48; MERKLEJN, I.: Teoria społeczeństwa informacyjnego Umesao Tadao i jej znaczenie dla dalszych badań. In: *Nowe media i komunikowanie wizualne*. Ed. P. Francuz, S. Jędrzejewski. Lublin, 2010, p. 13–22; SITKOWSKA, K.: Kościół wobec wyzwań nowych technologii. In: *Kultura – Media – Teologia*, 2, 2010, p. 88.

8 The genesis of the Internet is strictly related to the cold war military circles. Its aim then was to frustrate any attempts to destroy data by nuclear attack. Decentralized computer network gave such opportunities. Dynamic development of the Internet occurred in the 1990s, partly by growing popularity of personal computers. Cf. KULIG, J.: *Posłannictwo twórców przekazu medialnego w świetle nauczania Jana Pawła II*. Lublin, 2010, p. 157.

9 THE SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL: Decree on the media of social communications *Inter mirifica*. Vatican, 1963, no. 1.

10 JOHN PAUL II: The Encyclical *Redemptor hominis*. Watykan, 1979, no. 14.

11 The process of social communication is inseparably connected with the very human nature (essence of humanity) and through this process evangelizing work is done. a human is by nature open to “you” and does not develop alone but in relations and contact with other people. Cf. JANKOWSKA, J.: Oddziaływanie mediów na proces społecznego komunikowania. In: *Media w wychowaniu chrześcijańskim*. Ed. D. Bis, A. Rynio. Lublin, 2010, p. 467.

Nowadays, the Internet is “the most up-to-date and, in many aspects, the most powerful medium of all”<sup>12</sup>. It is the major source of information for many people, mainly young. By the Church it is treated as “a gift from God”<sup>13</sup> and called “a wonderful instrument”<sup>14</sup>.

In the apostolic letter *Il Rapido sviluppo* John Paul II says: “In fact, the Church is not only called upon to use the mass media to spread the Gospel but, today more than ever, to integrate the message of salvation into the ‘new culture’. (...) It tells us that the use of the techniques and the technologies of contemporary communications is an integral part of its mission in the third millennium.”<sup>15</sup> Then he explains: “The Church willingly employs these media to furnish information about itself and to expand the boundaries of evangelization, of catechesis and of formation, considering their use as a response to the command of the Lord: ‘Go into the whole world and proclaim the gospel to every creature’ (Mk 16:15)”<sup>16</sup> He also indicates the Internet as a source of information which makes people accustomed to interactive communication and notes that many Christians are already creatively using this instrument “exploring its potential in evangelization”<sup>17</sup>.

Looking at the Church from a historical perspective, we will see that the Christians have always used disposable resources, which could be employed for evangelization. Saint Paul went to aeropagus to proclaim Good News and convey it to the widest audience. The Apostle of Nations had not had at his disposal such modern means of communication as we have today. We can suppose, that if he lived in our times, he would assuredly run his website or blog, by means of which he would communicate with the established communities, expanding his evangelizing work.

Fr Józef Kloch, spokesperson to the Polish Episcopal Conference, claims: “If Luter hadn’t taken advantage of a printing house, his famous theses would probably have had only a local range. The new technique of that time also contributed to the dissemination of the views of the theologian from Wittenberg. Nowadays, the Internet plays a similar role as the invention of printing then – a carrier of information, information concerning also religion.”<sup>18</sup> It makes a very effective channel of new evangelization.

12 PAPIESKA RADA DS. ŚRODKÓW SPOŁECZNEGO PRZEKAZU: *Etyka w Internecie*. Watykan, 2002, no. 2.

13 PAPIESKA RADA DS. ŚRODKÓW SPOŁECZNEGO PRZEKAZU: *Kościół a Internet*. Watykan, 2002, no. 1.

14 JAN PAWEŁ II: Orędzie na 36. Światowy Dzień Środków Społecznego Przekazu *Internet nowym forum dla głoszenia Ewangelii*. Watykan, 2002, no. 4.

15 JOHN PAUL II: The ecclesiastical letter *Il Rapido sviluppo*. Watykan, 2005, no. 2.

16 JOHN PAUL II: The ecclesiastical letter *Il Rapido sviluppo*, no. 7.

17 JOHN PAUL II: The ecclesiastical letter *Il Rapido sviluppo*, no. 9.

18 KLOCH, J.: Sacrum i profanum w Internecie. <http://www.opoka.org.pl/varia/internet/klochsacrum.html> (7. 5. 2013).

## Polish Roman Catholic parishes on the Internet in light of empirical research

In the empirical research, Instytut Statystyki Kościoła Katolickiego SAC indicates how the Polish parishes use in pastoral praxeology the historic chance that the Internet makes for the Church. It has been doing nationwide research into Catholic religious practices since 1979. The full survey is conducted once a year and embraces direct counting of the people present at the Sunday Eucharist Mass (dominicantes) and the number of people receiving Communion (communicantes). There was another question added to the survey in October 2010. The question whether a parish possessed a website.<sup>19</sup> The given answers were arranged according to the administrative division of the Catholic Church in Poland – division into dioceses. Then, they were put in descending order. The results are shown in Table 1.

*Table 1. Parochial websites in consecutive dioceses  
of the Roman Catholic Church in Poland*

No.	Diocese	Yes		No		Total	
		N	%	N	%	N	%
1.	Katowice	201	77,9	57	22,1	258	100,0
2.	Gdańsk	120	73,2	44	26,8	164	100,0
3.	Gliwice	98	64,5	54	35,5	152	100,0
4.	Warszawa	130	64,0	73	36,0	203	100,0
5.	Warszawa-Praga	105	60,7	68	39,3	173	100,0
6.	Poznań	190	54,1	161	45,9	351	100,0
7.	Zielonogórsko-gorzowska	93	50,5	91	49,5	184	100,0
8.	Bielsko-żywiecka	96	50,3	95	49,7	191	100,0
9.	Tarnów	218	50,3	215	49,7	433	100,0
10.	Kraków	202	49,4	207	50,6	409	100,0
11.	Rzeszów	107	46,7	122	53,3	229	100,0
12.	Łódź	86	45,5	103	54,5	189	100,0
13.	Bydgoszcz	62	44,3	78	55,7	140	100,0
14.	Koszalińsko-kołobrzeska	87	43,3	114	56,7	201	100,0
15.	Białystok	47	43,10	62	56,9	109	100,0
16.	Sosnowiec	68	42,5	92	57,5	160	100,0
17.	Zamojsko-lubaczowska	74	41,1	106	58,9	180	100,0

<sup>19</sup> Cf. ISKK SAC (Catholic Church statistics): Strony internetowe i adresy e-mail parafii w Polsce : Badania (10. 2010). In: *Internet i Kościół*. Ed. J. Kloch. Warszawa, 2011, p. 255.

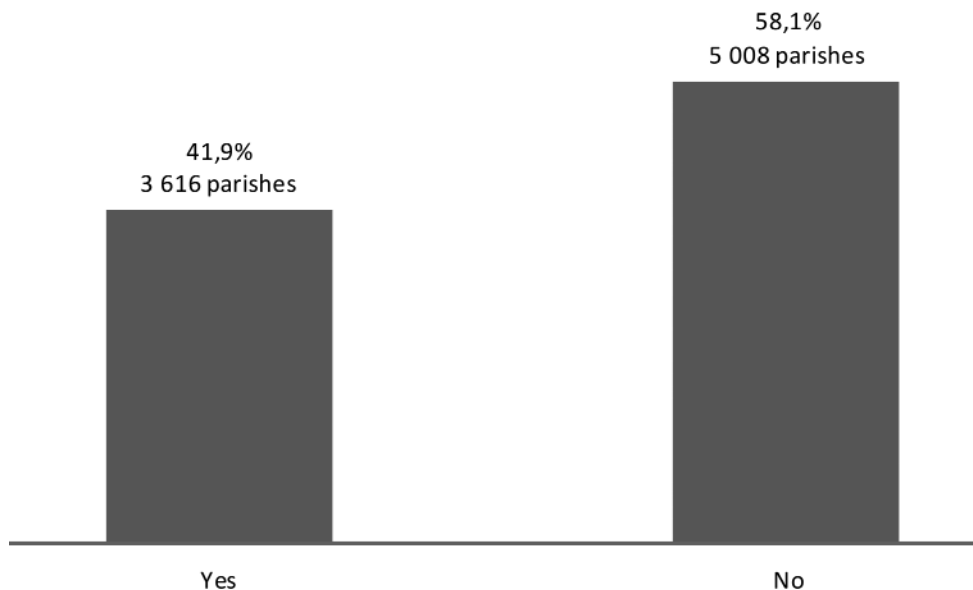
No.	Diocese	Yes		No		Total	
		N	%	N	%	N	%
18.	Wrocław	104	39,4	160	60,6	264	100,0
19.	Pelplin	88	37,6	146	62,4	234	100,0
20.	Legnica	81	36,7	140	63,3	221	100,0
21.	Świdnica	61	35,5	111	64,5	172	100,0
22.	Sandomierz	65	35,1	120	64,9	185	100,0
23.	Military Ordinariate	25	34,2	48	65,8	73	100,0
24.	Opole	128	34,1	247	65,9	375	100,0
25.	Szczecińsko-kamieńska	90	34,0	175	66,0	265	100,0
26.	Elbląg	50	33,3	100	66,7	150	100,0
27.	Elk	39	33,10	79	66,9	118	100,0
28.	Przemyśl	114	32,6	236	67,4	350	100,0
29.	Kalisz	69	32,1	146	67,9	215	100,0
30.	Włocławek	71	30,7	160	69,3	231	100,0
31.	Gniezno	72	29,6	171	70,4	243	100,0
32.	Łomża	53	29,6	126	70,4	179	100,0
33.	Siedlce	61	29,6	145	70,4	206	100,0
34.	Toruń	53	29,4	127	70,6	180	100,0
35.	Płock	57	29,2	138	70,8	195	100,0
36.	Częstochowa	61	27,1	164	72,9	225	100,0
37.	Łowicz	40	26,1	113	73,9	153	100,0
38.	Radom	52	26,1	147	73,9	199	100,0
39.	Warmia	40	21,9	143	78,1	183	100,0
40.	Drohiczyn	20	20,6	77	79,4	97	100,0
41.	Kielce	54	19,4	224	80,6	278	100,0
42.	Lublin (incomplete data)	6	85,7	1	14,3	7	100,0
	<b>Total</b>	<b>3 550</b>	<b>40,4</b>	<b>5 237</b>	<b>59,6</b>	<b>8 787</b>	<b>100,0</b>

Source: Research of ISKK SAC (Catholic Church statistics as of 10. 2010).

Table 1 shows the answers from 41 Roman Catholic dioceses and Military Ordinariate. Archdiocese Lublin sent incomplete data, 7 parishes out of 260. In Poland, 3 550 parishes have websites (40,4%). In light of the data presented in the table, one may note that the highest number of websites belong to the dioceses with a huge number of municipal parishes, with large populations of high density. a percentage of parishes having their own websites is the highest in the following dioceses: Katowice (77,9%), Gdańsk (77,2%), Gliwice (64,5%), Warszawa (64,0%) and Warszawa-Praga (60,7%). The lowest percentage of the parishes having websites involve dioceses with the highest number of rural parishes – Kielce (19,4%), Drohiczyn (20,6%), Olsztyn (21,9%), Radom (26,1%) and Łowicz (26,1%).

In the survey of Instytut Statystyki Kościoła Katolickiego SAC addressed to the Polish Roman Catholic parishes in 2010, there was also a question whether the parish has its own e-mail address. The answers are shown below (Chart 1).

*Chart 1.* Roman Catholic parishes in Poland having e-mail addresses



Source: The research of ISKK SAC (Catholic Church statistics as of 10. 2010).

According to the data on the chart, 3 616 Polish parishes have e-mail, which represents 41,9% of the total (8 624). Thus, this ratio is almost equal to the ratio of parishes having websites (slight difference of 1,5%). Decomposition of this ratio, involving diocese division, indicates its extensive internal diversification: from as many as 94,5% in the diocese Gdańsk to as few as 11,6% in the diocese Drohiczyn. Its level depends on the specifics of consecutive dioceses, as the ratio of parishes having websites. Therefore, the highest ratio belongs to the dioceses with the most urbanized areas and urban agglomerations with large flow of people.

Concluding the presented results of the empirical research, one may assume that the cyberspace is not sufficiently used by the parish communities at the time of information society. In consequence, three-fifth of the parishes still do not have their own website and e-mail address. However, the situation in Poland is very diverse and depends mainly on the level of urbanization of a particular area.

## Websites of Polish parishes in the face of new evangelization – suggested courses of pastoral restoration

The surveys presented above allow only for the fact of possession and non-possession of a website by the Roman Catholic parishes in Poland. Even a brief analysis of the contents of the visited websites is sufficient to characterize them more thoroughly and discover possible courses of restoration with a view to more efficient use of websites by parishes as an available tool of communication and evangelization.

An analysis of Polish parochial websites leads to a conclusion that each of them presents its own unique contents and layout. They have diverse structure, from ones resembling a simple card to more complex sites displaying larger amount of information. There are some similarities in the most frequently offered elements of their contents, i.e. parish history, the schedule of Mass and services, contact details, sacraments and parish office affairs, news, parish announcements, Mass intentions, information on parish groups and priests and galleries.<sup>20</sup>

As a creator and administrator of a few parochial websites, I have noticed that the most preferably browsed and viewed (top pages) are: home page and news, gallery, parish announcements. If the website is not kept up-to-date, developed, enriched and dynamic then a decreasing number of views is to be expected. With the increasing number of websites, there is also a rise in the number of "dead websites". Unfortunately, there are a lot of attractive sites that are static and not kept up-to-date.<sup>21</sup> For the Internet user, it can be a signal that the offer of a parish is not too rich. Subsequently, it can have an anti-evangelization effect. Thus, we should not confine ourselves to only creating a website. It should be remembered that this is part of a daily pastoral activity.

Digital divide is one of the most common difficulties in using the Internet by the parish in its evangelizing work. The biggest problem is not computer illiteracy or a lack of access to the Internet, but mainly a bias against innovation and certain stereotypes. Unfortunately, it also concerns many rectors directly responsible for parishes. Running a website seems to them to be an addition to Christian ministry and another unnecessary duty, as some of them think. The fact that the majority of priests cannot create a website on their own is

20 Cf. MOLENDĄ, R., PAWLIK, M.: *Parafia w sieci*. <http://www.opoka.org.pl/biblioteka/P/PR/idziemy201043.siec.html> (4. 4. 2013).

21 Cf. MOLENDĄ, R., PAWLIK, M.: *Parafia w sieci*. <http://www.opoka.org.pl/biblioteka/P/PR/idziemy201043.siec.html> (4. 4. 2013).



not an obstacle to the parish to have it. In every parochial community, there is assuredly someone who has mastered this skill. In fact, most of the websites have been created by such people: young priests, altar servers, readers or the faithful engaged in various parochial communities.

Free systems as Word Press, Jomla or Drupal give an opportunity to create and manage websites easily. There are also commercial companies creating websites for a fee and offering web administrator coaching. In Poland, E-parafia ([www.e-parafia.net](http://www.e-parafia.net)), Ecclesia Software ([www.es.net.pl](http://www.es.net.pl)), Parafia w Internecie ([www.parafiawinternecie.pl](http://www.parafiawinternecie.pl)), StronaParafialna.pl ([www.stronaparafialna.pl](http://www.stronaparafialna.pl))<sup>22</sup> specialize in creating websites. It is necessary to assign a competent person to the task of creating the website. In a small parish it is sufficient when its rector or a layman assigned by him handle this issue. In a large parish it is optimal, for obvious reasons, to have a group of laymen staying in permanent touch with the rector or other priest. It should be remembered that contribution of laity in creating the parochial website expands the circle of evangelizing people into laymen given the needed charisms.

A common mistake concerned with operating parochial websites in Poland is that priests treat them mostly as a board for parochial announcements. In this case, the bonds between the priests and the faithful cannot be maintained because of one-way communication model often typical for Polish rectors: they preach, the faithful listen.<sup>23</sup> However, the Internet is becoming more interactive. Therefore, Polish parishes should follow the way and offer a possibility of communicating not only through an e-mail address but also through comments and interpretation of current parochial events.<sup>24</sup> The social networks as Facebook or Twitter offer more opportunities in this regard. At the time of new evangelization, using them by the Church seems to be very desirable.

Running the website is also a form of new evangelization with the aim to seek the seeking ones.<sup>25</sup> An increasing number of Polish parishioners are like Sunday drivers: they are not with the Church every day. The website often becomes the instrument which enables them to obtain information on Mass and services times, Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation, working hours of parish office. a good website should give such information and be an integral part of Christian ministry in a parish, never a replacement for it.

It is worth enriching parochial websites with evangelizing elements. It is good practice to place there the Liturgy of the Word, invitations to par-

22 Cf. MOLENDĄ, R., PAWLIK, M.: *Parafia w sieci*. [http://www.opoka.org.pl/biblioteka/P/PR/idziemy201043\\_siec.html](http://www.opoka.org.pl/biblioteka/P/PR/idziemy201043_siec.html) (4. 4. 2013).

23 It is due to a mistaken belief resulting in belittling the role of laity in the Church. It happens according to the pastoral paradigm: like ecclesiology, like ministry (ministry depends on/derives from ecclesiology).

24 Possibility of posting comments by Internet users assuredly contributes to feedback communication but also raises many reservations. However, the user may be required to register and give his e-mail address, then have a comment approved by the moderator of the site.

25 Cf. KUCZWAŁ, D.: Internet w duszpasterstwie Kościoła katolickiego : *Perspectiva*. In: *Legnickie Studia Teologiczno-Historyczne*, 9, 2010, 1, p. 91.

ticipate in prayers and evangelization, links to Catholic websites, magazines, radio and TV. The parochial website enables its evangelizing message to reach engaged parishioners going regularly to church but also occasional visitors maintaining no contact with the Church. Evangelizing contents posted on the parochial website should be of pre-evangelizing nature and constitute "parochial portico". Their task is to prepare the listener for dialogue and awake certain disposition essential to receive the Word of God.<sup>26</sup> For a virtual guest they can be a kerygmatic impulse allowing to know the community of the Church more closely.

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<sup>26</sup> Cf. HANAS, Z.: Ewangelizacja w kontekście Internetu. In: *Nowa ewangelizacja wyzwaniem dla Kościoła w Polsce*. Ed. B. Biela. Katowice, 2011, p. 447.

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