WHAT IS THE CHURCH'S FUTURE IN THE METAVERSE?

Introduction

It will take at least a few years to realise the full potential of the *metaverse*. Currently, there are different conceptions of this word, with many incompatible entities, with different functions and with technologies that need to be improved. So far no single, clear concept has emerged and all the work is still at an early stage of development. It is expected that in the future, the unified world of the *metaverse* will see a paradigm shift in social networking - from applications focused on publishing content, to an era of mixed reality of virtual and physical worlds.[1] There are also a number of ethical issues surrounding the use of the new duality.

It is important to remember the correct terminology when talking about the *metaverse*. Here are some of the most important terms:[2] augmented reality (XR) is an umbrella term that encompasses all forms of computer-enhanced reality (VR, AR, MR). Virtual reality (VR) is the total immersion of the user in a digital environment. Augmented reality (AR), on the other hand, is the process of superimposing digital information on physical reality. Mixed reality (MR) allows people to interact with computer-generated images in the real world and in real time. In addition, mirror worlds are defined as digital creations that mimic the physical and social structures of the real world in a VR environment. It is worth remembering that the word *'metaverse'* itself is a combination of two well-known terms: 'meta', which in Greek means' beyond ', and the word 'verse', which is the abbreviation of 'universe', depending on the language used.

Metaverse: concept and definitions

For some time now, the word *'metaverse'* has been electrifying the worlds of communication, technology and academia. In this context, in October 2021, Facebook changed its name to 'Meta' (rebranding) and Mark Zuckerberg announced a paradigm shift that concerns efforts to combine virtual and augmented reality technologies in a new world using VR headsets, AR glasses or smart screens.

The generic term *metaverse* refers to the user's interaction in the digital world, in a virtual ecosystem, while simultaneously being in the physical world. Built this way, technology blurs the boundaries between the two worlds and offers immersive experiences, relationships, social interactions, games, programs, work, negotiation, and learning. Alex Tang sees the *metaverse* as the natural next step in the development of the Internet, fostered by the rapid development of artificial intelligence. According to the researcher, it consists essentially of four main components: augmented reality, lifelogging, mirror worlds and virtual reality.[3]
In another study, the authors define the *metaverse* as a shared virtual space online where people can interact socially or economically through digital identities – avatars. The *metaverse* offers multi-sensory experiences in an artificially created world; it becomes a

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[1] ACTA, Javier Luque Ordoñez, Emilio Raya López, El Metaverso. Overview, https://www.acta.es/medios/informes/2022005.pdf, 2-3.
[2] Pew Research Center, The Metaverse in 2040, 4.
[3]   Alex Tang, Christians in the Metaverse, Kinononia Paper 03/21, 2022, 1-2.

digital extension of many aspects of human life: work, education, social relationships, play, or shopping.[4]

According to Giovanni Cuccifebrero, the *metaverse* has the following characteristics: creativity, distributed ownership, blockchain technology, integration with physical reality, interoperability (not linked to a single platform), no limitation on the number of users, experiences or worlds, minimised barriers, real-time reactivity, opportunities to socialise, meet interesting people, create new communities and use of NFTs.[5]

In turn, Stylianos Mystakidis, a researcher and professor at the University of Patras, Greece, and a specialist in virtual worlds, provides the following definition of the concept: "The *metaverse* is a post-reality universe, an indefinite and persistent multi-user environment that combines physical reality with digital virtuality. It is based on a convergence of technologies that enable multi-sensory interactions with virtual environments, digital objects and people, using virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR). The *metaverse* is therefore an interconnected network of social immersive environments on sustainable multi-user platforms."[6]

A recent survey conducted in Italy by *Ipsos* and Vincenzo Cosenza, founder of the *Metaverse Observatory*, shed light on the attitudes, behaviours and perspectives of Italians regarding the *metaverse*. The latest survey showed an openness to the *metaverse*, with 52% of respondents finding the *metaverse* experience exciting. 92% of Italians say they know what the *metaverse* is, 77% are able to describe it spontaneously and more than half of the respondents provide expert descriptions. Research has highlighted the tendency to see the *metaverse* not as an alternative to physical reality, but as a way to improve online activities (games, entertainment, education or shopping).[7]

The Church in the *metaverse*

To date, no document has been developed in the Church that refers directly to the *metaverse*. However, many texts indirectly refer to the context that leads to the reality under discussion. Already in 2005, John Paul II had foreseen the rapid development of the Internet and had invited Catholics to engage in evangelisation in this new field. "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' that these powerful means of communication create and amplify. 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."[8]

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[4] ACTA, Javier Luque Ordoñez, Emilio Raya López, El Metaverso..., 1-2.

[5] Giovanni Cuccifebrero, Las nuevas fronteras de la red. Metaverso, algoritmos, "blockchain", La Civiltà Católica, 3, 2023, https://www.laciviltacattolica.es/2023/02/03/las-nuevas-fronteras-de-la-red/.

[6] Stylianos Mystakidis, "Metaverse" Encyclopedia 2, no. 1: 486-497, 2022, https://doi.org/10.3390/encyclopedia2010031.

[7] Ipsos, opinioni, conoscenza ed esperienze degli italiani, https://www.ipsos.com/it-it/metaverso-ricerca-opinioni-conoscenza-esperiencias-italiani.

[8] John Paul II, *The Rapid Development*, Apostolic Letter, Vatican 2005.

An earlier document, *The Church and the Internet,* from 2002, provides guidance for addressing technological change and new processes related to the Church's presence in the digital world. The right attitude should be to engage with new technologies and immerse oneself in evangelisation with increasing use of the Internet. "It is important, too, that people at all levels of the Church use the Internet creatively to meet their responsibilities and help fulfill the Church's mission. 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."[9] On the other hand, the text of the document warns against the loss associated with faith and the sacraments in the virtual world. "Virtual reality is no substitute for the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist, the sacramental reality of the other sacraments, and shared worship in a flesh-and-blood human community."[10] In light of the above, it is worth remembering that no technology can replace direct contact with a group of worshippers and community leaders. On the other hand, in the use of new social media, human dignity must be placed at the centre and the inventions of technology must be used responsibly.

The most recent document of the *Dicastery for Communication* in 2023 does not explicitly mention the *metaverse*, but talks about paying attention to the coexistence of the digital and physical world. "It is important to appreciate the digital world and recognise it as part of our life."[11] How Christians and the Church should engage with new technological advances is becoming an increasingly pressing question. "Great strides have been made in the digital age, but one of the pressing issues yet to be addressed is how we, as individuals and as an ecclesial community, are to live in the digital world as 'loving neighbours' who are genuinely present and attentive to each other on our common journey along the 'digital highways'.[12] It is therefore worth advancing the thesis that the Church needs the media to carry out its mission, given the opportunities and threats to the individual and to civilisation as a whole. "Although the virtual reality of cyberspace cannot substitute for real interpersonal community (...), it can complement them, attract people to a fuller experience of the life of faith and enrich the religious lives of users."[13] It is also necessary to take into account the cultural changes that result from the use of new technologies based on virtual reality, since the close link between technology and culture indicates the future directions of civilisation.

Today's culture often leads to isolation and confinement in the virtual world. Pope Francis is inviting us to establish relationships far beyond the digital world and to use new technologies as a means to an end.[14] The *metaverse* is very popular, especially among young people, and the virtual proclamation of the Gospel is becoming a necessity for the Church today and is no longer just an addition to traditional pastoral care. There is a need for creativity and responsibility on the Church's part, which must be flexible in all conditions. At the same time, it is important to keep in mind that the virtual world is governed by algorithms, which usually lead to a strong control of the choices made and lead to so-called information bubbles. Every

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[9] The Church and the internet, Pontifical Council for Social Communications, Vatican 2002, 10.
[10] Ibid, 9.
[11] Dicastery for Communication, Towards Full Presence, Pastoral Reflection on Engagement with Social Media, Vatican 2023, 17.
[12] Ibid, 1.
[13] The Church and the internet…, 5.
[14] Message of the Holy Father Francis for the 35th World Youth Day, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/youth/documents/papa-francesco_20200211_messaggio-giovani_2020.html.

new activity on the Internet is subject to the judgements of algorithms and artificial intelligence and has concrete consequences.[15]

For years, cyberspace has been used as a place of evangelisation and the principles of the teaching of the Catholic Church, including ethical ones, can also be successfully applied in the virtual world.[16] However, it should be remembered that the *metaverse*, like the entire digital space, is a very specific area, often with its own codes and languages.[17] Therefore, specialists are needed – missionaries who know these spaces exist and who are familiar with these codes and languages. Preparing the Church for the potential of the *metaverse* is a huge challenge and undertaking, because the first task of the Church is to transmit the faith and to nurture authentic human development, even in this new and exciting world. Ecclesiology sometimes becomes "e-ecclesiology", based on the theology of incarnation, but with the use of the tools of new digital technologies.[18]

Conclusion

With the development of modern technology, the question of the future of the Church in the digital world remains open and generates many debates. Despite the enormous momentum in the introduction of the concept and advertising of the *metaverse*, this space always remains strongly hypothetical. The new reality is designed to help people naturally perceive the physical presence of others, which is usually missing in previous online interactions. According to Mark Zuckerberg, smartphones will soon become irrelevant when it comes to connecting with people, and interactions will move towards the *metaverse*, which is the future of the Internet in three dimensions. Its advantage will be the possibility of having online experiences that are increasingly similar to those in real, physical presence.[19]

In light of the above, the *metaverse* becomes a huge challenge for the Church not only in the field of faith, but also in the transmission of human values. Modern technologies and avatars must not overshadow human dignity and the value of the person. That is why it is so important to educate users of the digital world and emphasise the centrality of the human being in modern technology. At the same time, Church people must not distance themselves from new digital challenges, including the *metaverse*, because: "Advancements in technology have made new kinds of human interactions possible. In fact, the question is no longer whether to engage with the digital world, but how."[20]

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