

Fully Native Online Religion: Participation-Based Authority and Emergent Governance in an Indonesian Catholic Community

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to explain how a religious community that originates entirely in digital space can develop authority, religious practices, and governance without ordained clergy or formal ecclesiastical structures. This inquiry is important for understanding forms of religious life that do not merely transfer pre-existing offline communities onto digital platforms. The study employs a qualitative netnographic approach to the *Indonesian Catholic Telegram Community (ICTC)*, an Indonesian Catholic diaspora community with more than 1,000 members. Data consisting of 118,870 messages from the community's first six months were collected through digital chat archives and analyzed using abductive thematic analysis informed by *constructivist grounded theory* coding procedures. The findings show that authority developed through four stages—contribution, recognition, expectation, and crystallization—producing eight informal roles. Religious life developed through digitally adapted devotional practices, community-support practices, and platform-native communal practices. Humor performed five functions: identification, clarification, norm enforcement, boundary-making, and conflict resolution, while nine mechanisms of emergent governance sustained communal order before written rules were codified. These findings have implications for developing more participatory yet transparent governance in digital religious communities. The study's originality lies in the concepts of *fully native online religion*, *participation-based authority*, and *endogenous institutionalization* as extensions of digital religion studies.

ABSTRAK

membentuk otoritas, praktik religius, dan tata kelola tanpa klerus tertahbis maupun struktur gerejawi formal. Kajian ini penting untuk memahami pembentukan kehidupan keagamaan yang tidak sekadar memindahkan komunitas luring ke platform digital. Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif netnografi terhadap Indonesian Catholic Telegram Community (ICTC), komunitas diaspora Katolik Indonesia dengan lebih dari 1.000 anggota. Data berupa 118.870 pesan selama enam bulan pertama dikumpulkan melalui arsip percakapan digital dan dianalisis menggunakan analisis tematik abduktif yang diinformasikan oleh prosedur pengkodean constructivist grounded theory. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa otoritas terbentuk melalui empat tahap—kontribusi, pengakuan, ekspektasi, dan kristalisasi—yang menghasilkan delapan peran informal. Kehidupan religius berkembang melalui praktik devosional yang diadaptasi secara digital, praktik dukungan komunitas, dan praktik komunal platform-native. Humor menjalankan lima fungsi: identifikasi, klarifikasi, penegakan norma, pembentukan batas, dan resolusi konflik, sementara sembilan mekanisme tata kelola emergen menopang keteraturan sebelum aturan tertulis dikodifikasi. Temuan ini berimplikasi pada pengembangan tata kelola komunitas religius digital yang lebih partisipatif sekaligus transparan. Orisinalitas penelitian terletak pada konsep fully native online religion, participation-based authority, dan endogenous institutionalization sebagai perluasan studi agama digital.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Digital media have increasingly become important environments for religious interaction, community formation, and the negotiation of religious authority (Campbell & Cheong, 2022; Helland, 2005). Digital environments can also reshape conventional patterns of religious leadership by creating new pathways through which influence and authority are recognized and exercised beyond traditional institutional roles (Campbell, 2007, 2020). In many cases, however, digital platforms function primarily as extensions of pre-existing religious institutions and offline communities. The Indonesian Catholic Telegram Community (ICTC) presents a different configuration. During its first six months, this diaspora-based Telegram group grew to more than 1,000 members and developed recurring religious activities, including daily Night Prayer, weekly Rosary, theological discussion, pastoral support, and conflict resolution. These activities were conducted through Telegram chats and associated video calls, without ordained clergy, a parish structure, a physical church building, or formal ecclesiastical affiliation. The community therefore provides an empirical case in which religious practice, communal authority, and social cohesion emerged within a digital environment rather than being transferred from an already established offline organization.

This formation becomes particularly significant because ICTC emerged during the COVID-19 period, when religious communities increasingly relied on digital platforms to sustain worship, communication, and pastoral interaction, accelerating broader transformations in digitally mediated religious practice (Mishol-Shauli & Golan, 2024). Research on Catholic communities likewise shows that digital media became important means of maintaining religious participation and pastoral activity when conventional forms of physical gathering were disrupted. Yet ICTC differed from communities that merely moved established religious practices online. Its communal life was born entirely on the

platform, and its first six months generated 118,870 messages that documented the development of religious routines, informal leadership, collective norms, humor, pastoral interaction, and conflict management. The case therefore raises a broader sociological question: how can a religious community emerge, sustain authority, and develop governance when the platform is not merely a communication tool but the principal environment in which communal religious life takes place? This question is especially relevant to digital religion studies because it directs attention from the adaptation of religion to digital media toward the endogenous formation of religious community within digital space itself.

Research on digital religion has developed along at least three major tendencies. The first tendency examines the relationship between online religious practice and established religious institutions. Helland (2005) distinguished between religion online and online religion, emphasizing differences between institutionally controlled religious information and more interactive forms of participation. Campbell (2020), through the concept of *Religious Digital Creatives*, further demonstrated how non-clerical actors may gain religious authority through digital competence, while Campbell and Cheong (2022) showed how religious communities negotiate and adapt institutional practices within changing media environments. Similar patterns appear in Indonesian Catholic studies, which primarily examine how established religious institutions and communities use digital platforms for religious communication, formation, and ministry (Daenuwy & Tanureja, 2023; Dau & Abatan, 2025; Habur, 2025). Collectively, this literature has substantially explained the digital adaptation of religious institutions, but it generally assumes the continued presence of an offline institutional anchor.

The second tendency focuses more specifically on digital religious authority and the ways authority is negotiated through technological environments. Existing studies show that digital media can redistribute visibility, expertise, and influence among religious actors, allowing lay participants and digitally competent individuals to acquire forms of authority that differ from traditional clerical structures (Campbell, 2020; Ess et al., 2012). Empirical studies of Polish Catholic forums, Brazilian Catholic Facebook spaces, Catholic web administrators, Instagram influencers, and immersive religious platforms further demonstrate that digital authority can emerge through participation, mediation, visibility, and technological competence (Kołodziejska, 2018; Sbardelotto, 2023; Golan & Martini, 2022; Febrian, 2024; Dos Santos & Da Cruz, 2024). However, these cases remain embedded within recognizable religious institutions or traditions in which institutional authority continues to function as an explicit or implicit point of reference. The question of how authority becomes organized when formal ecclesiastical authority is absent from the community itself therefore remains insufficiently explored.

The third tendency concerns humor and affective interaction in digital religious communities. Previous studies have examined humor as a form of identity construction, communication, cultural negotiation, and interreligious engagement (Bourgeois, 2024; Ahmad & Nurhidaya, 2024; Saifatunnisa et al., 2024). Within Catholic contexts, humor has also historically coexisted with devotional life and collective identity (Williams, 2019). Yet most existing research treats humor primarily as a communicative style, social lubricant, identity marker, or bridge between groups. Much less attention has been given to humor as an organizing mechanism through which communities clarify doctrine, enforce norms, negotiate conflict, and sustain informal hierarchies. Its potentially exclusionary dimensions—including the marginalization of newcomers, reproduction of status differences, masking of aggression, and reinforcement of gender asymmetries—also remain underdeveloped in studies of digitally mediated religious communities.

Taken together, these three bodies of literature reveal an important gap. Digital religion scholarship has extensively examined the online adaptation of religion, the negotiation of authority in technologically mediated settings, and the communicative role of humor, but it has rarely addressed communities that originate entirely online without formal ecclesiastical affiliation, ordained clergy, offline meetings, or pre-existing organizational structures. Existing frameworks commonly assume some form of institutional mooring, whether as a source of legitimacy, a negotiation partner, or an offline structure being extended into digital space. Even studies of communities using WhatsApp and Telegram during the COVID-19 period, such as Mishol-Shauli and Golan (2024), largely examine digital platforms as means for sustaining pre-existing religious structures rather than generating new communities from their inception. Consequently, both the categorization of digital religion and theories

of religious authority remain insufficiently equipped to explain cases in which communal structures develop endogenously through platform-based participation.

This study addresses that gap by examining ICTC as an extreme case (Flyvbjerg, 2006) on the basis of four empirical indicators: the absence of formal ecclesiastical affiliation during the period analyzed, the absence of ordained clergy, the absence of offline activities or physical meetings, and the organization of all religious practices entirely through digital platforms by community members themselves. On this basis, the study aims to explain how religious authority emerges and functions without ordained clergy, how ICTC substantiates fully native online religion as a distinct configuration within the spectrum of digital religion, what governance mechanisms enable a community of more than 1,000 members to operate before written rules are codified, and how humor functions as an organizing framework for religious practice while simultaneously carrying possible exclusionary effects.

To clarify the analytical contribution of the study, fully native online religion is conceptualized across six dimensions: origin, primary locus of activity, authority source, institutional relationship, ritual forms, and governance structure. On the dimension of origin, ICTC represents a community that emerged entirely on a digital platform rather than extending an offline organization. In terms of primary locus, its core religious and communal activities—including Night Prayer, Rosary, theological discussion, pastoral consultation, and social interaction—were conducted through Telegram and associated video calls. In relation to authority, recognition emerged through participation, peer acknowledgment, and accumulated trust rather than ordination or formal credentialing. Institutionally, the community operated without formal diocesan, parish, or clerical oversight, while its doctrinal and moral resources remained rooted in Catholic traditions that members brought into the platform. Its ritual forms ranged from the reproduction of traditional practices, such as the Rosary, to adapted formats, such as lay-led Night Prayer, and platform-native practices, such as the Marathon “Andai.” Governance, meanwhile, developed through interaction and recurring practice before formal rules were codified.

These six dimensions extend the spectrum proposed by Helland (2005) and further refined by Siuda (2021), whose framework still assumes some degree of institutional anchoring within forms of traditional online religion. ICTC occupies a position not adequately represented in those models: traditional religious content is maintained, but communal organization, authority, and governance develop through platform-endogenous and non-ecclesiastical structures. This does not mean that ICTC is institution-free in a sociological sense, since stable norms, recognized roles, recurring rituals, and shared expectations themselves constitute forms of institutionalization. Rather, the case illustrates endogenous institutionalization, in which institutional structures arise from within the digital community instead of being imported through a formal ecclesiastical template.

Accordingly, this study argues that when a digital platform becomes the primary environment of communal religious life, religious authority and governance can emerge through participation-based processes rather than formal ecclesiastical appointment. Shared religious identity, repeated participation, peer recognition, accumulated trust, and a humor-dominated communicative register can together generate stable informal roles, recurring ritual practices, and workable mechanisms of norm enforcement and conflict resolution. The study therefore extends Campbell’s (2020) concept of *Religious Digital Creatives* by proposing participation-based authority as a mechanism through which authority crystallizes without formal institutional authorization, while also extending Helland’s (2005) and Siuda’s (2021) digital religion frameworks through the concept of fully native online religion. At the same time, the study adds to research on religious humor by treating humor not merely as a communicative style but as a constitutive element of emergent governance that can both sustain cohesion and reproduce exclusion.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

The unit of analysis in this study is the Indonesian Catholic Telegram Community (ICTC), a private, invitation-only Telegram group formed organically in 2020 and referred to pseudonymously as “Kantomin.” The community had no physical meeting space, formal institutional affiliation, or ordained clergy during the period examined. The study focuses on the community’s first six months of

activity, when its religious practices, informal authority structures, interactional norms, and governance arrangements were still emerging. This period was selected because it captures the formative stage of a digital religious community before its practices and rules became fully stabilized.

This study employs a qualitative netnographic design because the research examines religious interaction, communal practices, authority formation, and governance as they developed within a digitally mediated environment (Kozinets, 2020; Kozinets & Gretzel, 2024). Netnography is particularly appropriate for analyzing naturally occurring online interaction and the cultural meanings embedded within platform-based communities. The analysis was conducted abductively, moving iteratively between empirical patterns and relevant theoretical concepts (Tavory & Timmermans, 2014). The analytical strategy combined thematic analysis with coding procedures informed by constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014). Because the dataset was fixed and retrospective, theoretical sampling in the conventional grounded theory sense was not feasible.

The primary data source consists of 118,870 Telegram chat messages contained in 28 export files covering the group's first six months, from mid-2020 to early 2021. Each file was bounded by a natural conversational break of approximately 24–72 hours, with the number of unique senders per file ranging from 13 to 109 ($M = 32$). The exported data included message content, timestamps, and sender information. Indonesian and mixed-language messages were analyzed in their original form and translated by the first author when necessary for publication. Images, stickers, audio, and video materials were excluded from the analysis. Deleted messages identified as "[Deleted Account]" constituted 7–48% of individual files ($M = 14\%$, approximately 55,000 messages) and were treated as a limitation of the archival dataset rather than reconstructed inferentially.

Data were collected through archival export of the Telegram chat logs and were reconstructed chronologically using timestamps, reply structures, and conversational sequencing. The corpus was stored in SQLite and indexed using FTS5 as a verification tool for locating recurring terms, checking patterns, and confirming coded instances across the dataset. To protect participant identity, all actor names were replaced with randomized codes such as UserHy and UserFr; names, locations, and institutional identifiers appearing in quotations were removed or generalized; timestamps were reduced to the month level; references to non-Catholic traditions were generalized; and the community itself was pseudonymized as ICTC throughout the manuscript. Distinctive quotations were paraphrased to reduce search-engine traceability. The raw dataset containing real usernames, including the original exports and SQLite database, is stored separately from publication materials on encrypted local storage, is not cloud-synchronized, and is accessible only to the research team. Data will be retained for two years after publication for verification purposes and then securely destroyed. Ethical access was based on gatekeeper consent routed through the community administrator to the owner. Three ethical limitations remain: consent was obtained through a gatekeeper rather than individually, no individual opt-out mechanism was available, and no formal ethics review was conducted; therefore, gatekeeper authorization constituted the highest level of access available for this archival study (Kozinets & Gretzel, 2024).

The data were analyzed in three stages. Initial coding generated 127 codes, which were subsequently consolidated through focused coding into 18 categories and then integrated theoretically into four major themes: participation-based authority, platform-native devotional life, humor as an organizing framework, and emergent governance. The first author conducted the coding through three successive codebook cycles and produced 45 analytic memos, while the second author reviewed the coding structure and confirmed interpretive concordance through peer debriefing, consistent with constructivist grounded theory procedures (Charmaz, 2014). Researcher reflexivity was addressed across cultural, relational, temporal, and interpretive dimensions (Kozinets, 2020; Kozinets & Gretzel, 2024). Culturally, the first author's background as an Indonesian Catholic provided interpretive access to the community's theological and humor registers, while the risk of confirmation bias was mitigated through negative-case analysis. Relationally, the first author was acquainted with the administrator who facilitated the consent request but had no relationship with other key actors. Temporally, the first author joined ICTC only in 2024 and became a researcher in 2026, meaning that the 2020–2021 dataset entirely predates their membership and positions the first author primarily as an archival observer. The second author, who was not a member of the community, provided additional interpretive distance through peer debriefing.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Participation-Based Authority: How Religious Authority Emerges without Ordination

The first major finding concerns the emergence of religious authority in ICTC despite the absence of ordained clergy, formal ecclesiastical offices, or institutionally assigned leadership roles. Authority was nonetheless visible in the community's everyday religious life, particularly in theological interpretation, prayer leadership, pastoral guidance, norm clarification, and conflict management. The data indicate that this authority did not arise through formal appointment, but developed incrementally through repeated participation and communal recognition. Across the corpus, this process followed four recurring stages: contribution, recognition, expectation, and crystallization. In the first stage, members established visibility and credibility through sustained participation; in the second, their contributions were explicitly acknowledged by others; in the third, recognition developed into expectations that particular actors would respond to specific religious or communal issues; and in the fourth, these expectations became sufficiently stable to constitute durable informal authority. This sequential pattern is referred to here as **participation-based authority**, namely a form of authority generated through accumulated contribution, peer recognition, and sustained communal expectation rather than through ordination or formal institutional designation.

Stage 1: Contribution

The first stage of participation-based authority was **contribution**, in which members began to acquire visibility and credibility through sustained, substantive participation in the community's religious discourse. UserFr provides the clearest example of this process. During the first two months of ICTC's formation, UserFr regularly posted theological explanations ranging from approximately 200 to 400 words, often several times per day, and frequently grounded these contributions in Catholic doctrinal sources and Church documents. Rather than simply responding to questions with brief opinions, UserFr repeatedly introduced interpretive explanations that connected everyday discussion with formal Catholic teaching. One representative contribution stated:

"Vatican II actually said the Church is the People of God first, hierarchy second. That's *Lumen Gentium* chapter 2 before chapter 3. People always get this backwards." (UserFr, ICTC Chat, Month 1, 2020; translated from Indonesian)

At this stage, however, UserFr did not yet possess a formally recognized or explicitly assigned position within the community. What the corpus shows instead is a pattern of repeated substantive contribution through which theological competence became increasingly visible to other members. Authority therefore began not with appointment or designation, but with sustained participation that created the empirical basis for subsequent communal recognition.

Stage 2: Recognition

The second stage was **recognition**, in which sustained contribution began to receive explicit communal acknowledgment. UserFr's theological explanations were increasingly met with replies, affirmations, expressions of thanks, and referrals from other members who identified him as a reliable source for particular religious questions. This recognition was not limited to general appreciation; members began to associate UserFr with a specific area of competence, especially doctrinal interpretation and clarification of Catholic teaching. One member responded:

"Wow, thanks, Fr. I finally understand this." (Member, ICTC Chat, Month 2, 2020; translated from Indonesian)

Such responses indicate that UserFr's contributions were no longer treated merely as individual participation, but as contributions carrying recognized interpretive value within the group. Recognition thus converted repeated participation into socially acknowledged competence, creating the relational foundation from which more stable expectations of authority could subsequently emerge.

Stage 3: Expectation

The third stage was **expectation**, marking a shift from passive acknowledgment to active reliance on particular actors. By this point, members no longer merely appreciated UserFr's theological contributions; they began to anticipate his involvement whenever doctrinal or ecclesial questions emerged. His prior participation had generated a recognizable association between the actor and a specific domain of competence, such that members actively sought him out when clarification was needed. This shift is evident in direct solicitations such as:

"Where's UserFr? He's the one who understands Vatican II. Fr, please explain the issue about priests." (*Member, ICTC Chat, Month 2, 2020; translated from Indonesian*)

This form of solicitation indicates that recognition had developed into **role expectation**. UserFr was no longer simply one knowledgeable participant among many; the community had begun to treat his response as something expected in situations involving theological interpretation. At this stage, authority became relationally structured through repeated communal reliance on a specific actor for a recurring function.

Stage 4: Crystallization

The fourth stage was **crystallization**, in which previously accumulated recognition and expectation became sufficiently stable to persist beyond the actor's immediate participation. UserFr's authority was most clearly demonstrated during his absence from the community. Across 28 conversational episodes, representing approximately 28,000 messages, members continued to refer to his earlier explanations and invoke his prior interpretations when related theological issues resurfaced. **Authority became crystallized when recognition and expectation persisted even in the actor's absence.** This persistence indicates that UserFr's authority had become embedded in the community's collective memory rather than remaining dependent on continuous visibility or real-time participation.

When UserFr later returned, his authority did not disappear; instead, it was reconfigured. Whereas his earlier role had centered on doctrinal interpretation as a **theological gatekeeper**, his later participation increasingly reflected a function as a **guardian of social etiquette**, particularly in regulating tone, interactional boundaries, and appropriate conduct within the group. The shift shows that crystallized authority was durable but not static: once established, it could be renegotiated and redirected toward new communal functions while retaining the legitimacy accumulated through earlier participation.

Table 1. Stages of Participation-Based Authority in ICTC

Stage	Empirical Process	Observable Indicators	Illustrative Evidence
Contribution	Repeated substantive participation in theological discussion	Frequent theological explanations; sustained participation; references to Church documents	UserFr posted theological explanations of approximately 200–400 words several times daily during the first two months
Recognition	Peer acknowledgment of the actor's competence	Replies, affirmations, expressions of thanks, and explicit referrals	Members repeatedly thanked UserFr and associated him with theological clarification
Expectation	Community reliance on the actor for a recurring interpretive function	Direct solicitation, tagging, and requests for explanation when doctrinal issues emerged	Members actively sought UserFr when questions concerning Vatican II and priesthood arose
Crystallization	Authority persists beyond the actor's	Continued reference during absence; durable role	UserFr continued to be referenced across 28 episodes of absence, representing

immediate participation	attribution; later reconfiguration of function	approximately 28,000 messages, and later returned with a modified role as guardian of social etiquette
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Source: Authors' analysis of the ICTC chat corpus.

The four-stage mechanism of participation-based authority did not produce a single, uniform form of leadership. Instead, it generated a set of differentiated informal roles that emerged from recurring patterns of participation, recognition, and communal reliance. Across the ICTC corpus, eight religious-communal role clusters could be identified. These roles are analytical categories constructed from the interactional data rather than formal positions recognized by the community itself. They should therefore not be interpreted as fixed offices, titles, or hierarchical ranks. The boundaries between roles were also permeable, as the same actor could occupy more than one role depending on the type of contribution and the function attributed to them by other members. UserMb, for example, appeared simultaneously as a Humor Enforcer and an Ethical Compass, illustrating that participation-based authority could crystallize into overlapping forms of influence rather than a single stable position. Table 2 summarizes these eight informal role clusters and the empirical indicators through which they were identified.

Table 2. Informal Religious-Communal Roles Emerging through Participation-Based Authority

Role	Actor	Primary Function	Empirical Indicators
Spiritual Visionary	UserHy	Articulated the community's founding vision and distributed authority outward	Community remained stable during four episodes of UserHy's absence, totaling approximately 4,000 messages
Theological Gatekeeper	UserFr	Provided doctrinal interpretation and helped define theological boundaries	Frequent theological explanations, direct referrals from members, and continued reference to prior explanations during prolonged absence
Pastoral Elder Presence	UserIc	Offered blessings, practical wisdom, and a parental presence across discussions	Repeated closing blessings and pastoral interventions across different conversational topics
Spiritual Facilitator	UserYa	Sustained Night Prayer and modeled relational vulnerability	Four cycles of withdrawal and return, with continued ritual participation and renewed communal recognition after each return
Ritual Host & Career Coach	UserLo	Hosted Zoom-based activities and provided career-related mentoring	Rapid increase in participation across three consecutive episodes, from 5 to 42 and then 102 messages
Community Architect	UserCh	Created and sustained social space, particularly for women	Development of a recurring women-centered interactional space within six episodes of initial participation
Humor Enforcer	UserMb	Reinforced the community's humor norms without holding an administrative position	Peak participation of 141 messages and repeated use of multiple humorous communication modes to reinforce group norms
Ethical Compass	UserMb	Maintained collective memory, challenged misinformation, and articulated ethical boundaries	Recurrent hoax correction, liturgical parody, and ethical interventions across the formation period

Source: Authors' analysis of the ICTC chat corpus.

The eight role clusters summarized in Table 2 emerged through recurring patterns of participation rather than through formal appointment, nomination, or institutional delegation. Actors acquired differentiated communal functions because their contributions were repeatedly recognized, relied upon, and associated with particular needs within the group. The resulting role structure was therefore relational and practice-based: members came to treat certain participants as theological interpreters, pastoral figures, ritual facilitators, community organizers, humor regulators, or ethical reference points because those functions had been repeatedly enacted and acknowledged in interaction. The role structure therefore emerged from accumulated interaction rather than formal appointment. This pattern also explains why roles could overlap, shift over time, or persist despite temporary absence, as their durability depended on communal attribution rather than on a fixed organizational chart.

A counterintuitive pattern emerged around the formal administrator role. Despite the platform-level authority attached to administrators, including control over membership and message management, the position was not treated as a prestigious status to be competed for. Instead, members repeatedly framed administrative responsibility as an unwanted burden and incorporated that framing into the community's humor. During the first month, one member joked:

"We curse him to become... admin forever." (Member, ICTC Chat, Month 1, 2020; translated from Indonesian)

This framing continued when administrative responsibilities were later distributed: members did not compete for the role, and volunteers had to be actively solicited. The contrast between informal communal authority and formal platform administration is empirically significant. Formal platform power therefore did not automatically translate into prestige within the community.

Taken together, the evidence shows that religious authority in ICTC did not emerge through ordination, formal ecclesiastical appointment, or predefined organizational office. Instead, it developed through a sequential process in which repeated contribution generated communal recognition, recognition produced expectations that particular actors would perform specific functions, and those expectations gradually crystallized into durable forms of informal authority. This process also produced differentiated religious-communal roles whose legitimacy rested on accumulated interaction, peer acknowledgment, and recurring reliance rather than formal designation. The persistence of authority during periods of absence, together with the limited prestige attached to formal administrator status, further demonstrates that authority in ICTC was grounded more strongly in participation and communal attribution than in platform position alone. The next section examines how this participation-based authority operated within the community's fully digital religious practices.

Platform-Native Spiritual Life: Worship Without Physical Space

The second major finding concerns the organization of ICTC's religious life entirely through digital media. Throughout the period examined, devotional practices, theological discussion, pastoral support, and communal interaction were conducted through Telegram chat and associated Zoom sessions rather than through a parish, church building, or other physical meeting space. The distinctiveness of this pattern does not lie simply in the fact that lay members led religious activities, since several Catholic devotional practices may legitimately be conducted without ordained clergy. Rather, ICTC's configuration was distinctive in four respects: its practices were organized in a fully digital format; leadership rotated among members without formal institutional oversight; devotional activity was integrated into the community's humor-driven interactional culture; and several practices emerged in forms that had no direct offline precedent. Taken together, these features indicate that ICTC's spiritual life was organized through the digital environment itself rather than merely transferred from an existing offline structure. Table 3 summarizes the principal religious and communal practices through which this platform-native configuration became visible.

Table 3. Religious and Communal Practices Conducted through ICTC's Digital Environment

Practice	Frequency	Leadership	Primary Function	Digital Configuration
Night Prayer	Daily	Rotating lay hosts	Collective prayer and spiritual accompaniment	Conducted through Zoom, with intentions and interaction coordinated through Telegram chat
Rosary	Weekly (Thursday, 21:00)	Voluntary lay members	Marian devotion and communal participation	Organized digitally, with participation coordinated through the group and open to members with different levels of religious commitment
Theological Discussion	Daily	Organic; no fixed facilitator	Informal faith formation and doctrinal clarification	Developed through continuous chat-based exchanges rather than scheduled institutional instruction
Pastoral Consultation	As needed	Peer-based	Support during personal crises, job loss, and family problems	Conducted through peer-to-peer interaction within the chat rather than formal pastoral appointments
Newcomer Welcome	Whenever new members joined	Any member	Orientation and transmission of communal norms	Conducted through immediate chat interaction, allowing norms and interactional expectations to be communicated informally
Sunday Football	Weekly (Sunday)	Organic	Cross-gender fellowship and social bonding	Organized as a recurring community activity through platform-based interaction without a formal institutional coordinator
Karaoke Night	Occasional	Organic	Fellowship and creation of social space, particularly for women	Emerges as an informal digitally coordinated communal activity rather than a formally scheduled parish event
ICTC Tele Quiz	Occasional	Rotating quizmaster	Activating less-participatory members and encouraging inclusion	Conducted as an interactive platform-based quiz with rotating member leadership
Friday Night Sharing	Weekly (Friday)	Organic	Emotional support and interpersonal sharing	Conducted through recurring peer interaction within the digital community
Morning Ritual	Daily	Any member	Reinforcing collective presence	Emerges through repeated morning interactions in the chat as

			and everyday connection	a routine marker of communal presence
Marathon “Andai”	Spontaneous	Organic; chain responses	Playful interaction and movement between sacred and profane registers	Emerged entirely through sequential chat responses, with no direct offline equivalent

Source: Authors' analysis of the ICTC chat corpus.

Night Prayer was the most regular and demanding devotional practice observed during ICTC's formative period. It was conducted daily through Zoom and led by rotating lay hosts rather than by a fixed religious leader. Personal prayer intentions were typically shared beforehand in the Telegram chat, allowing the prayer session to incorporate concerns emerging from the community's ongoing conversations. The practice also retained ICTC's distinctive interactional register, as hosts sometimes concluded the session with humorous reflections that drew on jokes, references, or conversational themes circulating in the group that day. One regular host described this approach as follows:

“I’m not a good prayer leader; I’m just accompanying everyone. What matters is that we are here together, talking to God in our own way.” (Regular Host, ICTC Chat/Zoom, Month 1, 2020; translated from Indonesian)

This pattern shows that Night Prayer functioned as a community-organized devotional practice in which participation, rotating leadership, digitally coordinated intentions, and shared interactional culture were integrated into a recurring form of collective religious life.

The Night Prayer should not be understood as a virtual Mass or as a digital substitute for sacramental worship. It did not involve the Eucharist, sacramental confession, or other rites that require ordained ministry, nor did it reproduce the Church's official Evening Prayer in a fully standardized form. Instead, the practice combined elements drawn from Catholic evening devotion with digital forms of coordination, rotating lay leadership, improvised intercessions based on chat interaction, and the community's characteristic use of humor. The practice was therefore neither a virtual replication of sacramental worship nor an entirely novel ritual, but a digitally adapted devotional form organized through community participation. Its significance lay in the way inherited Catholic devotional elements were reorganized through the affordances and interactional routines of the digital environment.

The weekly Rosary provides a second example of how religious participation could extend beyond conventional boundaries of formal affiliation. One member who described themselves as “not tied to any religion” joined the Rosary primarily as an observer and later participated in other community activities, including the ICTC Quiz. Their account suggests that a sense of acceptance emerged through shared presence and ritual proximity rather than through structured theological dialogue. The member explained:

“I can’t really explain it; I just felt accepted. I didn’t even join the prayer, I only listened. Then they asked me to join the quiz.” (Member, ICTC Chat, Month 1, 2020; translated from Indonesian)

This episode indicates that participation in ICTC's devotional life could operate at different levels of intensity, including spectatorial participation, while still facilitating inclusion within the broader community. In this case, ritual presence preceded wider social involvement, showing how digitally mediated devotional practice could function as an entry point into communal participation without requiring immediate doctrinal commitment.

The remaining practices reveal that ICTC's platform-native religious life was not confined to formal devotional activities but developed as a broader ecology of digitally organized interaction. The practices can be grouped into three empirical categories. First, digitally adapted devotional practices, such as Night Prayer and the Rosary, retained recognizable Catholic forms while being reorganized through chat coordination, rotating lay leadership, and video-based participation. Second, community-support practices, including pastoral consultation, newcomer welcome, and Friday Night Sharing, embedded emotional care, orientation, and informal accompaniment within routine platform

interaction. Third, platform-native communal practices, such as the ICTC Tele Quiz, Morning Ritual, Marathon “Andai,” and Karaoke Night, emerged directly from the communicative possibilities and interactional culture of the digital environment. This variation shows that *fully native online religion* does not require every practice to be entirely novel; rather, its distinctiveness lies in the fact that the community’s devotional, supportive, and social practices were collectively formed, coordinated, and sustained within the platform itself.

Taken together, these practices show that ICTC’s religious life was not simply an online extension of an existing parish or offline community. Its devotional routines, social support, communal rituals, and platform-native practices were organized within the digital environment itself, even when some of their religious content remained rooted in established Catholic traditions. The empirical record therefore supports the characterization of ICTC as a digitally originated religious community whose practices developed through platform-based interaction rather than through the transfer of a pre-existing offline structure. The next section examines how this digitally organized religious life was sustained through emergent governance before formal rules were codified.

Humor as an Organizing Framework for Religious Practice

The third major finding concerns the role of humor as an organizing framework for ICTC’s religious and communal life. Humor was not merely a stylistic feature of interaction or a form of entertainment; it shaped how members expressed religious identity, conducted discussion, reinforced expectations, and managed interpersonal tension. This orientation was articulated early in the community’s formation through what members described as a kind of “spiritual constitution,” summarized in the founding vision:

“A place where humorous people gather and no one gets easily offended.” (*Member, ICTC Chat, Month 2, 2020; translated from Indonesian*)

This formulation established humor as an interactional norm through which belonging, seriousness, and religious expression were negotiated. Within the corpus, humor repeatedly appeared in devotional exchange, theological clarification, norm enforcement, boundary-making, and conflict recovery. The empirical pattern therefore indicates that humor functioned as a constitutive mechanism of communal order, with at least five recurring functions: identification, clarification, norm enforcement, boundary-making, and conflict resolution.

Table 4. Empirical Functions of Humor in ICTC

Function	Empirical Form	Observable Evidence	Community Effect
Identification	Self-deprecating Catholic humor, recurring memes, and shared joking conventions	Repeated use of “Catholic but...” jokes and Catholic-specific humorous references in everyday interaction	Reinforced a shared sense of identity and signaled familiarity with the community’s communicative register
Clarification	Humor used to sharpen, redirect, or simplify theological discussion	Humorous interventions appeared during extended doctrinal exchanges and shifted the tone of discussion	Helped participants reframe theological issues in a more accessible and interactionally acceptable form
Norm Enforcement	Joking, mockery, and playful correction used to regulate conduct	Remarks such as “Where’s the funny part?” interrupted overly serious exchanges; inappropriate content was corrected through ridicule rather than formal sanction	Redirected behavior and reinforced interactional norms without relying on explicit disciplinary procedures

Boundary-Making	Competence in the community's humorous Catholic register functioned as an implicit marker of belonging	Members who understood and reproduced the group's joking style were more readily incorporated into interaction, while less humor-compatible participation was sometimes marked as atypical	Distinguished insiders from peripheral participants and shaped expectations regarding acceptable participation
Conflict Resolution	Self-mockery, compassionate ridicule, and humorous re-entry after interpersonal tension	Following conflict, members frequently resumed interaction through jokes or self-deprecating remarks; some episodes returned to ordinary exchange within approximately two hours	Provided an interactional pathway back into participation and helped restore ordinary group communication after tension

Source: Authors' analysis of the ICTC chat corpus.

Humor also functioned as a marker of collective identity and belonging. Members repeatedly used self-deprecating Catholic stereotypes, recurring "Catholic but..." memes, and shared joking conventions to signal familiarity with the community's communicative style. This humor helped define what participation in ICTC was supposed to feel like: religious discussion could remain serious in content while being expressed through a register that valued playfulness, irony, and mutual teasing. The founding vision captured this orientation clearly:

"A place where humorous people gather and no one gets easily offended." (Member, ICTC Chat, Month 2, 2020; translated from Indonesian)

The same pattern, however, also contained an exclusionary logic. Members who could follow and reproduce the group's humorous Catholic register were more easily incorporated into everyday interaction, whereas those who responded more seriously or did not share the same joking conventions could be positioned as less aligned with the community's style. Humor therefore operated not only as a resource for cohesion but also as an interactional criterion of belonging.

Humor further functioned as a mechanism for clarification and norm enforcement. One extended theological discussion, lasting approximately one hour, became increasingly serious until a member intervened with a humorous reminder of the group's identity:

"Hey, where's the funny part? This is Humorous Catholic, remember?" (Member, ICTC Chat, Month 2, 2020; translated from Indonesian)

The intervention immediately altered the interactional register. Participants shifted away from the increasingly intense theological exchange, the tone became lighter, and the discussion dissipated without recourse to moderator intervention or explicit sanction. The episode shows that humor did more than entertain; it clarified the expected style of participation and redirected interaction when discussion moved too far from the community's established communicative norm. In this sense, humor operated as a low-cost mechanism for redirecting interaction without formal sanction.

The platform-native character of ICTC's humor was particularly visible in the spontaneous Marathon "Andai," an episode in which members generated 32 successive variations of a romantic-joke format modeled on the repetitive structure of a Catholic litany. The sequence developed entirely through chat, with each contribution responding to the previous one and extending the pattern through rapid, collective improvisation. Sacred and profane registers were repeatedly combined: liturgical cadence and religious references were used to frame romantic, playful, and everyday content. The episode shows that humor was not external to religious practice or merely inserted into otherwise serious interaction. Instead, it became part of the community's own mode of religious expression, producing a form of platform-native play that depended on the sequential, participatory structure of digital chat.

Humor also played a recurrent role in conflict recovery. After episodes of interpersonal tension, members often re-entered interaction through self-mockery, playful exaggeration, or what can be described empirically as compassionate ridicule. In several cases, ordinary conversation resumed within less than two hours after conflict, without the use of formal mediation procedures or explicit administrative intervention. These humorous exchanges created a socially acceptable way for participants to return to the conversation while reducing the intensity of the preceding disagreement. Humor frequently provided an interactional pathway back into participation after conflict. Its regulatory function was therefore not limited to preventing escalation; it also helped restore conversational continuity once tension had already occurred.

At the same time, the same mechanism could constrain participation. The expectation that members remain humorous sometimes made earnest or serious contributions more difficult to sustain, especially when those contributions were repeatedly reframed as incompatible with the group's dominant register. One member responded after being humor-corrected:

"Fine, I'll just stay quiet. It's hard when you get a little serious and immediately get called unfunny." (Member, ICTC Chat, Month 2, 2020; translated from Indonesian)

This counter-evidence shows that humor's integrative capacity was accompanied by an exclusionary edge. While humor could reduce tension and reinforce shared identity, it could also silence serious contributions, strengthen insider-outsider distinctions, and make humor-compatible participation appear more legitimate than other communicative styles. Members who did not readily adopt the prevailing humorous register were therefore at greater risk of being treated as peripheral to the community's interactional norms.

Taken together, the evidence shows that humor in ICTC functioned as an organizing framework rather than merely a communication style. It structured belonging, clarified norms, redirected theological interaction, supported conflict recovery, and shaped the boundaries of legitimate participation. At the same time, the same mechanism that sustained cohesion could marginalize members whose communicative style did not conform to the dominant humorous register. This dual function is important for understanding ICTC's broader governance structure, because humor operated both as an informal regulatory resource and as a boundary-making mechanism within the community. The next section examines how these interactional mechanisms were incorporated into the emergent governance of ICTC before formal rules were codified.

Emergent Governance: Self-Regulation before Rule Codification

The fourth major finding concerns how ICTC maintained communal order before formal rules were codified. During the community's formative period, governance did not depend on a complex formal structure, a detailed written rulebook, or centralized supervision. Instead, order emerged incrementally through repeated interaction, collective routines, informal role formation, peer correction, and responses to specific incidents. The data identify nine governance mechanisms that developed from practice rather than from prior organizational design. These mechanisms enabled members to regulate participation, sustain recurring activities, respond to interpersonal tension, and preserve continuity even when key actors were absent. Taken together, they show that governance in ICTC operated as an emergent and distributed process embedded in everyday communal interaction. Table 5 summarizes the nine mechanisms and their principal functions, empirical indicators, and observed outcomes.

Table 5. Emergent Governance Mechanisms in ICTC

Mechanism	Primary Function	Observable Evidence	Empirical Outcome
Mandate of Humor	Functioned as an unwritten interactional constitution	Members repeatedly redirected overly serious or conflictual exchanges through humor and self-deprecating responses	External criticism and internal tension were often absorbed or deflected without formal sanction

Norm Internalization	Converted situational corrections into shared communal expectations	Boundaries initially articulated by administrators or core members were reproduced by ordinary members within approximately 24 hours	Norms became collectively enforced without formal training or written instruction
Participation-Based Role Formation	Generated informal authority and differentiated communal functions	Eight recurring roles emerged through repeated contribution, recognition, and communal reliance rather than formal appointment	Roles persisted through continued participation and could weaken or shift when actors became inactive
Collective Ritual Structure	Provided temporal and relational order in the absence of a formal organizational chart	Recurring practices such as Night Prayer continued through rotating lay hosts even when particular facilitators were absent	Ritual continuity helped stabilize communal rhythm and reduced dependence on individual leaders
Adaptive Learning	Enabled governance protocols to evolve through repeated incidents	Responses to boundary violations and interpersonal tensions became faster over the six-month period, shifting from hours to minutes	The community developed increasingly efficient informal response patterns over time
Founder as Metonym	Linked the founder's identity to the symbolic identity of the community without making governance personally dependent on the founder	The founder remained symbolically important, yet the group continued functioning during an absence spanning approximately 4,000 messages	The founder retained symbolic significance while operational governance became distributed
Quiz-Based Participation	Activated peripheral members, redistributed attention, and facilitated inclusion	ICTC quizzes drew less-active and non-religious participants into communal interaction without requiring doctrinal qualification	Participation expanded through low-threshold, non-doctrinal engagement
Peer Safety Monitoring	Provided informal protection and rapid response to member vulnerability	Reports of harassment through direct messages were addressed by peers within less than 12 hours despite the absence of a formal reporting system	Safety concerns could be managed through collective vigilance and informal intervention
Decentralized Administration	Reduced dependence on a single administrator or leader	Administrative and communal functions continued during the founder's absence across four episodes, totaling approximately 4,000 messages	Governance remained operational without a single point of failure or an authority vacuum

Source: Authors' analysis of the ICTC chat corpus.

The nine governance mechanisms shared five recurring empirical characteristics. First, they were emergent, developing through repeated practice and responses to concrete situations rather than through prior organizational design. Second, they were distributed, in the sense that governance functions were carried across multiple actors, routines, and interactional processes. Third, they were humor-mediated, because correction, de-escalation, and norm reinforcement were frequently conducted through joking rather than formal sanction. Fourth, they were adaptive, as response patterns changed over the six-month period in relation to recurring incidents. Fifth, they were mutually reinforcing, with one mechanism often supporting the operation of another. Distributed governance did not mean equal influence. Participation remained highly skewed, with a relatively small core of members contributing disproportionately to the community's interaction. Distribution therefore refers to the absence of a single point of operational dependence rather than to equality in visibility, influence, or participation.

These mechanisms also functioned interdependently rather than as isolated forms of regulation. Humor supported norm enforcement by making correction socially acceptable; repeated correction enabled norms to become internalized without formal instruction; sustained participation generated informal roles that members increasingly relied upon; recurring rituals provided temporal structure and continuity; peer monitoring addressed emerging safety concerns; and decentralized administration enabled communal activities to continue when prominent actors were absent. The governance pattern was therefore not reducible to any single mechanism. Instead, ICTC maintained order through a configuration of interacting practices in which communicative norms, informal authority, ritual repetition, peer vigilance, and distributed administrative functions reinforced one another over time.

The operation of unwritten norms is illustrated by an episode involving a newcomer who engaged intensively in theological debate during her first week in the community, particularly around Catholic teaching on contraception. Because the relevant interactional boundary had not been codified or explicitly explained, the newcomer continued the discussion in a serious argumentative register until another member intervened through humor:

"Hey, relax a little. Do you think this is the Council of Trent? Hahaha." (Member, ICTC Chat, Month 2, 2020; translated from Indonesian)

No written rule was cited and no formal warning was issued. Instead, the correction communicated the expected interactional style indirectly through ridicule and shared Catholic reference. The newcomer subsequently reduced her theological participation and later reflected:

"I thought serious debate was allowed, but apparently not. Fine, I'll just go along with it." (New Member, ICTC Chat, Month 2, 2020; translated from Indonesian)

The episode shows that an unwritten boundary could be enforced and subsequently internalized without reference to a codified rule.

Norm internalization in ICTC was therefore effective in producing behavioral conformity, but it also exposed an important limitation of unwritten governance. Newcomers were often required to infer interactional boundaries only after a correction had occurred, rather than being able to consult an explicit rule beforehand. This made governance responsive but also opaque, particularly for participants who had not yet learned the community's humor register or informal expectations. Norm internalization therefore occurred through participation and correction, but the absence of explicit rules also made governance boundaries less transparent to newcomers.

A second episode further illustrates both the effectiveness and the limits of this governance pattern. In month 3, two members became involved in an increasingly personal dispute over the interpretation of a papal encyclical. The exchange continued for approximately 90 minutes before a third member intervened with a humor-framed attempt to interrupt the escalation:

"Seriously, did everyone forget this is a FUNNY group, not a THEOLOGY group? Take a breath. Later I'll read you a Love Letter from the Vatican in a duck voice." (Member, ICTC Chat, Month 3, 2020; translated from Indonesian)

The intervention altered the tone immediately. Both participants disengaged within minutes, and the conflict ceased to dominate the group's interaction. However, the underlying theological disagreement remained unresolved. One of the members later returned to the issue, writing:

"I'm actually still curious about the encyclical issue earlier." (Member, ICTC Chat, Month 3, 2020; translated from Indonesian)

The intervention successfully de-escalated the interaction, but it did not resolve the substantive disagreement. This distinction is important empirically: ICTC's governance was highly effective at restoring interactional order and reducing immediate tension, but less consistently effective at producing substantive resolution of the issues that generated conflict. In this sense, the community's informal mechanisms prioritized continuity of participation and restoration of conversational stability over the complete adjudication of theological disagreement.

A further stress test concerned the founder's absence. Across four conversational episodes, representing approximately 4,000 messages, the founder was not present, yet recurring rituals, ordinary interaction, and informal regulation continued without a visible governance vacuum. Members continued to host devotional activities, reinforce norms, respond to tensions, and sustain the community's rhythm through distributed roles and recurring routines. Governance continuity during the founder's absence indicates that communal order had become distributed across routines, roles, and peer interaction rather than remaining dependent on a single central actor. The founder retained symbolic importance, but the operational continuity of the group no longer depended exclusively on their presence.

Taken together, the findings show that ICTC maintained communal order before formal rule codification through nine mutually reinforcing mechanisms embedded in everyday participation. Governance emerged through humor-mediated norm enforcement, role formation, recurring ritual, adaptive learning, peer monitoring, participatory activities, and decentralized administration rather than through a predesigned organizational structure. This arrangement was effective in sustaining continuity and rapidly de-escalating interactional tension, but it also produced opaque boundaries and could leave substantive disagreements unresolved. The evidence therefore indicates that emergent governance in ICTC combined resilience and adaptability with uneven transparency and limited capacity for resolving all forms of substantive conflict.

Discussion

Taken together, the findings across the four analytical domains—authority, religious practice, humor, and governance—show that ICTC did not remain an unstructured online gathering during its first six months. Across 118,870 messages, religious authority developed through four sequential stages—contribution, recognition, expectation, and crystallization—and produced eight recurring informal roles. At the same time, the community generated nine mechanisms of emergent governance, while humor performed five recurrent functions encompassing identification, clarification, norm enforcement, boundary-making, and conflict resolution. The durability of these arrangements was visible in several empirical stress tests: communal routines continued during four episodes of founder absence spanning approximately 4,000 messages; UserFr's theological authority remained present in collective reference across 28 episodes comprising approximately 28,000 messages; and the Marathon "Andai" developed through 32 successive contributions as a platform-native form of religious play. Taken together, these findings indicate that ICTC gradually generated stable roles, recurring rituals, interactional norms, and governance mechanisms from within the platform itself. Rather than evidencing an absence of institutional order, the case points to a process of **endogenous institutionalization**, in which communal religious structures emerged through repeated participation and collective interaction without being transferred from a pre-existing formal ecclesiastical organization. This process provides the empirical basis for conceptualizing ICTC as a case of *fully native online religion*.

ICTC became institutionally stable not because it replicated a parish structure online, but because several mutually reinforcing processes gradually produced order from within the platform. A shared Catholic identity supplied a common symbolic and religious repertoire, while Telegram functioned as

the community's primary locus of interaction rather than merely as a supplementary communication channel. Repeated devotional practices created temporal regularity; sustained participation generated differentiated informal roles; recurring interaction produced shared expectations and norms; and those norms were progressively stabilized through emergent governance. In this sense, fully native online religion should not be understood as religion without tradition or without institutionalization. ICTC remained deeply rooted in inherited Catholic doctrines, devotional forms, and moral vocabularies, but the genesis and organization of its communal religious life were platform-endogenous. This configuration extends Helland's (2005) distinction between religion online and online religion, because ICTC was neither simply an institutional religious presence on the internet nor merely an interactive digital expression of an already established community. It also extends Siuda's (2021) spectrum by showing that traditional religious content can coexist with a community whose organizational form, authority structure, and governance emerge entirely within digital interaction. This differs from COVID-era cases in which digital platforms primarily sustained pre-existing religious structures (Mishol-Shauli & Golan, 2024), as well as from studies of digital Catholicism that continue to operate within recognizable ecclesiastical or institutional anchors (Dos Santos & Da Cruz, 2024; Habur, 2025). Sbardelotto's (2023) account of lay-amateur participation comes closest to this configuration, but ICTC extends that trajectory by demonstrating that lay actors can not only reconstruct Catholic practice digitally, but also generate a relatively stable communal order without a formal ecclesiastical container. The theoretical novelty, therefore, lies in identifying endogenous institutionalization within fully native online religion: a process in which inherited religious traditions are retained while roles, norms, rituals, and governance are produced internally through platform-based participation.

Participation-based authority further explains how ICTC developed recognizable religious leadership without ordained clergy or formal appointment. The findings show a sequential mechanism in which repeated substantive contribution made competence visible, peer recognition converted that visibility into acknowledged credibility, repeated communal reliance generated expectations that particular actors would perform specific functions, and collective memory allowed those expectations to persist even during absence. This four-stage process—contribution, recognition, expectation, and crystallization—produced eight informal roles whose legitimacy rested on interaction rather than office. UserFr provides the clearest example: although absent across approximately 28,000 messages, members continued to invoke his earlier theological explanations, indicating that authority had become socially embedded rather than dependent on continuous presence. Conversely, formal administrator status did not automatically produce prestige, showing that platform-level power and communal authority were not equivalent. This pattern extends Campbell's (2020) concept of *Religious Digital Creatives*, which emphasizes digitally competent actors who acquire influence in mediated religious environments, and complements Ess et al.'s (2012) account of the redistribution and negotiation of religious authority. It also resonates with studies of digitally mediated Catholic authority in which lay actors gain influence through participation, mediation, and expertise (Golan & Martini, 2022; Kołodziejska, 2018), as well as with Campbell and Cheong's (2022) analysis of the negotiation of religious practice and authority in changing media environments. However, ICTC differs in one crucial respect: these earlier studies largely describe the redistribution or renegotiation of authority within, around, or in relation to recognizable religious institutions, whereas ICTC demonstrates the generation of authority without formal appointment inside the community itself. For this reason, participation-based authority is best understood not as another category of digital religious leader, but as a mechanism of authority formation in which legitimacy is produced cumulatively through contribution, recognition, reliance, and collective memory.

Humor functioned as an organizing framework because it operated as a shared interactional code through which members could negotiate identity, regulate conduct, and restore conversational order without relying on formal procedures. Across the corpus, humor performed five recurring functions—identification, clarification, norm enforcement, boundary-making, and conflict resolution—and these functions frequently overlapped in practice. A one-hour theological discussion, for example, was redirected through a single humorous intervention, while a separate conflict lasting approximately 90 minutes de-escalated within minutes after a member shifted the interaction into a joking register. The

32-iteration Marathon “Andai” further demonstrates how humor linked sacred and everyday registers by transforming Catholic litany-like form into collective digital play, while similar humorous conventions also appeared in devotional and social interaction. These patterns help explain why humor was effective: it softened sanction, enabled correction without formal disciplinary procedures, provided a shared vocabulary for distinguishing acceptable from unacceptable participation, and offered a socially recognizable pathway back into interaction after tension. This finding extends Bourgeois’s (2024) emphasis on humor and religious identity, Ahmad and Nurhidaya’s (2024) account of humor as cultural and religious negotiation, Saifatunnisa et al.’s (2024) treatment of religious humor as a bridge and identity mechanism, and Williams’s (2019) demonstration of the coexistence of Catholic devotion and humor. It also resonates with Meyer’s (2000) functions of identification, clarification, and differentiation, Billig’s (2005) account of humor’s disciplinary force, and Kuipers’s (2009) analysis of symbolic boundaries. ICTC, however, pushes these perspectives further by showing that humor can do more than communicate identity or negotiate difference: it can organize religious interaction itself. In this sense, the case supports a shift from understanding humor primarily as a communicative or identity resource toward conceptualizing it as an organizing framework of religious community.

Emergent governance in ICTC became effective not because authority was concentrated in a single leader, but because multiple regulatory processes reinforced one another across everyday interaction. Humor enabled norm enforcement in a socially acceptable register; repeated correction facilitated norm internalization; sustained participation generated informal roles; recurring rituals created temporal order; quizzes activated peripheral members; peer monitoring addressed safety concerns; adaptive learning shortened response times from hours to minutes over the six-month period; and decentralized administration preserved continuity when central actors were absent. The empirical record supports this interdependence. One reported harassment case was addressed by peers within less than 12 hours despite the absence of a formal reporting system, while the founder’s absence across approximately 4,000 messages did not interrupt ritual activity or ordinary interaction. Governance resilience therefore emerged from the coordination of routines, roles, norms, and peer responses rather than from centralized command. This finding is consistent with Campbell and Cheong’s (2022) account of religious communities negotiating practice and authority within changing digital environments, Campbell’s (2020) emphasis on the growing agency of non-clerical actors in mediated religion, and Sbardelotto’s (2023) analysis of lay participation in the digital reconstruction of Catholic communal life. ICTC extends these perspectives by showing that distributed religious agency can develop into a relatively stable governance configuration even without a formal ecclesiastical structure directing the process. More specifically, the case suggests that emergent governance is produced through the interdependence of communicative norms, participatory authority, recurring ritual, peer regulation, and decentralized coordination, rather than through any single governance mechanism operating in isolation.

The effectiveness of ICTC’s emergent governance should nevertheless be understood alongside its dysfunctions. On the positive side, the community sustained recurring religious activities without formal hierarchy, de-escalated interpersonal tension rapidly, created relatively low-threshold opportunities for participation, provided peer-based religious and emotional support, maintained ritual continuity during the absence of key actors, and responded collectively to safety concerns. These functions, however, coexisted with significant asymmetries. Unwritten norms imposed a higher interpretive burden on newcomers, who often learned communal boundaries only after correction; one participant’s reflection — “I thought serious debate was allowed, but apparently not” — illustrates how norm opacity could push less-acclimatized members toward peripheral participation. Humor produced a similar double effect. Although it supported cohesion and conflict recovery, the response “Fine, I’ll just stay quiet...” shows that serious contributions could be muted when they failed to conform to the dominant humorous register, turning humor competence into an informal test of belonging. This finding qualifies studies that emphasize religious humor primarily as a bridge, identity resource, or mode of cultural negotiation (Saifatunnisa et al., 2024; Bourgeois, 2024; Ahmad & Nurhidaya, 2024) by showing that the same interactional resource can also produce exclusion. Moreover, distributed governance did not mean egalitarian governance: influence remained uneven because a relatively small core of participants contributed disproportionately to the community’s

interaction, while administrators still retained platform-level powers unavailable to ordinary members. This similarly qualifies accounts of digital religious authority as redistribution, since redistribution does not necessarily eliminate hierarchy or asymmetrical influence (Ess et al., 2012; Campbell, 2020). Finally, ICTC was more consistently effective at restoring interactional order than at resolving substantive disagreement; the papal encyclical conflict ended behaviorally within minutes, yet the theological question remained unanswered. The case therefore demonstrates that cohesion, resilience, and decentralized participation can coexist with opaque norms, informal stratification, and unresolved substantive tensions.

Finally, the findings make three related theoretical contributions. First, the concept of fully native online religion extends Helland's (2005) and Siuda's (2021) frameworks by identifying a configuration in which inherited religious content remains recognizable, while the community's genesis, authority, ritual coordination, and governance are organized endogenously within the digital platform. Second, participation-based authority extends Campbell's (2020) typology of Religious Digital Creatives by shifting analytical attention from categories of influential actors to the mechanism through which authority itself is formed: repeated contribution, peer recognition, communal reliance, and collective memory. Third, the concepts of endogenous institutionalization and humor-mediated emergent governance explain how roles, rituals, norms, and regulatory mechanisms can become sufficiently stable to sustain communal order without a formal ecclesiastical template. These contributions also have practical implications for digital religious-community organizers and pastoral institutions. The findings suggest the value of explicit newcomer orientation, transparent minimum safety rules, distributed ritual facilitation, and designated spaces or procedures for substantive theological follow-up. Operationally, such measures could produce clearer onboarding norms, peer-safety protocols, rotation of facilitators, and protected spaces for serious discussion, with indicators including newcomer retention, diversity of participation, response time to safety incidents, and continuity during leader absence. These implications must nevertheless be interpreted within the study's boundary conditions. The analysis concerns one community on one platform during a six-month formative period shaped by the exceptional conditions of the COVID-19 era; it relies on retrospective archival data without interviews or real-time observation, cannot establish the extent to which members' offline religious reputations or prior networks influenced online authority, and is constrained by deleted-account data that limit complete longitudinal reconstruction of participation. These concepts should therefore be treated as theoretically grounded propositions derived from an extreme case rather than as universally generalizable characteristics of digital religious communities.

4. CONCLUSION

This study shows that ICTC developed into a relatively stable digital religious community through processes that emerged from within the platform itself. Across its formative six-month period, religious authority developed through four stages—contribution, recognition, expectation, and crystallization—and produced eight informal religious-communal roles without clerical appointment. Its religious life combined digitally adapted devotional practices, community-support practices, and platform-native communal practices; humor functioned through identification, clarification, norm enforcement, boundary-making, and conflict resolution; and communal order was sustained through nine emergent governance mechanisms. These findings demonstrate that ICTC did not merely transfer an existing parish or offline community into digital space. Rather, its roles, rituals, interactional norms, and governance arrangements were progressively constituted through repeated participation and collective interaction within the platform.

The principal scientific contribution of this study lies in three related conceptual propositions. First, fully native online religion identifies a form of digital religious community in which inherited religious traditions remain present, while the genesis and organization of communal religious life are platform-endogenous. Second, participation-based authority explains authority formation as a cumulative process of substantive contribution, peer recognition, communal reliance, and collective memory rather than as a consequence of formal appointment or digital status alone. Third, the concept

of endogenous institutionalization clarifies how recurring roles, rituals, norms, and governance mechanisms can become sufficiently stable to organize religious life without a pre-existing formal ecclesiastical template. The study also demonstrates that humor can operate not merely as a communicative style or identity resource, but as an organizing mechanism that simultaneously supports cohesion, regulates participation, facilitates conflict recovery, and constructs boundaries of belonging.

These conclusions are subject to several limitations. The study examines a single community on one digital platform during its first six months and within the exceptional social conditions of the COVID-19 period. Its retrospective archival design does not include interviews or real-time observation and therefore cannot fully reconstruct members' motivations, offline religious reputations, or pre-existing interpersonal networks. Deleted-account data also limit the completeness of longitudinal participation analysis. Consequently, the concepts proposed here should be treated as theoretically grounded propositions derived from an extreme case rather than as universally generalizable characteristics of digital religious communities. Future research should test these propositions comparatively across platforms, religious traditions, stages of community development, and non-crisis contexts, particularly to examine whether participation-based authority, humor-mediated governance, and endogenous institutionalization remain stable under different social and technological conditions.

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