

**PIOTR ZBRÓG**

Uniwersytet Jana Kochanowskiego w Kielcach, Polska

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9512-4027>

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## THE SOCIAL REPRESENTATION OF CORONAVIRUS IN THE POLISH CATHOLIC PRESS

Keywords: social representation, social representation theory, coronavirus, polish catholic press.

### ABSTRACT

This article presents the components of the social representation of coronavirus, analyzed on the basis of headlines from the most important religious periodicals in Poland. The object of research is currently one of the most frequently discussed and commented upon phenomena in the digital space. In addition to the cognitive image of SARS-CoV-2 (the virus that causes COVID-19) which was constructed in mainstream portals, the particular version produced by the Catholic media constitutes an interesting supplement. Catholic religious Internet portals significantly expanded the social representation of coronavirus, including in relation to faith, and this was a lens through which the pandemic was perceived. Components of this representation were typical of Christian beliefs and practices: prayer as the solution for misfortune, turning to God in times of crisis, concern about performing religious rituals or finding the potential for change during a pandemic. This social representation was discussed in Internet forums, and the opinions and judgements formulated allowed it to expand. Based on an analysis of the contexts for anchoring the noun *coronavirus*, the general elements of its social representation have been distinguished, e.g., “coronavirus is hindering participation in religious services”, “coronavirus is an opportunity for mankind”, “prayer fights the Covid pandemic”. This kind of perception of the coronavirus has prompted a large group of Catholics in Poland to form their own opinions about the pandemic, in digital and real space; this has subsequently led to the undertaking or abandoning of certain activities, and provoked various polemical opinions.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The pandemic spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus (the COVID-19 pandemic) has been one of the most important issues reported and discussed in the media in the last year. This has clearly affected the local and global perception of the virus and the pandemic. Through various texts and other means of social communication (including films and photographs) which constitute coronavirus discourse as a whole, its social representation is still in the process of being developed and modified. Apart from its main

components, determined by official communication (e.g., information and recommendations of governments, publications in the general media), there are some peripheral elements that resonate due to the activities of the non-mainstream media (e.g., religious or specialist press). The latter, apart from circulating mainstream news, add their own opinions and commentaries. Such perspectives complement the discourse with specific elements that remain important for its recipients.

This article provides an analysis of the cognitive components of the image of the coronavirus, the sources of which can be found in the Catholic press published in Poland. Due to the significance of religion within Polish society, these components constitute an important part of the general social representation of the virus (Chmielewski et al. 2022).

Particularly important in the reconstruction of the social representation of the coronavirus is the fact that the virus, as a medical phenomenon, is a point of interest in quite specialised disciplines of medical science (such as epidemiology). Despite this, due to the threat of the pandemic, it has become a topic described by non-medical professions – such as journalists, politicians and scientists. Above all, it has been commented on by non-specialists and everyday participants in public communication, who from the very beginning, due to the significant impact of the virus on their own lives, have become active participants in the official and non-official discourse regarding the coronavirus (Rybka et al. 2021). Among other things, this has caused confusion in terminology, since scientific terms differ from common-sense terms<sup>1</sup>.

## 2. THE SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS THEORY AS THE METHODOLOGICAL FOUNDATION OF THE CONDUCTED RESEARCH

Digital media plays a key role in constructing the components of the representation of coronavirus. They enable the publication, exchange and circulation of various information, opinions and views in the public sphere. Texts and images related to the coronavirus can be easily found, both on the official websites of news portals, and informal Internet forums. Since March 2020, these have been one of the most important components of daily news in Poland, providing information on the number of infected people, deaths due to COVID-19, restrictions in social life, ways of reducing the risk of infection, etc. All of this is discussed on the Internet, and determines the collective and individual image of the virus. Therefore, it is worth undertaking research on the components responsible for the construction of this cognitive image, using the methodology of social representations developed by Serge Moscovici (1984, 2001).

The Social Representations Theory (henceforth referred to as SRT) makes it possible to explain the way in which new concepts are adapted within social consciousness, and how they are construed and changed in the discursive space. Moscovici's main point

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<sup>1</sup> An example is the interchangeable use of the terms coronavirus (the cause of infection and pandemic) and COVID-19 (the result of infection: a disease).

of interest was the relation between scientific forms of knowledge and common-sense knowledge, developed at various levels of social communication. In his view, representations are the basis of social relations, and a tool for perceiving the world. They turn out to be a modern version of common sense, creating a network of concepts and definitions of related elements (Moscovici 2000). At the same time, it is difficult to identify them with coherent thought patterns, because, especially in the case of controversial phenomena, they often contain conflicting ideas and views.

Currently, due to the significant role of digital space in the dissemination of knowledge, research on social representations of ideas and concepts is taking on a new dimension. The Internet makes their transmission and reception – both in the public media and privately – almost universally available. Each participant of this type of communication is offered the opportunity to construct and reconstruct any fragment of reality. As a result, they change or create the image of objects and concepts as well as the way emerging problems are comprehended (Zbróg and Zbróg 2018). In such a socio-cultural context, social representations arise as a result of complex communication relations between the authors of publications and their recipients, whose perception of given objects differs.

Coronavirus representations originated from the publication of news articles in the media. They were influenced by the previous representations of viruses present in the social consciousness (e.g. influenza, SARS-CoV as well as MERS-CoV). Information about the new object was either reproduced or renegotiated by content modification. In this way, knowledge about coronavirus was categorized and a specific attitude was shaped as a result of frequent contact with new knowledge and new types of experiences (e.g. Wagner 2015). A new representation is usually constructed in the process of adjusting prior knowledge (Chaib et al. 2011). It is worth mentioning that the study of the social representation of the coronavirus (and any other object) cannot be confused with the study of an “ordinary” image or picture. Communication context in digital space generates various communication processes in the community of senders and receivers as they construct their representations – images and texts are used, including metaphors, emotions and values embedded in the media world (Höijer 2011).

### 3. METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

There are numerous research methods in the identification of social representations. Usually, they are associated with socio-genetic processes that reveal the ways in which certain elements circulate, i.e., how they develop, change and coexist with each other. This approach most often concentrates on the analysis of various programs and texts available in the media (the press, radio, television, the Internet – e.g., articles, forums, chats) (Flick, Foster and Caillaud 2015, 64–5).

In order to collect the corpus to be analyzed in the present article, four of the most widely read Catholic magazines were selected, namely electronic versions of the weekly

magazines *Gość Niedzielny*<sup>2</sup>, *Niedziela*, and *Idziemy*, and *Nasz Dziennik* daily. The collection of headlines to be qualitatively analyzed was excerpted by means of searching. After typing the word *coronavirus* (and its contextual equivalents) into the website search functions of the magazines above, approximately 500 articles from each of the magazines were obtained and then reviewed. The main research task was to analyze the contextual field in which the coronavirus nomination or its equivalents (e.g. *korona*, *koronka*, *SARS-CoV-19*) appeared, e.g.

- *Coronavirus in a parish in Zalesie Dolne. Church closed until further notice (N)*<sup>3</sup>.
- *Jasna Góra Monastery: every day at 8 p.m. an additional Holy Mass to end the coronavirus pandemic (I)*.

Such object placement within a contextual field is referred to as anchoring and takes place by naming an object, its features and functions, and comparing it with other objects or through metaphors and antinomies. This mechanism makes it possible to identify elements of social representations (Moscovici 2000, 41–52). Anchoring changes the “unknown” into the “known” by comparing it to the previous social representations in order to interpret them (e.g. by juxtaposition such as “coronavirus is flu-like” or “coronavirus is a plague and death”). By naming a new phenomenon, it can be then placed in a well-known sphere of life and culture. Metaphor is used in order to understand the essence of a new phenomenon, whereas thematic anchoring connects the “new” to certain basic patterns of cultural thinking. Simultaneously, objectification helps the “unknown” become the “known” through imaging, or transforming it into something that can be perceived through the senses (e.g. a face mask becomes an objectification of protection against coronavirus, whereas a picture of the virus makes the object more concrete) (Höijer 2010, 2011).

Existing ways of objectifying and anchoring the coronavirus in the contextual field affect participants in the public sphere. This, in turn, leads to comments containing new ways of anchoring or reproducing the existing anchors. Thus, a contextual network is created based on each given unit. Analysis of such contexts makes it possible to characterize the social representation of coronavirus – i.e. the potential ways of perceiving it.

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<sup>2</sup> According to Wirtualne Media, the weekly *Gość Niedzielny* was the top-selling weekly in Poland in the years 2021–2022: an average of 75 thousand copies. <https://www.wirtualnemedial.pl/artukul/sprzedaz-tygodnikow-opinie-iii-kwartal-2022-polityka-gosc-niedzielny-newsweek> (accessed September 23, 2023). It is included among the so-called opinion-forming weeklies. The other Catholic magazines are not so popular. However, the importance of *Gość Niedzielny* allows us to state that the influence of the Catholic press on the opinions and judgments of Poles, and therefore also the social representations of various objects, is significant.

<sup>3</sup> The letter in brackets indicates the journal’s abbreviation. Full names are included at the end of the article. Due to the volume limitations, the quoted titles were abbreviated to one of the four analyzed periodicals. Their locations are presented at the end of the article. Digital addresses were given only for titles from other portals.

#### 4. COMPONENTS OF THE SOCIAL REPRESENTATION OF CORONAVIRUS FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE CATHOLIC PRESS

According to the goal of this article, the research focused on representative elements of the coronavirus that can be considered a product of Catholic discourse. The periodicals analyzed contained numerous articles directly related to mainstream communication about coronavirus and, conversely, some religious aspects were found in the mainstream portals. This permeation of content between the general and religious spheres is illustrated by the following example headlines:

- President Andrzej Duda infected with coronavirus (I);
- PM Morawiecki in Katowice: a fairly high level of coronavirus incidents in the coming days (I);
- Kraska: this week the number of beds for coronavirus patients will increase (ND);
- People who recovered from coronavirus can help those who are sick (N);
- From Saturday: new restrictions on trade, the opening of shopping malls and closure of cultural institutions due to coronavirus (N);
- COVID-19 throttles the jungle (N).

The headlines above generate similar elements of the social representation of coronavirus, e.g., “coronavirus is a threat to people”, “coronavirus brings death”, “a face mask and maintaining physical distance can protect people against coronavirus infection”, and “restrictions in social life are necessary to limit the spread of SARS-CoV-2”.

The following examples illustrate the permeation in the other direction:

- Priest asks for face masks to be removed. Archdiocese distances itself. <https://www.rp.pl/Koronawirus-SARS-CoV-2/2010-19738-Ksiadz-prosi-o-zdjecie-masek-Archidiecezja-sie-odcina.html> (accessed October 13, 2022);
- Prayer to end the pandemic unites the faithful from across the world. <https://radio.lublin.pl/2020/03/modlitwa-w-intencji-ustania-epidemii-zjednoczy-wiernych-calego-swiata-2/> (accessed March 25, 2022);
- Faith in the time of plague. Coronavirus shows how childish Polish Catholicism is. It is based on superstition and magic. <https://www.newsweek.pl/opinie/wiara-w-czasach-zarazy-koronawirus-pokazuje-ze-polski-katolicyzm-jest-dziecinny/df2p2ze> [www.newsweek.pl](http://www.newsweek.pl) (accessed October 15, 2022);
- Coronavirus. Priest: several friends died. <https://www.tvp.info/50185368/koronawirus-w-polsce-ksiadz-szczerze-o-smierci-znajomych> (accessed October 15, 2022);
- Coronavirus in a Kielce parish. Parishioners are asked to report to the Centre of Disease Control. <https://kielce.wyborcza.pl/kielce/7,47262,26407328,koronawirus-w-kielceckiej-parafii-prosza-zeby-zglaszac-sie-do.html> (accessed October 17, 2022);

- Coronavirus and prayer. Scientists are studying the effects of divine intervention. “A miracle may happen”. <https://tech.wp.pl/koronawirus-a-modlitwa-naukowcy-badaja-efekty-boskiej-interniczego-cud-moze-sie-zdarzyc-6508234130122881a> (accessed October 8, 2022).

On the basis of a simplified quantitative analysis, it can be concluded that religious-focused media shared approximately 60% of the information which appeared in the general media, while the latter published only 5% of the news from Catholic media. What is more, such news appeared as if because it specifically constituted a component of the general discourse on coronavirus (e.g. information about infections in parishes, coronavirus-related deaths of priests and bishops, restrictions on the number of people participating in religious services, and postponing church celebrations).

The research findings are discussed below, in order to provide an insight into how Catholic media used anchoring in the contextual field of coronavirus. This was the starting point for the construction of the individual and/or collective representation of SARS-CoV-2.

#### 4.1. Coronavirus and its equivalents

The most common name used to describe the new virus was *coronavirus*. However, the term SARS-CoV-19 was used in official headlines:

- Regulations have been published changing the conditions for undertaking SARS-CoV-2 test (ND);
- Niedzielski: The regulation on the standard of care for patients infected with SARS-CoV-2 is already in force (N).

The abbreviated form of the full name – the colloquial *korona* or *koronka* appeared rarely:

- Resistance in the time of *korona* (N);
- *Korona* does not scare many parishioners (I).

As already mentioned, the name of the disease, COVID-19, was often misused to describe the virus:

- The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic is a reminder that one of the most important systems in the body is ... (I).

Frequently, coronavirus was placed in the context of two other terms: *epidemic* and *pandemic*:

- How to protect yourself from the coronavirus epidemic? (I);
- On May 14, all religions will pray for an end to the coronavirus pandemic (GN).

The word plague, as it is known from religious language, could in some contexts be considered both the equivalent of coronavirus and the epidemic (pandemic):

- Our Lady of the plague Tuesday (I);
- The Church in times of plague (I).

In the religious press, medical terms known from general reports were used to identify the cause of the pandemic as follows: *coronavirus* (approx. 82% of headlines), *SARS-CoV-19* (10%), *plague* (2%), colloquial *korona* (1%) and *koronka* (1%). Approximately 4% of the articles used the incorrect term *COVID-19*.

#### 4.2. Prayer and Christian deeds as a way to combat coronavirus

From a religious point of view, *prayer* was a natural context in which coronavirus was anchored. In this type of collocation, the name of the virus appeared quite often (approximately 25%). Consequently, several components of its representation can be distinguished. One element would be a general conviction that “prayer can beat coronavirus” or that “prayer is a way for believers to fight coronavirus”:

- Prayer and tonic, or Tanzanian ways to fight Covid (I);
- Cardinals Burke and Sarah on the power of prayer in the face of the coronavirus pandemic (GN);
- Prayer before the Shroud of Turin for the release of humanity from the coronavirus pandemic (N);
- Rosary with the Pope for the end of the pandemic and regaining hope (GN).

The headlines contained numerous appeals and calls to pray for the end of coronavirus:

- Christ is not in quarantine. The president of the US episcopate calls for prayer to the Sacred Heart of Jesus for the end of the coronavirus pandemic (GN);
- # Mercy. At 3p.m., pray the Chaplet of Divine Mercy for the end of the pandemic (GN);
- The Pope calls for prayers for peace and the end to the pandemic in union with Our Lady of Fatima (N);
- Appeal from Jasna Góra Monastery: With supplications, let us plead with God to end coronavirus (ND).

Prayer was to help coronavirus victims who were suffering both physically and mentally:

- Spain: religious orders pray for the victims of the coronavirus pandemic (GN);
- Archbishop Gądecki: I pray for those infected with coronavirus (GN);

- The Pope prayed for those frightened by the coronavirus pandemic (I);
- Pope Francis prayed for those experiencing the consequences of the pandemic (GN).

The headlines also included requests for prayers for certain people infected with coronavirus:

- Coronavirus among Capuchins. Brothers ask for prayer (N);
- Gniezno: The Primate asks for prayers for Bishop Wojtuś, infected with Covid-19 (GN).

In some contexts, prayer as the main element was used together with affective verbs:

- The Pope pleaded for an end to the pandemic (GN),

and the coronavirus was anchored metaphorically, which also added an emotive character to the headlines:

- Pope Francis: We want to respond to the virus pandemic with prayer (GN);
- Lithuania: Prayer Map against Coronavirus (I);
- Prayer attack against the end of the pandemic (N).

Sometimes, instead of the term *prayer*, substitutes were used, which included the names of specific prayers (e.g. novena, entrustment):

- Entrustment to the Divine Mercy in the face of the coronavirus pandemic (I);
- Lourdes: Novena to save the world from coronavirus (I).

Yet another variant was to pray to certain saints:

- Blessed Hanna Chrzanowska – in times of pandemic, people ask her for help (I);
- Coronavirus: Mayor of Venice entrusted the city to Mary in the face of the coronavirus pandemic (GN).

Anchoring coronavirus in contexts containing prayer was a key way for Catholic participants to include components of an overall message such as: “prayer as a tool to fight coronavirus”; “prayer will end the coronavirus pandemic”; “prayer helps coronavirus victims”; into the resource of its social representation. Such mental constructs seem natural for believers. The headlines confirmed the validity of what is obvious to a Catholic during a time of a pandemic – namely that prayer is able to help us overcome the threat of coronavirus, help its victims and, consequently, with divine help, will end the pandemic.



It should be noted that the anchoring of coronavirus in the context of prayer in Internet portals of a general nature did occur occasionally and also, even less frequently, in connection with the strictly religious aspect (the last of the examples below):

- In the face of coronavirus, 40% of students pray. <https://naukawpolsce.pap.pl/aktualnosci/news%2C81367%2Craport-wobec-zagrozenia-koronawirusem-40-proc-studentow-modli-sie.html> (accessed January 2, 2023);
- Coronavirus and prayer. Scientists are studying the effects of divine intervention. “A miracle may happen”. <https://tech.wp.pl/koronawirus-a-modlitwa-naukowcy-badaja-efekty-boskiej-interniczego-cud-moze-sie-zdarzyc-6508234130122881a> (accessed January 1, 2023);
- Coronavirus. The church encourages special prayers. <https://kielce.wyborcza.pl/kielce/7,47262,25779701,koronawirus-kosciol-zacheca-do-specjalnej-modlitwy.html> (accessed December 12, 2022).

An invariant was the development of the context of prayer to include other religious deeds and practices of a merciful or penitential nature, performed in order to seek protection against coronavirus:

- May 14: prayer, fasting and works of mercy for the end of the epidemic (I);
- Due to the coronavirus pandemic, the Franciscans fast for all people (GN);
- Mercy against the pandemic (N).

Placing coronavirus in these type of contextual fields generated components of social representation such as “good Christian deeds can stop coronavirus” or “fasting and mercy will help defeat the virus”.

### 4.3. The Church supporting the fight against coronavirus

A slightly different perspective of the social representation of coronavirus, from the point of view of Catholics, was developed by those contextual fields in which the Church was presented as an institution fighting the pandemic physically. Most of all, there was information about the active participation of people of the Church in helping others – e.g., they would work in hospitals and nursing homes, or assisted physicians and medical staff:

- Nuns and priest working in the nursing home in Bochnia are healthy! (I);
- Radom: Despite Covid-19, chaplains are at the beds of the sick (GN);
- Missionaries on the front lines during the coronavirus pandemic (GN).
- Examples were also given of offering financial and material aid to church institutions. Here, the role of Pope Francis was emphasized: Italian Episcopate allocated EUR 19 million to fight the pandemic (ND);

- Assistance of the papal fund to fight coronavirus continues (I);
- Pope Francis donated two respirators to Ecuador to fight the coronavirus pandemic more effectively (GN);
- Million dollar donations from the archbishop to pandemic victims (GN);
- Respirator for Milicz as part of the #WdzięczniMedykom campaign conducted by Caritas Polska against coronavirus (N).

In this context, the headlines also refer to the help provided generally by the Christian community to representatives of other faiths:

- Pakistani Christians support Muslims during the pandemic (I),

and to spiritual assistance initiated by the Church:

- Coronavirus in Mexico: The Church promotes neighborhood support networks in parishes (GN).

Placing coronavirus in this type of context allowed components such as “The Church supports people in the fight against coronavirus”, “The Church is an institution that is helpful in overcoming the effects of the coronavirus pandemic” to be included in its social representation. This component of the social representation is illustrated by the following affective heading and article excerpt:

- The Church in the fight against the coronavirus. Once again the Church is equal to the task: it does not divide people into believers and non-believers; it does not ask about their views but is there when they need it (N).

#### **4.4. Coronavirus obstructs religious practices**

One of the key threats for believers was the obstruction of religious practices by coronavirus (including the temporary closing of churches, bans on religious services, or reductions in the number of Mass attendees):

- Vatican: for the first time in history, an ‘Angelus’ Sunday without the participation of the faithful because of the coronavirus (GN);
- Italy: the faithful excluded from Holy Mass – coronavirus (I).

There were warnings that in some places around the world coronavirus could even cause the permanent closure of churches:

- Coronavirus as an excuse to close churches after the pandemic? (I).

### Coronavirus became a threat to religious rituals:

- What about First Communions? General Curia issues announcements regarding the organisation of the First Holy Communions during the pandemic (I).

In the initial stage of the pandemic, both clergy and lay people, despite dangers reported in the media, expressed their concern and protest against restrictions regarding the organisation of religious practices:

- Prof. Andrea Riccardi criticises church closures due to coronavirus (I);
- Archbishop Depo opposes church closings due to coronavirus (I).

These ways of anchoring coronavirus created social representations that provide a clear message: it “hinders religious practices in almost every dimension”. However, the strict order to apply sanitary recommendations raised doubts and protests. Here, one can speak about the rare polemic nature of the opinions of members of the Catholic community. Thus, an additional component of this representation can be distinguished: “the coronavirus pandemic must not prevent the cultivation of traditional forms of religious practice”. This last component complemented the representations of extreme and conservative Catholics many of whom believe absence during a Sunday Mass is a sin. At the same time, this raised a particular issue as to whether, if religious practices were relaxed, it would be more difficult to continue them after the pandemic was over<sup>4</sup>. For this reason, the following calls could be heard:

- President of the Episcopate: the pandemic cannot stop us from participating in Holy Mass. (I);
- Let us not isolate ourselves from God during the Coronavirus (N).

Permitting absence from Mass due to the threat of coronavirus was signaled in numerous collocations by the term *dispensation* – a special permission from the Church to not perform certain religious practices:

- Dispensation in the Tarnów diocese in connection with coronavirus (GN);
- Archbishop Budzik grants dispensation not to attend Mass due to the epidemic (N);
- Decree on the dispensation of Bishop Marek Mendyk in connection with the growing number of people infected with the coronavirus (N).

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<sup>4</sup> This was indicated in articles in the Catholic press, e.g., How does coronavirus affect Polish religiosity? It is not yet known how long the restriction of public worship will continue. Regardless of this, the question now arises as to whether the continuation of the pandemic threat and refraining from participation in the Sunday Mass will have a lasting impact on religious practices after the threat has passed – this is one of the questions posed in the analysis of the Institute of Statistics of the Catholic Church on the impact of the coronavirus on Polish religiosity (GN).

It seems that *dispensation*, usually quite rarely applied and probably not fully understood by many of the faithful, was included into the lexical resource of Catholics as a synonym for justifying absence during Mass; it thus developed their resource of social representation of coronavirus which “exempts them from this obligation”.

There was controversy – both among the faithful and the clergy – regarding the reception of Holy Communion during the pandemic with the hand instead of the mouth (both forms are acceptable by the Church). The headlines anchored coronavirus also in this context:

- First Communion only in the hand and the use of holy water is forbidden. The Church in Hong Kong has issued new regulations to prevent and protect churches and parishes from coronavirus (GN);
- Liturgical Commission of the Episcopate: Communion in the hand is not a profanation! (GN).

This provoked controversial judgements in the context of campaigns against allowing Holy Communion in the hand, and this criticism was prevalent in official messages and commentaries of Church officials:

- God does not detest my hands. The campaign “Stop Holy Communion in the hand” led by the Piotr Skarga Christian Culture Association and the websites supporting it is harmful, manipulative and confuses the minds of the faithful (I);
- The controversial campaign “‘STOP Holy Communion in the hand’. It is impossible to desecrate Holy Communion unknowingly, and the tongue is just as worthy as the hands to receive it. Stop the fake news in the field of theology! – writes a secular philosopher involved in the life of the Church. <https://deon.pl/kosciol/kontrowersjska-akcja-stop-komunii-swiatej-na-reke-sa-pierwsze-komarzenia,1006332> (accessed October 12, 2022).

The entire discussion moved to general Internet portals,

- Billboards in Rzeszów: “Stop Holy Communion in the hand!”. Who is behind it: those who deny the pandemic or ultra-Catholics? <https://rzeszow.wyborcza.pl/rzeszow/7,34962,26397970,stop-komunii-swiatej-na-reke-grzmi-napis-na-billboardach.html> (accessed October 12, 2022);

as well as other areas of the Internet. The following heading illustrates the stance of both parties:

- First Communion in the hand – rescue from the “coronavirus pandemic” or the defeat of the Church? <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3V7E0w0m0xo> (accessed October 12, 2022).

The above fields, where coronavirus was located, made possible the creation of the following associations: coronavirus is “an excuse for absence during obligatory Mass as stated in the dispensation”; “prevents the fulfilment of duties by the faithful”;

“is an understandable reason for cancelling even the most important religious events”; “allows changes to be made in traditional rituals, such as receiving Holy Communion in the hand”.

In the context of religious practices, the way they are participated in and celebrated in the time of coronavirus led to the formation of contradictory opinions among Church officials, especially at the beginning of the pandemic, and those of the faithful who opposed the liberalization of canon regulations. Currently, however, prohibitions and restrictions are rarely questioned because of the large number of the clergy and lay people infected with the coronavirus during religious practices. These experiences led the Catholic clergy to join the group of those encouraging compliance with the rules protecting against coronavirus infection:

- Call of the President of the Polish Episcopal Conference for compliance with sanitary recommendations during the coronavirus pandemic (I).

#### 4.5. Living as Christians in times of trial

Important metaphysical questions were anchored in article headlines in connection with the pandemic. They concerned selected aspects of the spiritual life of believers, such as, for example, the stability of faith in the face of death, or ways of dealing with misfortunes caused by the pandemic. Some of the main associations occurring in the contextual fields are listed below. The coronavirus pandemic:

a) is a trial of faith for Catholics and the need to follow Christ:

- The pandemic is for us an examination in faith (I);
- Deputy-Rector of John Paul II University: during the pandemic, Christians follow the Good Shepherd (N);
- Religion is needed when coronavirus attacks (N).

b) Reveals the weak foundations of worldly life:

- Bishop Kamiński: the coronavirus pandemic reveals the fragility of life and temporal security (I).

c) Encourages us to submit to God’s will:

- Fr professor Pawlina: maybe the present time is the time of humility for all of us (GN).

d) Should make a Catholic accept suffering:

- Archbishop Gądecki: the pandemic reminds us of the gospel of suffering (N);

- People who suffer with Christ, including those affected by the pandemic, are writing a great chapter of the gospel of suffering (N).

There were also some questions as to whether coronavirus was “God’s punishment”:

- The pandemic continues. Have we been punished? (N);
- The question must be asked: What is the significance of the virus pandemic from the perspective of God’s will? (N);
- Coronavirus Outbreak – God’s Punishment? (I);
- Is coronavirus a punishment from God? (ND);
- Coronavirus as a punishment for sins? Salesians explain (GN).

The above examples of the placement of coronavirus emerged in various individual contexts. They can be generally summed up with phrases like: “a pandemic is a kind of trial for believers” or “coronavirus is a catalyst for difficult questions about the foundations of faith”. The only thematic regularity was related to the question “Is coronavirus an act of God?”. The question mark at the end of the sentence would indicate the fear of stating such a fact directly, as illustrated in the following excerpt:

- What does the Father answer to those who ask about the coronavirus pandemic? That this is God’s punishment, God’s act. Or maybe it is better not to involve God in it (I).

#### **4.6. Coronavirus leads to new means of communication in the Church**

An interesting aspect of the pandemic was the acceptance of religious practices in digital media by the clergy and believers. Coronavirus was often anchored in the fields related to online communication:

- The Church in the face of a pandemic – on-line prayer (I);
- Online adoration in a time of pandemic? Fr. Jacek Grzybowski (I);
- Is adoration of the Blessed Sacrament possible online through live broadcast? (GN);
- Pandemic-induced isolation is to help use digital media (N);
- Online Easter Without Borders during Coronavirus (I);
- On-line youth retreat. The prevailing coronavirus pandemic will not prevent young people from participating in the May retreat! (N).

Therefore, the social representation of coronavirus should include the following components: “the coronavirus pandemic digitizes the universal Church”, “coronavirus dynamically develops the reach of prayer including digital space”.

#### 4.7. Coronavirus as an invitation for change

In addition to the dilemmas, fears and anxieties described above, many coronavirus headlines were associated with unpleasant phenomena that might lead to a change for the better. The virus was placed in the contexts of *chance*, *hope* and *benefit*:

- Pope Francis: Struggling with Coronavirus as a Chance to End Injustice (I);
- The Pope in an interview for “The Tablet”: let us not waste the present chance for conversion (GN);
- Let us straighten our paths. How to take advantage of the current Covid-19 pandemic? (N);
- Blessed crisis? How to take advantage of the pandemic (N);
- Chaldean Patriarch: the Coronavirus pandemic “a chance for awakening” for humanity (GN).

Some positive changes were seen as the result of the pandemic:

- Cardinal Krajewski: Coronavirus makes us support life (GN);
- New vocations as a result of the epidemic? Interview by Anna Bandura (N).

The pandemic was presented as an opportunity to deepen one’s faith:

- Bishop Kamiński: May the difficult time of the pandemic strengthen our faith (I).

The social representation of coronavirus was thus expanded to include positive aspects such as: “the pandemic offers hope for change for the better”, “coronavirus is an opportunity to change the modern world”. In the whole negative picture of the coronavirus, it was a truly Christian view, illustrated by the almost oxymoronic expression *blessed crisis*.

#### 4.8. Objectification as a source of components of social representations of coronavirus

Moscovici (2000:51) argued that objectification makes it possible to materialize ideas, phenomena and objects as images. Coronavirus, as an entity which exists in reality but remains imperceptible and invisible to the naked eye, was presented in the form of magnified microscopic photographs. Thanks to them, its effects were visualized, which in turn widened the contextual field of its social representation.

In general Internet portals, the key image illustrating the pandemic included a person wearing a face mask. Sometimes, hand sanitizers were used to illustrate the need to

protect oneself against infection. The hope of inventing a vaccine against coronavirus was visualized by a picture of a scientist working in a laboratory, using a microscope and syringe.

In the religious press, there were photographs featuring a clergyman wearing a face mask, visor, or protective gear.

Information about the effects of coronavirus was often accompanied by photographs of empty churches, whereas articles related to the question of faith and prayers for the end of the pandemic were illustrated with photographs of people praying, or Catholic attributes: the cross, prayer books or the rosary.

It can be concluded that objectification in the religious press developed the following components of the social representation of coronavirus: “rules of protection against coronavirus apply to all”, “prayer is the hope for salvation from the pandemic”, “coronavirus restricts religious practice”.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

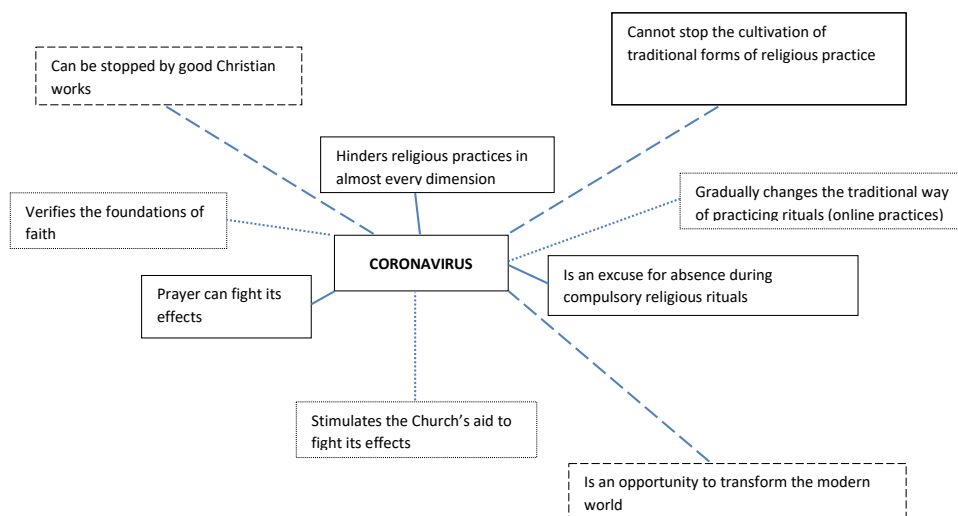
In the general media, coronavirus was anchored in contexts which: presented its features and properties as an entity (e.g. the specific coronavirus SARS-CoV-2 that causes COVID-19); indicated a threat to health and life (e.g. an infection may cause the loss of smell and taste); informed people about the government’s protective measures and policy towards the pandemic (e.g. after reaching a certain level of infection, the government will introduce lockdown measures and impose quarantine on those who are infected); provided data on the number of cases and deaths from COVID-19 (e.g. 20,000 infections and 500 deaths were recorded today); described the impact of the pandemic on various sectors of the economy and its employees (e.g. shopping malls and schools will be closed until Monday); and presented the restrictions resulting from the risk of infection (e.g. wearing a face mask in a shop); and methods of treating the sick (e.g. hand sanitization is indispensable); as well as various virus-related effects (e.g. online education for school children and university students). This perspective was reproduced in the content of religious portals. However, there was also a different perspective on coronavirus presented there, from the provenance of faith.

Based on the analysis of a corpus of the contextual fields of over two thousand headlines excerpted from Catholic periodicals in Poland, this article has characterized the contextual fields in which the examined object was placed. The object was usually marked by the term *coronavirus*, and its equivalents included: *SARS-CoV-2*, *plague*, *korona*, *koronka* and the incorrect name of *COVID-19*. Coronavirus also became a component of repetitive phrases: *coronavirus pandemic/epidemic*, and the *time of coronavirus* (e.g. “in the time of coronavirus there are more deaths”).

Following the analysis of the contextual fields of the headlines, a simplified map of the generalized components used in the Polish Catholic press was developed, to make up the social representation of coronavirus. For better clarity, some components were



combined into one element on the basis of semantic synonymy (e.g. explanations such as “prayer can defeat coronavirus”, “prayer is the believers’ way to fight coronavirus”, “prayer is a tool to fight coronavirus”, and “prayer will help end the coronavirus pandemic” were unified as “coronavirus and its effects can be combated by prayer”). The highest frequency components (each of them constituted between 13 to 15% of the set of excerpts) were connected with a solid line, whereas a dotted line was used for those of lower frequency (between 9 to 12%), with a broken line representing the lowest frequency components (between 6 to 8%). The remaining components were not included.



*Diagram 1.* Components of the social representation of coronavirus based on headlines from the Polish Catholic press (own study).

Catholic religious Internet portals significantly expanded the social representation of coronavirus, including the aspect related to faith, and this was a lens through which the pandemic was perceived. There were components typical of Christian beliefs and practices: prayer as the solution for misfortune, turning to God in times of crises, concern about performing religious rituals or finding the potential for change in the time of a pandemic.

Such a source of social representation was discussed in Internet forums and the opinions and judgements formulated allowed it to expand. One of the components of this social representation, seemingly irrational in the context of information about the dramatic effects of SARS-CoV-2 was “coronavirus does not really exist, it is just fake news”, “patients with COVID-19 in hospitals are film extras”. The common-sense cognitive picture of coronavirus is highly complex and is still developing.

## SOURCES

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 “Idziemy.pl” (I) – <http://idziemy.pl/>  
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## Spoleczna reprezentacja koronawirusa w polskiej prasie katolickiej

Słowa kluczowe: reprezentacja społeczna, teoria reprezentacji społecznych, koronawirus, polska prasa katolicka.

### STRESZCZENIE

W artykule omówiono składniki reprezentacji społecznej koronawirusa, opracowane na podstawie tytułów w najważniejszych periodykach religijnych w Polsce. Obiekt badań jest obecnie jednym z najczęściej opisywanych i komentowanych zjawisk w przestrzeni cyfrowej. Oprócz wizerunku kognitywnego SARS-CoV-2, konstruowanego w portalach mainstreamowych, jego interesującym uzupełnieniem stanowi część wytwarzana przez media katolickie. Religijne portale katolickie w istotny sposób poszerzały zakres reprezentacji społecznej koronawirusa o aspekt związany z wiarą, przez pryzmat której postrzegano pandemię. Pojawiły się w niej składniki typowe dla przekonań i praktyk chrześcijanina: modlitwa jako odium na nieszczęście, odwołanie się do Boga w czasie kryzysu, troska o możliwość odprawiania rytuałów, dostrzeganie potencji zmiany w dobie kryzysu itp. Taki zasób reprezentacji społecznej poddawano dyskusjom na forach, czatach, formułowano w związku z tym kolejne opinie, sądy, pozwalające ją wzbogacać. Na podstawie analiz kontekstów kotwiczenia nominacji *koronawirus* wyodrębniono uogólnione elementy jego reprezentacji społecznej, m.in.: „koronawirus utrudnia uczestnictwo w praktykach religijnych”; „koronawirus jest szansą dla ludzkości”; „modlitwa stanowi odium na pandemię koronawirusa”. Tego typu sposoby postrzegania koronawirusa stanowiły dla znaczącej katolickiej części polskiego społeczeństwa asumpt do formułowania własnych opinii na temat tego obiektu w przestrzeni cyfrowej oraz realnej. Stawały się one determinantami podejmowania określonych działań lub ich zaniechania, a także wywoływały polemiczne sądy.