

**Screening Piety, Invoking Fervour:  
The Strange Case of Italy's Televised Mass**

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**Abstract**

This paper discusses the television broadcasting of Catholic Masses in Italy today from an interdisciplinary perspective that integrates theology with religion and media studies as well as television studies. After a brief overview of the history of television broadcasting of the Mass and a discussion of its rapid theological acceptance, the paper analyzes the unique success and “proliferation” of televised Masses in Italy. Looking at some of the common characteristics of televised Masses across Italian broadcasting channels, the paper concludes with a reflection on the specificity of (televised) Mass as a ritual action.

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## Introduction

The question concerning the television broadcasting of the Mass has long ceased to worry Christian Catholic theology, which is by now much more attracted by issues connected to the use of newer media. However, as unfashionable as the topic may seem, some unresolved questions about Mass on television are still worth considering, and not only because this issue is making headlines again with the increasing availability on the internet of televised Mass and other church services. On a more fundamental level, these questions offer a useful opportunity to reassess the problem of the relationship between Christian faith and its mediatization, intended here as a process of reforming and re-understanding some practices characteristic of the Catholic faith “according to the needs, structures, processes, logics, or interests of media institutions” (Rothenbuhler, 2009a, p. 289). Rather than mere instruments, media, and specifically television, have to be seen as part of the cultural environment within which we constantly negotiate our religious practices and identities, and as providing important symbolic resources to those negotiations (Hoover, 2006, p. 75).

It is with this interpretive framework in mind that the above-mentioned and still open questions on televised Mass can be addressed today. They involve questions relevant to both theology and media studies. From a theological point of view, the central questions revolve around television’s ability to preserve the specificity of what is liturgically celebrated in the Mass; from the perspective of media studies, the question is mainly about the “nature” or quality of the audience’s participation in a televised Mass. These questions cannot be separated and require an interdisciplinary approach, which raises its own methodological difficulties.

The academic bibliography concerning the televised Mass, in addition to being short, suffers from the limitations common to inter-disciplinary thought. On the one hand, a media studies approach may not take into account the liturgical and sacramental quality of the Mass and tend to consider its broadcasting like any other media event. There is value to this approach because broadcast Mass shares a number of features and characteristics with other media events: it is a pre-

planned event organized independently from the media and broadcast live from a remote location (Rothenbuhler 2009b, p. 61), and it is an event that has a predictable dramaturgy condensed in time and space with a dominant verbal element and a high degree of rhetoric required to involve the audience (Dayan and Katz, 1992). On the other hand a theological approach may tend to emphasize the uniqueness of the Mass to the point of making any comparison with other media events difficult. Moreover theologians are sometimes insensitive to the fact that television broadcasting, even if live, implies the production of a “text” with its own syntax.

Despite these challenges, this paper uses an interdisciplinary approach to discuss the broadcasting of Catholic Masses in Italy today. In the first, introductory part, I briefly look at the history of the television broadcasting of the Catholic Mass and its relatively unproblematic acceptance, which raises the question, explicitly posed by Derrida, about the possibility of considering Catholic worship itself as a media (spectacular) event. In the second part I will examine the specific case of the broadcasting of Catholic Masses in Italian television, which brings to light some paradoxical aspects of the Italian media system and reflects the quasi-monopolistic position of the Catholic Church in Italy compared to that of any other religious confession. In the third part I will offer some elements for a tentative analysis of the televised Sunday Mass produced and broadcast by the main Italian television networks. Borrowing the language of discourse analysis, one may say that the first part defines what can be considered the (theological) “pre-text” for the analysis, while the second part establishes the (sociocultural and religious) “context” of the analysis, and the third part forms the study of a set of (audiovisual) “texts” to uncover some specific characteristics of Italy’s televised Catholic Mass today.

### **PRE-TEXT / A holy alliance between Mass and television?**

In the earliest official documents of the Catholic Church concerning the media broadcasting of the Mass, radio and television are evaluated differently. Apart from some moral concerns expressed by Pope Pius XI in his Encyclical Letter *Divini Illius Magistri* (Pius XI, 1929), the Church viewed the technological possibilities offered by radio positively (Groupe Mediatech 1990, pp. 41-42) and Catholic radio stations were quickly created. The Katholieke Radio Omroep in the Netherlands started broadcasting in 1925 and Vatican Radio was inaugurated with a papal radio message on February 12, 1931 (Pius XI, 1931). During the second half of the 1920s a number of requests were made from different parts of the Church in order to obtain the permission to broadcast High Masses on radio (Groupe Mediathec 1990, 43). Despite the Vatican's generally favourable attitude toward radio, the answer was negative and categorical: Eucharistic celebrations and all their components, even liturgical songs, were not to be broadcast or recorded by communication media such as the radio or the cinematograph. According to the Holy Office any such broadcasting had to be considered as an abuse (Baragli, 1973, p. 451).

A quarter of a century later, the same requests were presented with regards to television. But in this case, starting with the first statement of Pius XII, a completely different attitude emerges. Now, the broadcasting of Mass on television is considered acceptable and useful. In a speech broadcast by French television on 17 April 1949 following the broadcasting of the first Mass of a newly ordained priest, the Pope said:

“The world has been told that religion was declining, and, thanks to this new marvel, the world will see the grandiose triumphs of the blessed Sacrament and of the Virgin Mary; it has been told that the papacy was dead or dying, and the world will see the crowds flow beyond the sides of the immense St. Peter's Square in order to receive the papal blessing and to listen to his word; it has been said that the Church did not count anymore, and the world will see the Church, persecuted or glorious, but everywhere alive” (Groupe Mediathec, 1990, p. 106, all translation are mine unless otherwise noted).

The first Masses were broadcast at Christmas 1948 in Paris and New York, only a few months before this speech, in which Pius XII shows no doubt that this emerging practice is an advantageous one. The phrase “the world will see” underlines his conviction in a rhetorical crescendo. What matters for him is not to offer the believers more opportunities to access services, but to demonstrate to everybody how vital the Church is and its unchanged ability to attract the masses. Cardinal Suhard, who celebrated the Christmas Mass of 1948 telecasted from Notre-Dame cathedral in Paris, concluded his sermon with similar enthusiasm: “We thank you, God, for having raised [...] this new technology to spread the Gospel of your Son!” (Groupe Médiathec, 1990, p. 105).

Following these events, in 1950s and 1960s, the question of the acceptability and value of televised Mass animated a new theological debate. Karl Rahner’s very critical position is especially noteworthy. According to Rahner, the sacramental character of the Mass celebration demands a respectful attitude that the television cameras cannot ensure. Exposing the Eucharist to outsiders via broadcasting, in his perspective, risks turning viewers into voyeurs. That television makes it possible for sick people to attend Mass was too weak a justification for Rahner. For him “the Mass is one of those things that is inconvenient to offer as a spectacle to anybody” (Rahner, 1959, p. 189, translation from German is mine). He evokes the “discipline of the arcane”, the specific rule of silence intended by ecclesiastical writers of Christian antiquity as an essential measure to save religious praxis from profanation. Such discipline, Rahner claims, is still important today, because the sacraments never address an undefined, general public as television does (Rahner, 1959, p. 190). Rahner emphasised the distinction between the sacred and the profane, and between the original and the copy, and asserted that every televised event is a copy and thus belonging entirely into the field of the profane.

Johann Baptist Metz reiterated Rahner’s main argument in an essay published in 1993 titled, warningly, “The Electronic Trap”. Metz grants that the Eucharist does have a public dimension, but calls into question the identification of such a “public” with the television audience, an audience

considered inevitably subject to the logic of consumption, and consequently incompatible with religious worship (Metz, 1993). Rahner and Metz's caveats do not lack theological cogency, but have been completely ineffective due to the rapid spread (and popularity) of televised Mass as one of the first television programs to be broadcast regularly in countries like France, Italy or the Netherlands (Pavanello, 2002, p. 255). Their argument, to which I will return in my conclusion, would require not just a reconsideration of the practice of televised Mass, but, as Leomar A. Brustolin observes, "a revision of all the celebrative practice of the Church today" together with "a new attitude towards ecclesiology" (Brustolin, 2012, p. 325) in order to reassess the relationships between the Church and the world.

Today, the question of the legitimacy of telecast Masses does not seem to arise anymore. The community of Catholic theologians seems to agree with what Hans Bernhard Meyer wrote in 1986: in the case of televised Mass, "a real participation going beyond the mere intention [of the viewer] is made possible also without the physical presence in the place of the event" (Meyer, 1986, p. 140). Watching the Eucharist on television has therefore the liturgical qualities needed to qualify for some "real participation". Theologians occasionally return to the argument, almost always in the context of practical theology, reflecting about the ways and conditions of something they consider a positive and indisputable tenet (Schilson, 2004). This latter can be still expressed with the words of practical theologian Ottmar Fuchs. According to Fuchs, the liturgical reality made public by broadcasting the celebration does not necessarily imply "the destruction of the mystery, but can also manifest its attractiveness" (Fuchs, 1994, p. 637).

How can we explain this quick and unproblematic approval of televised Masses in the Catholic Church? Does it have any relationship with the fact that the Church understands the liturgy of the Mass in a way that is similar to the way in which television understands itself and its potential as a broadcast medium? According to a classic thesis in media studies, "the only reality which can compete with a media event is another media event" (Dayan and Katz, 1992, p. 90). Hence the

efficacy of the sacrament in Catholic theology may be understood as the efficacy of the mediation that the sacrament itself represents. In other words, the sacramental efficacy is not a mere gift of a supernatural agency but rather the result of a whole process of mediation and transformation in which one is incorporated when taking part in the rite. Marshall McLuhan's famous formula, "the medium is the message" (McLuhan 1964, p. 9), offers here a possible key for interpreting sacraments. It suggests that we should define sacraments and their celebration as "media events". This approach to sacramental theology resonates with the concept of mediation that informs recent works on religion and media, strongly influenced by the cultural turn in media studies. Media are understood as producing belief and effecting the sacred or transcendent (de Vries and Weber, 2001; Hoover, 2006). The media's propensity "to erase themselves in the act of mediation" (Krämer, 2008, p. 9) also perfectly fits the Catholic understanding of the sacraments.

A similar argument can be found in one of Jacques Derrida's later texts. The French philosopher claims that the relationship between Christianity and television is much stronger than that between television and other religions. Derrida advances this thesis in an almost offhand way, but his remarks are nevertheless interesting. Of course, he notes that other religions also use television in an extensive and professional way, but their broadcasts consist in footage of a speech, a teaching, or a discussion, not of events. During Catholic Mass, on the contrary, the thing itself, the event, happens in front of the television camera: "the Christian religion is the only one in which prayers are not only filmed or photographed, as in other religions, but where prayer itself partakes of the act and process of photography or of filming. One doesn't simply film someone praying, like Moslems or Jews praying without looking at the camera; one prays into a microphone and the prayer is staged for the camera" (Derrida, 2001, p. 76).

Derrida is wrong to say that Christianity is the only religion with this approach to religion and media. Muslim groups like the Ahmadi heavily use television and online streaming video to promote their vision of Islam, and broadcast mosque sermons complete with the introductory and

concluding prayers which are staged (also) for the camera. Even if the Ahmadiyya Movement is considered a sect by the majority of Muslims, with millions of followers around the world it is still a relevant and noteworthy religious community.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, Derrida's assertion remains interesting. The French philosopher correlates the Catholic acceptance of filming and broadcasting the intimacy of worship with the dogma of the Incarnation in which God becomes visible in Jesus Christ "by the Holy Ghost" (Derrida, 2001, p. 61). An incarnation by means of the Ghost, or of the Spirit, as attested by the Christian Credo, is precisely "a spiritual incarnation" and therefore a "spectralization" (ibidem). It is on the basis of this incarnation/spectralization, Derrida concludes, that one can speak about an "intimate complicity", a co-belonging of Christianity and media.

This communality is fully realized in televised Mass, a mediation of the sacred that brings together live recording/broadcasting and the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist. Live broadcasting guarantees the immediacy of the images; the Eucharistic presence certifies in turn that the content of these images has a sacramental value that makes them, for television viewers, the point of maximum concentration of the sacred. The two levels support each other: the live television images look "real", the real presence appears "live". The connection between the two is so prominent that, at the time of the first televised Masses, even Catholic theologians in favor of this practice had considered fully unacceptable the broadcasting of *recorded* television Masses. French liturgist Aimon-Marie Roguet wrote for example: "when I watch a televised Mass, the reflection of the host that I am seeing is produced by a real host, and is by consequence related to the real presence. That is why we should never accept the telecasting of a recorded Mass" where, on the contrary, "the image [of the host] we are seeing does no longer correspond to any real presence" (Roguet, 1954, p. 34). The "host" referred to here is the bread used during Mass. Despite ecclesiastical preoccupations, the broadcasting of recorded Masses became a rather common practice (Lever, 1995, p. 76) because it was less expensive, but even today it is often regarded as

“misleading” (Italian Episcopal Conference, 2004) by the authorities of the Catholic Church because of its disruption of the event’s immediacy.

The teaching of the Catholic Church does not consider watching a television Mass as the fulfillment of the obligation of every Catholic to attend Mass each Sunday, an obligation which requires participation in the faithful assembly gathered in one place, where the Eucharist can be received (Pius XII, 1957; John Paul II, 1998). This restriction, of which the viewer was reminded before the beginning of any televised Mass in the past, works at the level of obligations but remains ineffectual at the level of symbols and meanings exactly because of the tight connection between the immediacy of the media event and the realism of the sacramental celebration.

### **CONTEXT / The Italian proliferation of televised Masses**

A general survey of European television shows that religious expression in the media is differentiated and conditioned by national history, ranging from (more or less) strict religious neutrality to positions of objective privilege granted to a specific religious group. In Italy, media presence strongly promotes a formerly official religious denomination, which was state religion until the 1984 revision of the Concordat with the Catholic Church. Here, the Italian situation is similar to other countries such as Greece, which only grants airtime to the national Orthodox Autocephalous Church, or Poland and Portugal, where public television reserves considerable airtime for the Catholic Church and only Catholic Masses are broadcast (Guyot, 2009, p. 141). But in the majority of European countries the television broadcasting of religious services, if provided, is regulated by the criterion of representativeness or by the criterion of equal treatment to different denominations.

Notwithstanding these differences, since the early 1970s, under the pressure of secularization, most broadcasting studios in Europe abandoned the model of broadcasting a great and solemn Mass

and new solutions were found, different for each national context. In France attention was paid to alternating the contexts of celebration (parish Masses, monastic Masses, young people's Masses, Masses in hospital's or prison's chapels). The sermon was (and still is) not delivered by the priest who is celebrating but by priests specifically trained for television (Bianchi, 1992). In Holland, a sort of "television parish" was created, with the same priests regularly presiding over the liturgy in the same church and about half of the broadcasted celebrations throughout the year came from this parish (Ter Steeg, 1991). In Germany, where a long struggle for television Masses preceded the first broadcasts, the public station ZDF alternates between the broadcasting of Catholic and Protestant Sunday morning service. The Catholic parish communities chosen for television broadcasting have to fulfill certain tasks and duties such as the formation of a group of ministers who bring the Eucharist to the sick and elderly and the organization of a telephone and mail answering service for television audience (Sanders, 1986; Bianchi, 1992, p. 531). In Switzerland, too, television broadcasting alternates between Catholic and Protestant services. The three national languages and regions are featured on a regular basis, too, and broadcasting considers different socio-cultural backgrounds through the alternation of urban, rural or Alpine contexts for celebration (Koller, 1978).

In Italy, the situation is quite different. The weekly broadcasting of the Catholic Mass has maintained good ratings, and their market share throughout the transformations in the television landscape (Lever 1995, p. 80), from the epoch of the state television monopoly to the epoch of what Umberto Eco has called the "neo-television" (Eco, 1983, pp. 163-179), characterized by the incoming of private networks at the beginning of the 1980s. Italian society and television changed profoundly during these years, but the Mass broadcasted every Sunday morning remained a staple of the media landscape and the Italian socio-cultural context since Raiuno started broadcasting Catholic Masses on television in 1954.

There are many possible reasons that explain the unchanged permanence of a traditional model of televised Mass. The main reason is probably that Rai, the state broadcaster, is based in Rome, where the influence of the Vatican is often considered to be greatest. Communication about religious topics via the radio and television system in Italy has always been Vatican-centered (Ruffinengo, 2006). One should not be surprised if, in particular, the telecasting of the Mass, considered by Catholics to be the center of Christian life, is under some form of control by the Vatican or episcopal authorities. In the early 1980s, secularization and the liberalization of the Italian television market could have provided an opportunity for change, but the influential presence of John Paul II on the papal throne and the important role he decided to play in the Italian public sphere led to the unexpected consequence (among others) of affirming the success of the traditional solemn televised Mass. The solemnity of the tone even increased, because the reference point for broadcasting became that of the papal Mass, regularly broadcast by public television on occasions of papal pastoral visits to the Roman parishes and during national and international travels of the Pope, exploiting his growing communicative appeal (Ruffinengo, 2006, p. 109).

The relative success and the undoubted prestige of the televised Mass have led other networks to enter the field, for both religious and commercial reasons. First to arrive was Telepace, a Catholic regional network based in the area of Verona. Telepace's first broadcast was a black and white report of John Paul II's pastoral journey to Poland in June 1979 (Stirelli, 1997, p. 137). The network now provides 24-hour broadcasts of religious programs including worship, meditations, rosaries and religious news programmes. The origin of Telepace is similar to that of other Italian local networks driven by a passionate belief in the possibility of proselytizing via the media. What ensured this devotional and militant network's unique success was the choice to acquire professional and technical resources for live broadcasting. This is also what allows Telepace to broadcast televised Masses. Telepace initially reached a local audience but soon expanded its coverage by placing communication towers in Rome and Agrigento (Sicily) and taking over other Catholic television

networks, such as TeleLodi, a diocesan television station broadcasting in the region of Milan (Stirelli, 1997, p. 152). Taking advantage of John Paul II's affection and esteem (Stirelli, 1997, pp. 17-20), Telepace was allowed in 1985 to officially follow the Pope's international travels together with the main international television channels. In 1990, Telepace also started to broadcast the live papal Mass regularly as well as recordings of the Sunday Angelus and the Pope's general audiences made available by the Vatican Television Center. In 1996, the network launched satellite broadcasting, reaching audiences in Europe, the Middle East and parts of Africa. Today, Telepace is a television syndicate with more than fifty affiliated local television stations, regularly broadcasting the papal Mass via both satellite and terrestrial digital transmission systems.

After Telepace, Rete 4 entered the market, a popular entertainment channel belonging to the media giant Fininvest/Mediaset, owned by Silvio Berlusconi. During the 1980s, immediately after the liberalization of Italian television, Fininvest had grown from a single local television station in Milan to become one of the largest media holdings in Europe. The channel Rete 4 has traditionally focused on a predominantly elderly and female audience (Hibberd and Sorrentino, 2007, p. 245) and decided to broadcast Sunday Mass in September 1996 with the aim to gain a reputation for being a family television network with a more "serious" profile. Rete 4's Mass is broadcast on Sunday mornings a little earlier than Mass on Raiuno in a clear attempt to attract a part of their audience.

Raiuno, Telepace and Rete 4 broadcast Masses nationwide every Sunday and on other days of obligation, in addition to the Sunday Masses broadcasted by small regional television networks. What, then, are the reasons for this proliferation of televised Masses, unparalleled in western European countries? Televised Mass in Italy is able to capture a large audience share in a very particular time slot on Sunday morning (from 10 to 12 a.m.). In the early 1990s, when Raiuno telecast the "only" Sunday Mass in Italy, the share, i.e. the percentage of in-use televisions tuned to the programme, reached between 35 and 39%, with an average audience of two million viewers

(Lever, 1995, p. 80). At the end of the same decade, in 1999, the Sunday Masses broadcast in the same time slot by Raiuno and Rete 4 reached together an average audience of 2.5 million viewers, which rose to 2.7 million the following year as a result of the Great Jubilee of 2000 (Martelli, 2004, p. 159). Today, according to data provided by Auditel, the Italian audience measurement company, and made public by different internet blogs, Raiuno's televised Mass regularly gets close to a 20% share with an average estimated audience of 1.9 million, while Rete 4's Mass reaches between 9 and 11% share, with an average audience of about 850,000. The persistent success of Italy's televised Masses in terms of audience is without comparison in western Europe, even though the general demand for religious broadcasting has increased in recent years. In other countries, too, for example in Germany, Sunday Mass seems to reach a larger audience today compared to when Mass broadcasts started in 1986 (Lever, 2012), perhaps because a significant part of the Catholic population is now elderly and no longer able to go to church.

There are also financial and promotional motives for broadcasting the Mass. Despite requiring a high level of professionalism, the production of a televised Mass is less cost intensive than other events that are broadcast live, because it is situated in a very specific space and its execution is easily predictable. It also provides a certain prestige to the producer. From this point of view the Mass represents a strategic investment. Its broadcasting can help redeem a channel like Rete 4 in the eyes of the most traditional part of the Italian audience, even though Rete 4 devotes a large part of its broadcasting to gossip programs and quiz shows filled with scantily-clad dancers. Rete 4 also adopts a questionable political stance, slanting its news coverage in favor of Berlusconi's political agenda, and the channel has also been involved in a long court case about the monopolization of television frequencies by the Mediaset group<sup>2</sup>. These are all good reasons for including a more ethical programme window.

Although the Masses broadcast by Raiuno, Mediaset's Rete 4 and Telepace are in competition in the same television market, their format is curiously similar: a popular, chanted Mass, with strong

congregational participation, liturgically irreproachable and solemn. Most likely, the reason for this is the homogenization of programming output due to the current lack of pluralism in the Italian broadcasting sector (Padovani, 2009). This lack of pluralism is a consequence of strong state control over the Italian media system, characterized by the political parties' influence on how media are organized and structured and by a high degree of integration of media and political elites (Mancini, 1991, p. 139).

The repetition by the different broadcasters of the same model of a solemn Mass communicates to television audiences a certain image of the participation of Italian Catholics in liturgical celebrations which is far from realistic and which might also create unrealistic expectations on the part of the audience of what to find in an actual religious service. Participation in Sunday worship remains significantly higher in Italy than in other central and northern European countries (Garelli, 2011, pp. 57-62), but Italian churches are far from being as crowded as shown by television. Neither are normal Sunday services always accompanied by large and efficient choirs. Rather than offering a credible representation of the habits of religious participation in the country, Italian televised Masses tend to portray the faithful's involvement in an idealized Mass. To the television audience, the shots of the faithful who take part in the service show people fully engaged in the ritual. The frequent recourse to close-ups of the congregation praying, listening and answering emphasizes this point. The intensity of the participation in the service, which is partly constructed by the producers, is displayed to the viewer at home in order to provoke his/her own involvement. Close-ups create identification: one cannot see so much fervour and remain a mere spectator.

In recreating a "perfect" celebration, television producers adopt an educational role that is not theirs. These televised Masses indicate to the audience what their ideal involvement in any liturgical event ought to be. Why would different television broadcast networks, both public and private, share this educational intention that perfectly responds to ecclesiastic preoccupations for an active and fruitful participation in worship? One reason may be the need to offer their target audience a

mild, even idealized representation of Catholicism itself. Televised Mass can reassure traditional Catholic believers that they still belong to a profoundly religious culture, despite signs of the contrary. The audience is flattered (and rendered loyal) by the uncritical confirmation of their hopes.

Another reason for this style is the direct involvement of Catholic Church representatives in the production of these televised Masses, an involvement that has no comparison with the Masses broadcasted in other countries. The television director of the Mass broadcast weekly by Raiuno is always a priest chosen by the Italian Episcopal Conference. The co-director is also a priest. Raiuno also relies on the services provided by the Vatican Television Center, instituted by Pope John Paul II in 1983. As stated in its statute, quoted by the Holy See's website, the aim of the Vatican Television Center is "to contribute to spreading the universal message of the Gospel by using television to document the Pope's pastoral ministry and the activities of the Apostolic See". Rai, a public-share capital company with the Italian Ministry of Economy and Finances holding the majority of its shares, has also a specific structure called "Rai Vaticano"<sup>3</sup> that handles telecasts of religious events in collaboration with the Vatican Television Center.

The Italian Episcopal Conference have considerable influence on the nomination of the director of "Rai Vaticano", as evidenced by the surprising choice of Marco Simeon for this envied post in 2010<sup>4</sup>. This nomination of a young man said to be a protégé of important cardinals, such as the former Vatican Secretary of State Tarcisio Bertone, shows that the logic of the *lottizzazione*<sup>5</sup>, by which all of the main competing political parties controls the Italian media system, is accepted and positively assumed by Catholic Church representatives in order to maintain a strong presence for the Church in the country's cultural life. While in France or in Germany the right to publicly broadcast religious services is founded on the idea of the religious neutrality of the state and on religious pluralism (Oliva, 2006; Sanders 1986), in Italy the Catholic Mass enjoys a strong,

privileged position which does not raise questions about its legitimacy. Public policy acknowledges the unique role of the Catholic Church in Italian social and civil life.

### **TEXT / The make-believe of television construction**

The live broadcasting of a real event such as a liturgical celebration implies the transfer of light and sound signals analogous to those produced in the physical space where the event takes place, or the digitalization of those signals. The television works as a prosthesis, as an extension of our senses. This metaphor can, however, be deceptive, because no recording of sounds and images is neutral. Every recording is a selection driven by an intention, which is not necessarily the same as the one guiding the event being recorded. Television operators have to render a static and repetitive event such as the Mass appealing for the audience, and they do so by inserting some elements and removing others that are not functional to the product they are creating. Like every broadcasting of a live event, a televised Mass exposes the audience to a complex combination of presence and absence. The viewer is stimulated in his/her desire to participate but is also aware of being an observer, unable to interfere with the event. The television director is well aware of this paradox and works both to increase the involvement of the audience and to guarantee them a satisfactory show. For this purpose, standard programming and broadcasting procedures have been defined over time.

Television Masses broadcast by Italian networks are characterized by the persistence of stylistic and directional options elsewhere considered to be outdated or lacking of sobriety (Eugeni, 2000, p. 51) such as superimpositions, zooms-in, previously taken video inserts and, in some cases, presence of old-fashioned voice-over commentary. This is particularly evident in the case of Rai and Fininvest's broadcastings of the Mass – both professionally well-crafted, very popular and in direct competition with each other<sup>6</sup> – on which I wish to focus henceforward. From a technical

point of view, the two networks have similar means and procedures, although Raiuno is able to ensure a higher level of professionalism. In both cases, according to my own observations, the television crew involved in the production consists of at least four camera operators plus a fixed camera recording simultaneously within the place of worship. The editing takes place in the production truck outside the church chosen for the service.

Any Catholic community wanting to become a candidate for hosting a Mass to be broadcast needs to obtain an authorization from its bishop and has to exhibit a high average attendance at Sunday celebrations. The selection of the worship sites does not take into account the plurality of social and ecclesial contexts, but privileges almost exclusively Masses that lack any type of liturgical innovation and are celebrated in big, lively parishes or in churches that are places of popular devotion.

In the space remaining, I will attempt to analyse aspects of different parts of the Mass as it is broadcast on television, namely the liturgy of the Word, the liturgy of the Eucharist and the specific moment of the elevation of the consecrated elements. For this purpose, I will follow a textual approach that considers a television programme as “a network of meaningful signs that can be analysed and interpreted” (Bignell, 2008, p. 329). This interpretive work is based on the assumption that a text does not just contain a formulated meaning, and therefore a knowledge, but also the “instructions for use” that allow the text itself to be pertinently appropriated (Viganò, 2003, pp. 209-210). In the specific case of the televised Mass, one must also be aware of facing a text which is in fact a metatext because it is constantly referring to another sign system, that of the Mass itself. This precision is important because the existence and identification of a metalanguage is exactly what justifies the epistemological classic distinction between observer and participant, so important in anthropological and sociological practice. This distinction has become blurred after the rise of deconstructionism, which has established that observer and participant perspectives do not enable the recognition of isolable and distinct systems of meaning making practices. However such

different perspectives cannot simply be fused with each other, and they play a crucial role in my analysis, as it will be seen subsequently.

I am going to examine two recent televised Masses as texts to be interpreted not in a vacuum, but in relationship with the context of their production and reception, as delineated in the previous part. The Masses here considered have been chosen for their availability as they are both currently viewable on YouTube. They are the Mass telecast by Raiuno on 15 December 2013 from the church of St. Mary of the Mercies in Linguaglossa (Sicily) and the one telecast by Rete 4 on 28 October 2013 from the Basilica of St. Mary in Ercolano, near Naples (respectively available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bHQitrmtlTo> and <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tRz661R0Oq4>). All elements on which my analysis focuses, however, are recurrent and in the light of the textual similarity of the examples analysed with many other Italian televised Masses I have viewed and taken into account, I argue that these elements of the grammar of broadcasting are exemplary for how Italian television Masses are being created. Moreover, although my analysis is not comparative, there is evidence that the textual and stylistic characteristics that I am going to highlight in Italian televised Masses cannot be found together and with the same frequency in television Masses broadcasted in other western European contexts. The availability of televised Masses on video-sharing websites, or directly on the producing television network websites (ZDF for Germany, RTVE for Spain) and religious programmes websites (“Le jour du Seigneur” for France) allows us to easily verify my assumption.

Let us start with the Bible readings and the sermon as it is the most static part of the service. It is accompanied by periodic shots of artistic or decorative elements of the church, often in close-ups with slow camera movements, interchanged with close-ups of the person who is reading or preaching and with long shots of the inside of the church taken by a fixed camera. Symbols such as crucifixes and burning candles are privileged. As a result, the television audience does not have to face the same static image as the faithful within the church and is less exposed to boredom – a risk

one cannot run if the viewer holds a remote control in their hand. Of course the faithful, if bored or distracted, can always look around, but they cannot explore the church's adornments as closely as the television audience. Even if they are distracted, the faithful remains inescapably in front of the liturgical act that is going to be accomplished, namely the proclamation and meditation of God's word, while the textual construction of the televised Mass tends to disrupt this face-to-face with the word.

The liturgy of the Eucharist, with its rhythm of speech and response, offers the opportunity for a television treatment based on the spatial opposition between the place of the celebrant and that of the faithful, underlined by the shot-reverse-shot editing pattern typical for dialogue scenes, in which the camera follows the order of the speech (Bazin, 1967, p. 33). This spatial opposition is strongly gendered with the male pole of the Catholic celebrant (or celebrants) very often juxtaposed with female members of the congregation by the television director (himself male)<sup>7</sup>. This happens primarily because the majority of the congregation is female, as confirmed by sociological surveys (Garelli, 2011, p. 60-62), but I argue that the construction of the television text further emphasizes the gender gap – in other words the television director singles out women for close-ups. One immediate reason for this selection is to create a “natural” gender symmetry with the reverse shot of the celebrant. But the consequences of this stylistic construction of the text, that may well be unconscious, must be evaluated carefully. The male celebrant is shown as active, with gestures and speech constituting the ritual, while the (overwhelmingly) female congregation is shown in a passive, though devout attitude. The formal means of constructing the television product thus render visible and reinforce the gender dichotomy, which characterizes the Catholic Church and its liturgy.

Immediately after the Consecration, when the host and chalice are elevated for the congregation to see, the television camera shifts from the celebrant in a medium shot to a close-up of the host and chalice. Zoom-in movements are recurrent at this moment. In Rete 4's Masses, the zoom-ins are prolonged and accentuated, giving the impression that one “enters” the consecrated

host. In Raiuno's Masses, a dissolve superimposes the close-ups of the host and chalice with shots of pieces of art in the church that recall the Eucharistic mystery. In the case of the broadcast from the church of St. Mary of the Mercies in Linguaglossa, the close-up of the host fades into a shot of a bas-relief of the Last Supper, in which the Christ is shown in the same gesture of benediction of the celebrant, while the subsequent close-up of the chalice fades into the close-up of one of Christ's hand nailed to the cross in a wooden crucifix. The liturgical purpose of the elevation is to make emphatically clear in a symbolic form the completion and fulfillment of the Eucharistic prayer, and this is further emphasized on the television screen as if by itself it lacked verification – a verification, however, that television grammar is capable of ensuring. The editing of television images provides the audience with the visibility of the process of the interiorisation of the ritual required of the faithful. In suggesting the identification between the chalice and the wound of Christ's hand the television text aims to render visible the mystery of transubstantiation, and in this sense it "produces" belief by exteriorizing it for the benefit of the viewer. The close relationship between believing and exteriorizing deserves to be emphasized. This visualization (and therefore "spectacularisation") of the belief follows the logic of the construction of all media events, which inevitably "blur the boundary between the sacred and the profane" (Dayan and Katz, 1992, p. 207), but it is emphasized by specific options taken by the television directors when constructing the programme.

The broadcasting of this stage of the Mass, namely the elevation, is designed, especially in the case of Raiuno's Masses, in a manner that leaves the congregation of the faithful outside of the frame. The viewer takes their place, and the persistent frontal character of the shots that frame the altar and the minister(s) give him/her the impression that the liturgy, reaching here its key revelatory moment, is celebrated precisely for him/her. Even when the church's congregation is not left outside the frame in other moments of the service, its members are shown, as I have already remarked, in a way that stimulates emotional identification rather than participation. This kind of

television construction tends to nullify the distance between the language of the liturgy and the metalanguage of the televising of the liturgy, so that the different status of faithful and viewer, or participant and observer, also seems to blur. As said in my introduction, the knowledge of this difference is crucial for both theology and media studies. A televised Mass that consistently invites the audience to replace the congregation relegated out of the frame does not contribute to this effort of knowing and evaluating the difference between participant and observer and finally predisposes the viewers to an uncritical (and difficult to define) involvement in the worship. Is the viewer observer, participant or “participating observer”? This question is very complex in itself, and it seems hard to find textual clues for an answer in Italy’s televised Masses. These rather contribute to dismissing the question as meaningless in the context of their spectacularisation of belief. Of course spectacularisation is not necessarily something negative for religion, but here it is highly problematic because it makes it difficult for the viewers to feel themselves connected to a physical congregation and therefore part of a ritual that does not accomplish itself on the television screen.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

In conclusion I would like to go back to the critical position of Rahner and Metz. Their claim for the need of a Christian “discipline of the arcane” emphasizes the specific nature of the Mass, which, like any ritual action, does not need spectators. Maintaining a “secret” dimension of the ritual allows for distinguishing it from both the private and the public spheres of existence and for producing a different specific sphere, that of the community (Bonaccorso, 2005, pp. 211-218), in which everyone may take part. It is this secret dimension that preserves Christian liturgy from the process of spectacularisation for which, according to Derrida, it seems to be intended. A secret dimension, not just private or public, may allow for viewers at home an interaction with the worship not fully predetermined by television codes and open to the possibility of a spiritual unfolding.

When the television rendition of the Mass erases the presence of the “assembly of the communicants” or when it gives visibility to the “mystery” of transubstantiation by reduplicating and explicating its symbolic expression, the images deliver the ritual to a public space where no “secret” is preserved and where everybody is able to approach and “understand” the ritual itself not by virtue of individual faith but by virtue of its media treatment. The viewer’s faith is not really challenged by television images but maybe more mirrored in them as something evident. Fervour is offered more than required or suggested.

Rahner’s and Metz’s concerns about the Christian discipline of the arcane are hard to maintain as an argument to condemn the television broadcasting of the Mass, but represent a valid criterion to test the adequacy of the editing and production decisions that contribute to the construction of a television text consistent with the spiritual exigencies of the liturgical celebration of the Eucharist. As the case of Italy’s televised Masses shows, the control of the Catholic Church and the involvement of ecclesiastical representatives in the production of the television programme are not a guarantee that the broadcasting actually allows for a personal involvement of the audience in the act of worship, or that at least it helps the audience to wonder about their degree of observation/participation. Instead, these Masses make explicit a certain self-representation of the Church and the attitude we are expected to have when taking part in its ritual life. On the contrary, when the producing and programming of the television Mass are regulated by the principles of secularity and religious neutrality, as happens in other European countries as different as France, Germany or the Netherlands, the result may be more satisfactory not only for theologians concerned about the secret (intimate *and* communal) dimension of the liturgy, but also for the pluralist television audience that has the right to choose for itself to be a participant or just an observer, in other words whether or not to take part in what they are watching.

**Notes:**

<sup>1</sup> Muslim Television Ahmadiyya International (MTA Int.) is the first 24-hour worldwide Muslim direct-to-home network, with programs produced in over 150 countries. Friday sermon is broadcast live and a rich selection of sermons remains available online: <http://www.alislam.org/mta/>.

<sup>2</sup> In January 2008 the European Court of Justice found Italy's system for allocating radio frequencies for television broadcasting in violation of European Union law on communication. This violation was made possible and legalized by the controversial amendment "Salva Rete 4" (Save Rete 4), signed in December 2003 by Italy's Prime Minister S. Berlusconi, which guaranteed Mediaset's channel its right to broadcasting.

<sup>3</sup> The structure was founded in June 1995 under the name of "Rai Giubileo" in order to coordinate the broadcasting activities related to the Great Jubilee of the year 2000. In 2002 it was transformed into the current structure.

<sup>4</sup> At the time of his nomination Simeon was general secretary of a Vatican Foundation promoting artistic and cultural events. Apart from his Vatican acquaintances, Simeon was also close to the banker Cesare Geronzi, a historical figure of Catholic finance involved in many scandals in Italy and finally convicted of bankruptcy, and to Luigi Bisignani, a powerful lobbyist now at the centre of a major investigation for corruption. Simeon has been replaced at the head of Rai Vaticano in February 2013, after his name came up in connection with the so-called "Vatileaks" affair.

<sup>5</sup> The term is derived from an agricultural context and originally meant the parceling out of land. It indicates the way in which positions in state and para-state agencies (in particular the media system), were shared out among the various political parties in function of their electoral results. See Padovani, 2005, pp. 161-228: "*Lottizzazione: A Normal Practice for Public Service Journalists*".

<sup>6</sup> Here the duopolistic nature of the Italian broadcasting system has to be taken into account. With today's satellite transmissions excluded, Fininvest and Rai have controlled 90% of Italy's domestic television market since the 1990s (Amienyi and Soler-Bourgillos, 1996, p. 84).

<sup>7</sup> Today, the directors of the broadcasting of the Mass for Rete 4 are Marco Tesei and Ferruccio Castronuovo, writer and director of numerous successful television programs, who also worked as an assistant with Federico Fellini, Sergio Leone and other well-known Italian filmmakers. Since 2004 the direction of televised Mass for Raiuno has been coordinated by Antonio Ammirati of the National Office for Social Communication of the Italian Bishop Conference.

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