

Pastoral challenges faced by priests in shepherding and proclaiming the Gospel in social media

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14 NOVEMBER 2014

I believe by now all of us must have become familiar with *Evangelii Gaudium* with the consistent theme in the teaching of Pope Francis on New Evangelization.

Unlike other Apostolic Exhortations, the magisterial style of Pope Francis is very different. From the first pages of *Evangelii Gaudium* a soul of fire occurs, ardent and insatiable, eager to "go out" to the outside, to the "periphery", like a fire of love, spreading irresistibly (EG 20-23). I would like to quote Paragraph 49 which I will use to reflect upon in my talk today. The Holy Father writes: *'I prefer a Church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security.... If something should rightly disturb us and trouble our consciences, it is the fact that so many of our brothers and sisters are living without the strength, light and consolation born of friendship with Jesus Christ, without a community of faith to support them, without meaning and a goal in life'*. (EG 49)

It is in this context that I would like to reflect upon the theme of the *Pastoral Challenges faced by priests in shepherding and proclaiming the gospel in Social Media: the challenges and opportunities*.

According to an overview report on global digital trends published by *We Are Social*, a London-based social media agency with offices worldwide, out of the world's estimated population of some 7 billion people, there are 6.5 billion with mobile subscriptions in one form or another.

- Mobile devices play a huge role in Asia's social media scene. This continent is home to more than 3 billion mobile subscriptions. In other words, now the number of mobile phones in Asia is about the same number of people in this continent.
- It is interesting to note that Asia is also home to 50% of all the world's social media users. And, home to more Facebook users than any other continent.

Furthermore, in a United Nations study published last year, more people on earth have access to mobile phones than sanitary toilets. Only 4.5 billion people have access to clean, working toilets.

There was also a tipping point last year that has major implications for businesses and for the Church. This point will impact publishing and marketing and evangelizing strategies and tactics in the future.

On December 13, Beyoncé, one of the world's biggest music stars ignored the traditional mass media product launching process. She by-passed the "normal" mass media release: no radio campaign, no multiple TV appearances, no retail and consumer brand promotions.

Instead she announced her new album on Instagram with just a picture, captioned 'Surprise!'. Amazingly, this one picture sent the music world into instantaneous meltdown. Beyoncé was simply releasing her new album on iTunes with zero warning. An Instagram post was all she needed. Twitter reported a whopping 1.2 million tweets about the album in just 12 hours and the new album sold 828,773 copies in just three days, making it iTunes' fastest-selling album worldwide.

One more example: During the Papal Visit to South Korea two months ago, tens of thousands of people were fortunate enough to attend Eucharistic celebrations and various functions. However, several millions more reportedly followed the ceremonies' 'live' telecast on their mobile devices. Far more people were talking on social media about the modest and compact car that Pope Francis chose for his visit.

These "new forms of behavior" are posing an immense challenge and are also providing great opportunities to the Church and the proclamation of her message. The truth of our faith has not changed. Our Tradition has not changed. But the people of our dioceses are living in a new world and a new culture, using a "new language" on their mobile devices.

As you may already know, a mobile device such as smartphone is so much more than a phone. It's a phone, a camera, a video recorder, an audio recording device, a satellite map, a writing device and more. If you don't have one, you will need it very soon. Whether it is for texting, calling, chatting, skyping, lining or more likely tweeting, a smartphone is a must-have tool nowadays.

The Catholic Church has always advocated the use of all forms of media to spread the Good News – whether it be parchments and scrolls, art, stained glass, illuminated manuscripts, printing, television or radio. We must therefore welcome the use of so-called 'social media' in this task. Many parishes already have websites. There are 'sacred spaces' on line, priests on TV and radio programs, and many more. But all of these are no longer enough.

Two years ago, Proposition 18 from the Synod on the New Evangelization stated, "*Education in the wise and constructive use of social media is an important means to be utilized in the New Evangelization.*"

There are different ways of looking at the use of social media in evangelization – one is to see the new media as yet another tool to reach people with the message of the Gospel. By means of the various forms of social media, we can reach out to the peripheries and draw people in, so that they can hear the Word of God and understand it better. They may then be open to a face-to-face

encounter with a Church or parish group, or feel drawn to Mass and the sacraments. We must remember, however, that the best form of communication is still interpersonal.

The Acts of the Apostles, Chapter 17, in the New Testament speaks about Paul going into Athens, the bustling capital of the ancient world. Paul is amazed to see that the city was full of idols. Yet Verse 21 comments: *All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.*

St. John Paul II the pope saw the internet as being like the ‘new Athens’, new marketplace or Areopagus (cf. *Redemptoris Missio*, 37c), a ‘global village’ where people exchange ideas and talk to each other but with “new languages, new Psychology and new ways of communicating. Like Paul, our challenge is to become aware of such a situation and see the need for dialogue with this digital culture in this new Areopagus.

Nowadays, people are spending huge and increasing proportions of their time in this virtual world. I believe many of us, if not all, keep our mobiles with us all the time. Many keep social networks open throughout the day in a distinct browser tab or chat apps thanks to platforms like WhatsApp, WeChat, and LINE, so much that for them it is becoming increasingly the place where they live their lives. When they go to bed at night most of them check their phones one last time, highlighting that social media are playing a huge part in the growth and evolution of the online landscape in Asia. What we call the real world of face-to-face seems often dull and uneventful to them and their secondary existence.

Thus social media has become the nervous system of our new culture, in which more and more people are expressing and exploring their identity, picking up and discarding their values and attitudes, expressing their feelings and prejudices, befriending and unfriending each other, measuring each other’s status and importance, relevance and appearance.

If our young people and people of all ages are living in this gigantic network, then we, as people of faith need to be in there, interacting with the inhabitants of this world, with the men and women who dwell in the social media.

When we speak about new evangelization in the Church, we more often than not think of the so called ‘real world’, but billions of people live in the social networks. These have been described as among the biggest countries in the world – and they are countries with no barriers.

For example, more than 1.2 billion inhabit the world of Facebook. Most of them, according to We Are Social, are in Asia. The majority of these people may never enter a Church or practice Religion or even become aware of it as essential part of life and society. But, if we are to respond to the Gospel mandate given us by Christ to ‘go out to the whole world’, then we must include the digital world and proclaim the Good News there also. Our challenge as evangelizers has always been to reach out and encounter people wherever they are - and increasingly that means going online.

We might have been used to ask ourselves, "What do we need to tell people?" Now we also have to ask ourselves, "What do people want and how they want to hear from us?" They no longer want to wait for the evening newscast, or the morning paper, or even the Sunday homily. If we do not go to them, they will go elsewhere. They develop their own program and know where to find it. When our parishioners need *information*, they will seek it and find it. When they need *guidance*, they look for it and consult their social networks. When they need *community*, they will connect to it.

In this year's MESSAGE FOR THE 48TH WORLD COMMUNICATIONS DAY, Pope Francis speaks about 'Communication at the Service of an Authentic Culture of Encounter'. The Internet, in particular, he says, 'offers immense possibilities for encounter and solidarity. This is something truly good, a gift from God'.

The Holy Father is telling us that "today the social networks are one way to experience this call to discover the beauty of faith, the beauty of encountering Christ". We should encourage this encounter through technology and social media. For the record, social media requires technology, but they are not the same thing.

Our problem is that in general the local Church authorities do not distinguish between technology and the social media. We, the Church, are still distinguishing between the tools and the cultures they create, while disregarding the latter. Long gone are the days when to connect to the Internet you had to fire up a modem and wait for the connection. Now we are always on. We are the Internet.

Yes you heard that right. We ARE the internet. We are no longer living in a world where you had a producer of content on a website and a number of consumers. Through social media we are the Internet. Each one of us is a consumer and a producer on the web. Our lives, real lives if you will, are creating content for the social networks to consume. Actions on these networks are extending our lives.

The Holy Father states that "the digital world can be an environment rich in humanity; a network not of wires but of people."

The challenges facing the Church in the digital culture and the need to effectively communicate our message and concerns in today's generation are that we need to learn the language of social media, which is conversational and interactive -- to speak in a style that is accessible to a generation accustomed to 15 second commercials and 140 character texts or "tweets", who prefer content that allows them to respond, comment and feel that they are interacting with someone that genuinely cares.

The Holy Father urges us in his message "to dialogue with the men and women of today, to understand their expectations, doubts and hopes, and to bring them the Gospel". We have to go

out of our churches to dialogue with people in their own environment, in their own life. This is what the Pope is inviting us to do using social media: reaching out to people in their own environment and to the modern day peripheries.

For Pope Francis, that is the new way of evangelization and doing pastoral work by being present in the lives of people. The way we interpret the Holy Father's apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* can be nothing short of fully utilizing the potential of social media: to be present in people's lives and to share both their joys and sorrows.

The Holy Father is clear that as Christians we need to 'walk the streets of the digital highways, to encounter, like the Good Samaritan, those who are lying on the side of the road and witness to them in tenderness and love'. Thanks to the social media, he says, 'Christian witness can reach the peripheries of human existence'. I quote from the Message: 'The digital highway is ... a street teeming with people who are often hurting, men and women looking for salvation or hope. By means of the Internet, the Christian message can reach "to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8)'.

There is a temptation to see evangelization in the social media as simply bombarding people with religious messages. Pope Francis encourages us to go beyond this. He challenges us to think about how we can effectively encounter people and witness to them in, and using, new media.

He asks: 'Can we be available to them, hear their issues and problems, engage with their questions and doubts and their search for truth?'

The Holy Father concludes: 'May the image of the Good Samaritan who tended to the wounds of the injured man by pouring oil and wine over them be our inspiration. Let our communication be a balm which relieves pain and a fine wine, which gladdens hearts'.

He urges us: 'Let us boldly become citizens of the digital world... in order to dialogue with people today and to help them encounter Christ. The Church needs to be a Church at the side of others, capable of accompanying everyone along the way'.

Therefore, let us accompany, let us get dirty, let us shorten distances so as to be in the midst of the people, endure rejection and humiliation. Let us take on human life and touch the suffering flesh of Christ in the people. In other words, let us have the smell of the sheep. (cf. EG 24)

I would like to end my presentation with the communication message which Archbishop Eamon Martin of Ireland uploaded on his twitter (on 19 May 2014) some useful suggestion for us to keep in mind a number of principles which might guide us in our presence in social media:

- Be positive and joyful. Remember that it is the 'Joy of the Gospel' that we are communicating, so, as Pope Francis says: no 'funeral faces'.

- Remember ‘Ubi caritas et amor’. Fill the internet with charity and love, always giving rather than taking. Continually seek to broaden and reframe discussions and seek to include a sense of charity and solidarity with the suffering in the world.
- Have a broad back when criticisms and insults are made – when possible, gently correct misunderstandings and errors.
- Pray in the digital world. Establish sacred spaces, opportunities for stillness, reflection and meditation online.
- Establish on-line connections, relationships and communities. The Church has always been about ‘gathering’ together in the name of Jesus Christ – but it was never said where we must meet.
- Educate our young to keep themselves safe and to use the Internet responsibly.
- Witness to human dignity at all times online. We are well-aware of the pervasive prevalence of pornography on the Internet, which can ‘pollute the spirit’, destroy and degrade human sexuality and relationships, reduce persons to objects for gratification, draw millions into the commodification and commercialization of sex, and feed the monster that is human trafficking.
- Last but not the least, be missionary. Be aware that with the help of the internet, a social media message has the potential to reach the ends of the earth in seconds. In this regard, let us foster and call forth charisms in younger committed people who understand the power and potential of the social media to bear witness.

That is our challenge and our opportunity as Christians. Let us help people to discover the joy of the Christian message: a message of love and mercy. Let us go forth to announce the Gospel with joy to all people, in all places, in all times, without hesitation, without revulsion and without fear. Freely we have received the “Joy of the Gospel”, so now let us freely give it to others, especially in social media.

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