



The New Media and the New Evangelization

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Houston, Texas
August 16, 2014*

Friends, I want to talk with you today about the new culture of communication and its implications for the Church's mission of evangelization.

I want to share the perspective of my ministry in Los Angeles. As you know, L.A. is one of the world's centers of the emerging media culture and it's a metropolis that drives technological innovations and shapes opinions, fashions and culture for the whole world.

Here's how I'd like to our time together this afternoon, I want to begin by making four basic observations about the new technologies and social media networks.

After making these four basic points, I then want to offer some suggestions about how the Church can use these technologies in the new evangelization. And after that, I would like to take time to have some questions and discussion.

So, let me begin with my first observation. It's this:

We are living in a period of rapid changes in communication — driven by technological innovations and larger patterns of economic and financial “globalization.”

Thirty years ago, nobody imagined that 90 percent of our young people would be carrying a phone with them in their pockets. Nobody but science fiction writers imagined what we see today — that these small devices give people the ability to share images and texts with other people all over the world, instantly, in “real time.”ⁱ

This leads to my second observation.

This revolution in communication is changing the way we live, the way we work, and the way our societies operate. This is true, not only in the United States and the Americas, but everywhere in the world.

We are living in the first generation where the Internet, computers, mobile phones and social networking media such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram are a “given” part of ordinary daily reality.

And these new technologies are shaping our patterns of thought, our behavior and our lifestyles. More and more this “digital reality” is influencing:

- how we experience the world and think about values and the meaning of life;
- how we express ourselves and share our experiences;
- how we learn and get information; and
- how we form relationships and make life commitments.

This brings me to my third observation:

In order to “reach” people in this new digital environment, the Church must have a pastoral presence on social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Vine. In addition, the Church needs a strong pastoral strategy for using these platforms to convey the Gospel message.

In every age, the Church is called to go where her people are. And in our age, we find more and more young people “inhabiting” the virtual communities created by the Internet.

This why, in the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, we are making a strategic pastoral investment to reach people using new social media channels and new technologies.

As the Archbishop, I now have my own Facebook page and Twitter account, and I send messages over these media several times each day.

My goal is to make connections with my people, to build friendship and community, to address peoples’ spiritual needs, and to nourish their faith.

And we are making progress every day. Amazing things. I have about 235,000 “followers” on my Facebook page and almost 14,000 on Twitter. Earlier this year, in the Month of May, I had a Facebook post on the value of the Rosary that was seen and shared by more than 1.5 million people.

In addition to my ministry, we have a strategy for the other key offices and agencies in the Archdiocese — including our Vocations office, our Life, Justice and Peace office, and our New Evangelization office.

We have several pastoral priorities in making use of these new media:

- First, we want to provide solid news and information about the Church;
- We also want to provide the Church’s interpretation of contemporary events;
- We want to share the Church’s rich social doctrine and vision for society and culture; and finally,
- We want to defend the Church and explain her teachings in the face of misinformation, misunderstandings and secularist propaganda.

I want to stress: our work of evangelization in this digital environment is only just beginning. But we are learning new things every day. One of the most important insights we have gained is that we need to have a deeper understanding of the “culture” of this new digital media environment.

And that’s my fourth observation that I want to make:

The Church’s evangelization in the new “digital continent” must be rooted in serious study and reflection on the “culture” that we find in this new continent.

Our Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI has described the world of on-line communications and social networking as a “digital continent.”ⁱⁱ

That is a powerful image for us to reflect on. What he means is that the digital space is it’s own “world,” it’s own environment.

And as the Church continues to send missionaries to the five continents, now we are called to send “missionaries” to proclaim the Gospel in the new virtual “continent” created by the Internet and social networks.

As we know, beginning with the first apostolic missions, the Church’s missionaries have always been students of the cultures they are called to evangelize.ⁱⁱⁱ We need to follow this same approach in our evangelization of the new “digital continent.”

We need to learn everything we can about this new “culture.”

For instance, we notice that these new media only permit communications that are brief and instantaneous.

A Twitter messages can be only 140 characters in length. Videos shared on services such as Vine can be only 7 seconds long.

So communication over these channels has to be short and it has to be quick. In addition, we can say that these new media platforms have three other basic characteristics:

- They rely on pictures more than words;
- They appeal to emotions and stories more than reasoned arguments; and
- They seek to convey immediate experiences, not in-depth or developed explanations.

So the Church needs to understand these characteristics of the new media culture. And as the Church’s missionaries have always done, we need to find ways to bring people living in this digital culture to an encounter with Jesus Christ — *through* and *within* this culture.

Ok. So now that I have outlined what I think are four basic observations about the new media and the “culture” of the digital continent, I want to turn now and offer some pastoral directions and perspectives for the Church’s evangelization of people in this digital environment.

And I want to make four points.

First, we need to remember that evangelization, at its heart, has always been about communication.

The Gospel was first shared in oral and written form — the apostles preached the Gospel and they wrote the letters and Gospels collected in the New Testament.

But throughout her history, the Church has always found ways to use the newest media to spread the Gospel. Beginning with the printing press and continuing through the innovations of radio, television and cable technologies.

Our challenge with the Internet is the same challenge the Church has faced in every generation: How do we proclaim the beauty of God and the salvation offered by Jesus Christ in ways that speak to the deep questions and desires of the human heart?

My **second** point is this: We should regard the new social media as a “providential” opportunity for spreading the Gospel message in our time.

In her mission of evangelization, the Church has always embraced what is good and true in the cultures of the world.^{iv} In his first World Communications Day message, Pope Francis describes the Internet and social media as “something truly good, a gift from God.”^v

We should have that same positive attitude as we seek to evangelize people in the new digital continent.

It can’t be denied — there is much that is disturbing and dark in the virtual worlds of the Internet. So we do need to be vigilant in seeking to purify those elements of the digital culture that are degrading to human dignity and hostile to the human search for God.

But we need to be open to what is true and good in this digital environment. We need to be looking — as the apostles and Church Fathers did — for the “seeds of the Word” that can be found in this digital culture.^{vi}

These new social networks are creating a “virtual public square,” where people can come to exchange ideas and search for understanding, meaning and truth.

The popularity of these networks reflects an intense desire among our people for immediacy and contact; for friendship, connections, and community.

This is especially true for young people. But we should remember that the fastest growing group on Facebook is middle-aged people and older.

So our task is to find ways to create what Pope Francis calls “a culture of encounter” in this digital space. We need to find ways for people to meet Jesus and come in contact with the saving power of his Gospel through these social channels.

And that leads to my **third** point:

The character of the new social media — especially the way they emphasize short, rapid communication that is based on images and emotion — this poses real challenges for the Church’s evangelization.

To put the issue simply: Is it possible to proclaim the richness of the Gospel in a “tweet” of 140 characters or in a video that lasts only 7 seconds?

My answer is: I don’t think so.

But I do think it is possible for us, to use these technologies to stir people’s consciences and to open their hearts to God. We can use these technologies to sow “the seeds of faith” and prepare people for the encounter with Jesus and the Gospel.

It’s true that in history, the Church’s apologetics and evangelization has often taken the form of philosophical and historical arguments. But that’s not the only way we have to share and explain our faith.

Jesus spoke in “brief” but memorable forms — think about his beatitudes, his parables, and his aphorisms. The Desert Fathers and early Christian monks used proverbs and short prayers drawn from the Psalms and the Scriptures.

We should study and learn from these examples as we try to fashion “messages” for Twitter and the other new media. We should draw also on the example of our great Catholic poets and artists.

Our whole Catholic tradition is rich in visual symbols and sensual imagery that would “translate” into videos, photos and illustrations for sharing over social media channels.

Our traditions of prayer, liturgy, chant and sacred song — these also offer beautiful possibilities for adaptation in the digital environment.

As I said earlier, the social media encourage emotion and storytelling. Here too, our Catholic tradition has a lot to offer.

The Church holds the most extraordinary human-interest stories ever imagined — in the lives and adventures of our saints and mystics. In the stories of our missionaries and martyrs.

What we need today is a new zeal and fresh imagination to bring out the riches from the vast treasury of our Catholic spiritualities.

As we know, our tradition is drawn from every race and nation under heaven. So we have amazing possibilities.

What we need is a new generation of evangelists and apologists who are enthusiastic about finding new ways to encounter people in their search for truth in the virtual worlds of the Internet.

And that leads to my **final** point:

Despite the widespread secularization of our societies, we can see that millions of young people — and adults — are still hungry for God. These million long to make contact with God and they long to know his love and his power in their lives.

People are searching the social channels of the Internet for “answers” and for spiritualities that will bring them holiness and wholeness and communion with God and other people.

This is why these new digital landscape is the new “mission territory” for the Church.

But we need to remember — and this is my last and most important point — that our Catholic faith is *incarnational* and *sacramental*.

We proclaim a God who became flesh and blood, and who touched people and healed them. We invite people to communion with this God through physical elements — water and oil, bread and wine — physical elements that have now become signs and instruments that give us entry into the world of the spiritual, the world of God.

There is nothing “virtual” about the Christian religion. That means our message will always be in a kind of fundamental tension with the “virtual” realities and “virtual” communities of the digital continent.

So we need to remember:

These new technologies are only a “means” to an “end.” These new technologies are tools to serve the mission of the Church, the mission of bringing people to meet Jesus.

We know people are using these technologies to search for meaning and hope; for connections and community. So the Church needs to have a strong presence in this digital culture.

We need to be listening to what people are talking about — their desires and doubts and hopes. We need to be looking for ways to enter into a dialogue with them. We need to be looking for ways to express the heart of the Gospel — the message of God’s mercy,

the message of salvation. And we need to find ways to promote the Gospel values of the dignity of the human person, the sanctity of marriage and the family.

But everything we do in this field — blogging, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, all of it — it's all about bringing people to Jesus. To a true experience of the reality of the living God who loves us, who forgives us, who cares for us like a Father. And this reality is only experienced fully in the Church and in the sacraments.

So the goal of our mission to the digital continent is the same of our mission in every age and every place — to bring people to the beauty of encountering Christ, to the beauty of living in authentic relationship with him and our brothers and sisters in the Church, which is the family of God.

Let me close with a brief reflection from our Holy Father Pope Francis. He says:

“We hold a precious treasure that is to be passed on, a treasure that brings light and hope. They are greatly needed. ... The great digital continent not only involves technology but is made up of real men and women who bring with them their hopes, their suffering, their concerns and their pursuit of what is true, beautiful and good. We need to bring Christ to others, through these joys and hopes — like Mary, who brought Christ to the hearts of men and women. ... This is the path. This is the challenge.”^{vii}

So let us entrust our journey on this path to Mary, to Our Lady of Guadalupe, our Mother and the Bright Star of the New Evangelization.

As she helped to bring the Gospel to the New World, may she help us to transform the new digital continent so that it serves the human person's search for the living God in our time.

Thanks for your attention, I look forward to our conversation.

ⁱ According to the Pew Internet and American Life Project— 85% of all U.S. adults use the Internet regularly. Of those, 73% regularly use the social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter. And more than 42% regularly use more than one social networking site.ⁱ All of these trends are more pronounced among the younger generation.

More than 90% of U.S. young people ages 16–29 own a cell phone and most own smartphones, which provide access to the Internet. <http://pewinternet.org/Commentary/2012/February/Pew-Internet-Mobile.aspx>.

ⁱⁱ Pope Benedict XVI, “New Technologies, New Relationships: Promoting a Culture of Respect, Dialogue and Friendship,” Message for 43rd World Communications Day (May 24, 2009).

ⁱⁱⁱ For example, in preaching to nature-worshippers in Lystra, St. Paul and St. Barnabas spoke of God's creative powers (Acts 14:8–18). Preaching to the Greeks, St. Paul used the language of their poets and philosophers to explain the Christian message (Acts 17:22–24).

^{iv} See Phil. 4:8.

^v Pope Francis, “Communication at the Service of an Authentic Culture of Encounter,” Message for the 48th World Communications Day (June 1, 2014).

^{vi} See Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, “Communication and Culture: New Methods of Evangelization in the Third Millennium,” in *On the Way to Jesus Christ* (Ignatius, 2005), 42–54, at 49.

^{vii} Address to Pontifical Council for Social Communications (September 21, 2013).