

Introduction

We surely all have experienced the side-effects of the digital world, especially of social media with which we can waste quite a lot of time and even forget to live our everyday lives scrolling through feeds of barely known people. But it is important to hear the words of the Gospel that exhort us to be «as cunning as serpents» (Matt 10:16), and not to ignore the tools of today's world, but to use them wisely for good purposes. «Test them all; hold on to what is good», Paul reminds us in the very first New Testament book (1 Thess. 5:21). The potential of the tools of New Media are talents that are not only worthwhile but necessary to be explored and utilized for the mission — if we fail to do so, we become like the servant who has buried his treasure (Matt 25:14–30). The need for this has already been pointed out by several popes and theologians. Moreover, the use of modern communication channels is fully in line with our Church's self-definition regarding its mission of evangelization and the service of the common good. The last hundred years have brought many new impulses and a definite openness to the world around us - so it is worth taking a brief look at the most prominent examples of the Church-related use of New Media.

1. New Media

There is no possibility to fully discuss the concept of New Media in this article, but the most important thing to note here is that while Old Media tools (television, newspaper, radio, books) did not allow its target audience to comment and react, New Media is based on user-made content and also supports online commenting and communication which makes it very vivid and dynamic. New Media involves blogs, video sharing sites like YouTube, online podcasts, streaming possibilities, and Social Media, such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, LinkedIn, etc. According to 2019 statistics, we can see the inevitable role of New Media. The study reports that there were 3.48 billion social media users in 2019, with 9% total worldwide growth (288 million) since last year.²

2. New Media in Evangelization: spreading the Gospel and nurturing spiritual life

New Media in the Service of the Gospel and the Common Good

Réka Mohay

2.1 Word on Fire

Word on Fire is more of a global «media chaplaincy» than an ordinary website.³ Its simple but revolutionary purpose is to evangelize culture. It is led by a well-known bishop, Robert Barron, making high-quality videos⁴ on a wide range of topics: Christianity, sacraments, theology, spirituality, philosophy, movies, literary works and social issues on YouTube, which are gripping and informative summaries of the current topics. Their purpose is also to call out to non-believers and sceptics. Barron describes how he encounters a number of negative comments on the videos.⁵ However, because he can respond to such reactions, it offers a unique opportunity to engage in dialogue with those who have never set foot in any Church institutions. Many of them are in search of true values and meaning, and this way, to their great surprise, they find themselves discussing life and faith with a Catholic priest from the comfort of their own home.⁶ Many other forms of content are available on the site: homilies, blog posts, articles, professional and educational materials that can help the formation of parish and other groups. Word on Fire also aims to strengthen a positive Church image. Father Steve Grunow, a co-worker, says that if the Church does not present itself authentically and bravely in the context of New Media, others will do it, and there will certainly be hostile and false approaches.⁷

Word on Fire is not only present on the website and on YouTube, but also on Facebook, Twitter and, more recently, Instagram, along with Barron's own accounts, making their activities even more widespread and interactive. Barron has been present on Instagram for a while now, which is one of the New Media tools that is increasing rapidly. In 2015, 300 million active users were reported, sharing an average of 70 million photos per day, and its importance is still growing.⁸

2.2 Catholics Come Home

The Catholics Come Home initiative originates from Tom Peterson, a Catholic

media professional who aims to re-evangelize by modern means of communication, primarily targeting Catholics who are far from the Church and their faith. It uses two basic tools: video ads and a website.⁹ The ads draw attention to the website where all the videos can be watched. From time to time, new short films are released; in 2016, for example, the Millennium Generation was specifically addressed. Some videos show the beauty of Church life, others focus on the lives of young Catholics, and others briefly point out that life has much more to offer than everyday chores if we listen to God's call. We can also encounter advertisements in which public figures talk about their faith or their conversion. Many videos focus on the personal stories of converted former atheists and agnostics. In addition to these, many questions and answers can be read, presenting the Church's teaching in a clear, understandable way. There is a section which offers help regarding confession, and another that redirects us to other websites to find the churches and Masses that are closest to us. According to a previous survey, more than 53% of non-practicing Catholics who saw at least one of the advertisements produced were at least thinking about returning to the church or getting more information.¹⁰

2.3 Pray as You Go

Invented to support and enrich the spiritual growth of religious practitioners, Pray as You Go, a British-developed Jesuit program, is available on their website and in the form of a mobile app.¹¹ Its purpose is very simple: to help with daily prayer. The editors have three main aspirations for their users: to become more aware of God's presence in their lives, to listen to God's word, and to grow in their relationship with Him. New audio material is available every day on the website and in the app, which includes a scripture passage, related reflections, prayer, personal questions, and usually two kinds of sacred or classical musical pieces to help one focus and «tune in». In Lent and Advent,

online retreats are also uploaded. All their materials are sophisticated and of high value, serving as a true spiritual resource, and are completely free. The website also has an editors' e-mail address where anyone can send comments and questions.

2.4 @Pontifex

Twitter is a social media interface for sharing and connecting information across the Internet, allowing users to communicate via short tweets. At the end of 2012, Benedict XVI entered Twitter with huge success. After just signing up, even before writing his first tweet, he had already gained thousands of followers.¹² Since then, Pope Francis has taken over this communication platform from his predecessor, sending new messages every day to his millions of followers, such as social justice issues and spiritual questions. Regarding Pope Francis's online presence, it is worth mentioning his video message sent to a Pentecostal meeting of American Pentecostal Protestants in 2014. The recording was made with the help of a friend and participant of the meeting, Tony Palmer, a Protestant bishop who recorded the words of the Holy Father with his iPhone.¹³ As Zsupan-Jerome states, though the message is mediated, this kind of communication still creates a very personal and direct atmosphere.¹⁴ Videos like this one also show that, ultimately, online communication points towards real, personal human relationships.¹⁵

3. New Media in service of the common good: Social movements

3.1 Online Protest against Anti-Catholic Commercials: Kayak, Hyundai

Thomas Peters, the founder of the «American Papist» blog¹⁶ reports that he used the opportunity to reach out to a large number of Catholic readers to initiate online movements, such as raising their voices against anti-Catholic commercials. One example was the Kayak travel website's commercial that presented Catholic nuns as being «repressed» — in an unfair way.¹⁷ He blogged about the offensive character of the video and created an online protest against it via Facebook and Twitter where many Catholics expressed their concerns, adding that they were not willing to use the services of this site in future. The movement succeeded: Kayak withdrew the commercial and the company's chief mar-

keting officer even made a public apology. The same happened to Hyundai's commercial that made fun of the Holy Mass, presenting a slightly sacrilegious «soccer Mass». This advertisement was also pulled and apologies were sent out to everyone who personally contacted the company through digital space.¹⁸

3.2 Supporting Persecuted Christians

It was also the «American Papist» blog, and other online petitions too, that played a great role in the support of Asia Bibi, a woman whose story went worldwide after being sentenced to death in Pakistan due to her Catholicism.¹⁹ Of course, many other factors played a role in freeing Bibi, but the online space functioned as a platform for expressing solidarity and calling for justice and prayers. This example shows us how important it can be to give a voice to our opinions via social media. The more of us who do it, the more we can be heard. This is something, even if we can do no more in a difficult situation but stand up for truth and for those who need protection with the help of online tools.

3.3 Catholic Relief Services – Online Fundraising for Charity

Other important examples of using the digital world and New Media for the service of the common good are the online charity-fundraising possibilities. These options not only raise awareness of a good cause but let us help materially. One website of this kind is called Catholic Relief Services (CRS.org) where people can easily contribute with micro donations via text messages. Thanks to these donations CRS supports refugees, local farmers, survivors of natural disasters and various kinds of people in need. Another current example is the enormous joint effort that we could see in Hungary when more than 2.1 million Euros were raised in less than a week for the expensive medical care of a toddler, Zente, suffering from a rare condition called spinal muscular atrophy.²⁰ The call for help was shared by thousands of Hungarians on social media, especially on Facebook and Instagram.

3.4 Pro-Life Movements

Online cooperation can also play an important role in the efforts of the pro-life movement. It can help to encourage pro-family

legislation and voting for candidates that are committed to Catholic values.²¹ But the New Media can also build a «digital movement» such as the «40 days for Life» campaigns that are worldwide peaceful prayer movements organized to pray for the end of abortion. The founders hold online webcasts to communicate and coordinate the volunteers around the world who join the movement and start prayer vigils in their local cities.²² All this could not have been accomplished without the use of New Media tools. In similar ways, online podcasts, Instagram stories and video-conferences can all be valuable when it comes to spreading the gospel or to standing up for important issues.

Conclusion

The examples presented here show the need for creativity, prudence, faith, commitment and courage while working in this field. As Pope Francis repeatedly encourages us to do, we should indeed step out of our comfort zones and ask the Spirit of wisdom and understanding for inspiration.²³ We also need proper formation and knowledge for those who work for the Church using New Media. Excellent professionalism is also required to handle the challenges of the digital world as we are responsible for how we use the «talents» given to us in the modern era. Nevertheless, it is crucial to add one more argument. Without there being community, personal commitment to our faith, and being real witnesses to the Gospel, online communication, mass media or any kind of programs lose their worth. We need persons and communities who listen to each other, have compassion and care, and who show love towards each other and towards the whole creation that is entrusted to us. This always has to be the first step. New Media usage must always remain a tool, not a goal. It too should be a form of service to the Kingdom of God, in which there is no place for any kind of self-centeredness or vanity, while there is a huge need for authenticity, solidarity and community – facilitating offline relationships when possible. Online space presence is a necessity, but it only makes sense if we use it to listen, to accompany, and to help others get closer to their Creator on their journey towards Him.

Resources

GOULD, Meredith, *The Social Media Gospel, Sharing the Good News in New Ways*, Liturgical Press, Collegeville 2015.

KASZÁS, Fanni, *700 million Raised in Less Than a Week for Hungarian Toddler's Medicine, Hungary Today*, <https://hungarytoday.hu/700-million-raised-in-less-than-a-week-for-hungarian-toddlers-medicine>

Pope FRANCIS: *Evangelii Gaudium*, Rome, 2013, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html

VOGT, Brandon, *The Church and New Media, Blogging converts, online activists and bishops who tweet*, Our Sunday Visitor, 2011.

WeAreSocial.com, <https://wearesocial.com/blog/2019/01/digital-2019-global-internet-use-accelerates>

ZSUPAN-JEROME, Daniella, *Connected Toward Communion, The Church and Social Communication in the Digital Age*, Liturgical Press, Collegeville, 2014.

NOTES

¹WeAreSocial.com, <https://wearesocial.com/blog/2019/01/digital-2019-global-internet-use-accelerates>

²<https://www.wordonfire.org>

³<https://www.youtube.com/user/wordonfire-video/videos>

⁴It is no coincidence that in his speech at the Synod on Young People in 2018 he also outlined his strategic principles for youth evangelization through his video experience.

⁵VOGT, Brandon, *The Church and New Media, Blogging converts, online activists and bishops who tweet*, Our Sunday Visitor, 2011, pp. 29–30.

⁶Ivi, p. 32.

⁷GOULD, Meredith: *The Social Media Gospel, Sharing the Good News in New Ways*, Liturgical Press, Collegeville, 2015, p. 86.

⁸<https://www.catholicscomehome.org/>

⁹VOGT, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

¹⁰Pray as You Go, <https://www.pray-as-you-go.org/home/>

¹¹Pope BENEDICT XVI opens Twitter account, has thousands of followers without a tweet, Deseret News, <https://www.deseretnews.com/article/865568019/Pope-Benedict-XVI-opens-Twitter-account-has-thousands-of-followers-without-a-tweet.html>

¹²ZSUPAN-JEROME, Daniella: *Connected Toward Communion, The Church and Social Communication in the Digital Age*, Liturgical Press, Collegeville, 2014, 126.

¹³*Ibidem*.

¹⁴The video can be watched here: <https://youtu.be/NZ9Ssvs5cgY>. The Pope here tells us that the divisions between Christians are the fault of all of us, but also expresses hope for unity and draws attention to each other as brothers and sisters, regardless of denomination.

¹⁵American Papist blog was one of the most read Catholic blogs in 2011. Nowadays, Peters' posts can be read at the following link: <https://catholicvote.org/author/thomas-peters/>

¹⁶VOGT, *op. cit.*, pp. 168–169.

¹⁷*Ibidem*.

¹⁸Ivi, p. 171.

¹⁹KASZÁS, Fanni, *700 million Raised in Less Than a Week for Hungarian Toddler's Medicine, Hungary Today*, <https://hungarytoday.hu/700-million-raised-in-less-than-a-week-for-hungarian-toddlers-medicine>

²⁰VOGT, *op. cit.*, pp. 171–172.

²¹Ivi, pp. 177–188.

²⁴Pope FRANCIS: *Evangelii Gaudium*, Rome, 2013, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html, 20; 280.