

The Church in a Digital Age

Speaking Notes, Paul Tighe, Notre Dame, 19th October 2016

In this intervention, I wish to reflect on what it means to evangelize in a world that is marked by the profound cultural changes that are being forged by digital and social media. When we think about the changes in communication, what some commentators call the 'digital revolution', it is natural to focus on the technological developments. We are fascinated by the speed with which communication devices are becoming more powerful, smaller, more connected and accessible. While this focus is understandable, the truth is that the most profound change is not technological but cultural: the real challenge is to appreciate how much is changing in the ways that people, especially young people, are gathering information, are being educated, are expressing themselves, are forming relationships and communities. In 2012, Pope Emeritus Benedict insisted that: *The new technologies are not only changing the way we communicate, but communication itself (World Communications Day Message, 2012)*. These changes, moreover, are not just happening 'outside' the Church but within our communities and in the everyday experience of believers.

It is obvious that the Church must be attentive to its own theological traditions as it seeks to establish criteria for its engagement with the social media. We cannot rely only on the insights of sociologists and 'media gurus', no matter how valid their perceptions, as we seek to develop a strategy for our communications ministry. We must always begin with the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and seek to find ways of expressing to our contemporaries the abiding and ever relevant truth of God's unconditional love for all people. But as Pope Emeritus Benedict instructed the Pontifical Council: *It is not only a matter of expressing the Gospel message in contemporary language; it is also necessary to have the courage to think more deeply — as happened in other epochs — about the relationship between faith, the life of the Church and the changes human beings are experiencing.... what challenges does "digital thought" pose to faith and theology? What questions and requests? (Address to Pontifical Council for Social Communications, 2011)*

Church and Communications

I would like to begin by encouraging bishops to give more explicit attention to communications. When we talk about the communicative mission of the Church, we are not talking about one mission among many others. We are in fact talking about the fundamental reason why the Church exists. The Church exists by the will of God and it exists precisely to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ. From the beginning this has been its universal mission. We are called to bring the Good News to the ends of the earth, to ensure that the Gospel reaches and touches the hearts of people in every part

of our world. This message with which we have been entrusted – this Good News – is a Person, Jesus Christ, and we invite others not merely to know about him but to enter into a relationship with him. Good communication is never simply about the exchange of information but about the creation of relations – a truth that is becoming ever more verifiable in the realm of social media.

Today, when we speak of the ‘ends of the earth’, we must remember the so-called ‘digital continent’. As Pope Emeritus Benedict said in his message for World Communications Day 2013: *The digital environment is not a parallel or purely virtual world, but is part of the daily experience of many people, especially the young (WCD Message, 2013)*. For them, digital devices are not primarily instruments to be used but are part of the fabric of their lives. I think we should avoid the term ‘new media’: these technologies and networks are ‘new’ for me and those of us of a certain age but they are a normal everyday feature of the lives of younger generations in the developed world and, increasingly, in developing countries. To talk of ‘new media’ is to date oneself, and to risk failing to appreciate their ‘ordinariness’ in the lives of so many. We need to recognise that those who have come of age with digital communications do not live with strong distinctions between their ‘on-line’ and their ‘off-line’ experiences. The connectivity facilitated by these devices has reshaped their existential environment and enables them to live their lives in the context of networks and patterns of friendships, association and community that would have been unimaginable until a decade ago.

Moreover, these networks have become fundamental points of reference for them in their pursuit of information and news, for self-expression, for shaping public opinion and for dialogue and debate. Given the centrality of the networks and the connected media environment in the lives of people today, it is absolutely necessary that the Church should seek to establish a presence in the ‘digital world’. If the Church is not present, and does not share the Good News in this forum, then we risk becoming marginal to the lives of many and are failing in our mission to bring the gospel to the ends of the earth.

Communication is also at the heart of our daily lives as believers. The Church is a community, it is the gathering of those who been called together by Christ. Our ‘ecclesia’ cannot flourish, our Church will not be a place of communion and belonging, if we do not foster those forms of communication that promote a sense of connection and participation. We must learn to appreciate the potential of social media to ensure that people are being listened to, consulted by, engaged with and valued by the Church and their pastors. This is not just a question of customer relations or marketing but of ensuring that the Church *can give witness and voice to the faith of the whole people of God gathered together by Christ (Gaudium et Spes,3.)*

The Church does not only communicate through those formal means with which we are most familiar. Communication is not confined to pulpits, radio, TV, newspapers and the internet; we are rich in these means, but we communicate in every aspect of our lives. Communication is also a fundamental aspect of our liturgies and our celebrations. Communication is effected by how we live our faith, run our schools and hospitals, and treat the poor and vulnerable. Often, the most important communication is the strength of our witness to the Good News – our testimony renders it believable and welcome in the lives of others, or not. It is our life, our liturgy, our attitudes, our approach to people that speaks most loudly, for better or for worse. Social media allows us to see ourselves as others see us. If we are attentive to the comments, criticisms and observations of those who visit our sites and engage with our postings, we can learn much about how we are perceived. We need to understand better how our message is being heard and understood, and how we are seen, by different audiences. We have always, and rightly, focused on the content of our teaching; today we must listen more attentively to our audience, or the multiple audiences we address, and understand their concerns and questions. We need to understand better, and take account of, the contexts and environments in which they will encounter us and the Gospel we seek to proclaim in word and deed.

The presence of the Church in the digital world/social networks

I have already argued that the Church must be present in the digital continent. The real challenge, however, is to establish a presence that recognises and responds to the distinctive culture of that environment. Just as in previous times, missionaries had to understand the culture, languages and customs of the continents they sought to evangelise; so also today, we have to be attentive to our way of being present, the language we use and how we will engage with the values and dynamics that characterize the networks. When it comes to understanding how we should be present in the digital environment, we need to ask the right question. It is not about how we should use the new technologies to evangelise but rather how we can be an evangelising presence in the new 'world' that has been brought into being by these technologies. *The dynamics proper to "participatory networks" further require that the person be involved in what he or she communicates. When people exchange information, they are already sharing themselves and their vision of the world: they become "witnesses" of what gives their life meaning (Pope Emeritus Benedict, Address to PCSC, 2011).*

Clearly, believers have a right, and a duty, to be fully active citizens of the digital world, to express their views and to share their deepest convictions. Our presence will only be effective, however, if we are authentic witnesses to our faith. We have to manifest our genuine concern for those we

encounter by *listening to them, conversing with them and encouraging them* (Pope Francis, *Address to PCSC, 2013*). We cannot simply bombard people with our 'answers' but must take their questions seriously and allow them to fully express themselves. *A particularly significant way of offering such witness will be through a willingness to give oneself to others by patiently and respectfully engaging their questions and their doubts as they advance in their search for the truth and the meaning of human existence* (Pope Benedict, *WCD Message, 2013*). This is particularly important in an environment where any question is likely to attract immediately commercial and ideological responses and offerings. If we allow people to go deeper and to probe further, we help to 'give a soul to the internet'. It is important to remember that we are not ourselves the soul of the digital arena, but our readiness to listen and our openness to the questions of others will enable them to express their deepest personal and spiritual yearnings. In this way, we help to ensure that *the digital world can be an environment rich in humanity; a network not of wires but of people* (Pope Francis, *WCD Message, 2014*).

If we take others seriously, show respect for them and their views, and avoid any form of manipulation or exploitation; then we are both offering a consistent witness to our faith in Jesus and helping to humanise social media. This is particularly necessary at a time when many are concerned about the increasingly shrill and violent nature of some of the commentary that is found on social networks. We need to add our efforts to those of other people of good will to ensure that humanity's enhanced capacity for expression and communication realizes its enormous potential to strengthen the unity of the human family, to foster an *authentic culture of encounter*, rather than perpetuate division and rancour.

As our relationships with those we encounter in the social networks becomes more profoundly human, it will become more appropriate and truthful for us to share the deepest source of our hope and joy. *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* (Pope Francis, *Address to PCSC, 2013*). In the context of a truly human encounter with another person, we would be lacking in authenticity if we did not seek to share the Good News that set us free. We share it, however, as a gift with full respect for the freedom of the other and the mystery that will be at the heart of his or her encounter with Christ: *Within this encounter, there is the person and there is Christ. There is no room for the spiritual engineer who wishes to manipulate* (Pope Francis, *ibid*).

The language of the social networks

Theologians must assist the Church in finding a 'language', a way of speaking, appropriate to the new media environment created by the technologies and the social networks. This is especially important if we are to be faithful to our mandate to speak to those who are not members of our community – to other Christians, to those of other religions, to non-believers and to those who are now distant from the life of faith having parted from the Church for various reasons. In speaking of language, I am thinking of our styles of engagement, our means of communication and our vocabulary.

In the first place, we must adjust our style of communication. As Pope Francis has stated: *God is everywhere: we have to know how to find him in order to be able to proclaim him in the language of each and every culture; every reality, every language, has its own rhythm (Address to CELAM, 28 July 2013)*. In the past, the technologies tended to privilege one directional communication: one person or institution broadcasted a message and the audience or public passively consumed it. Today, digital communication requires a more interactive participative style: unless our message engages people who begin to share it, comment upon it and question us about it, it will remain without an audience and we risk talking to ourselves. Unless we take others seriously and enter into conversation with them, we cannot expect them to pass much heed of us or hope to achieve 'traction' for our views and ideas. *We have to be able to dialogue with the men and women of today ... We are challenged to be people of depth, attentive to what is happening around us and spiritually alert. To dialogue means to believe that the "other" has something worthwhile to say, and to entertain his or her point of view and perspective (Pope Francis, WCD Message, 2014)*.

Secondly, we need to acknowledge that our traditional mode of expression was very text dependent while the digital culture tends to highlight multi-media content. Words and text are still important but our communication will be more effective if we can also express ourselves with images, video, music and gestures. We need to rediscover the capacity of art, music and literature to express the mysteries of our faith and to touch minds and hearts. Just as the stain glass images of the medieval cathedrals spoke to an illiterate audience, we must find digital forms of expression that are appropriate to a generation that has been described as "post-literate". We have long been accustomed to telling our story; we can now aspire to show who and what we are. We need to learn to show how we celebrate our faith, how we seek to serve and how our lives are graced and blest.

Finally, in talking of language we should recognise that much of our Church vocabulary – especially our theological and liturgical terms - can be problematic and confusing for our contemporaries. We

are challenged to rediscover simpler words and to use more accessible metaphors if we are to capture the attention of the broader public. Again Pope Francis has expressed this most clearly: *At times we lose people because they don't understand what we are saying, because we have forgotten the language of simplicity and import an intellectualism foreign to our people. Without the grammar of simplicity, the Church loses the very conditions which make it possible "to fish" for God in the deep waters of his Mystery (Meeting with the Bishops of Brazil, 28 July 2013).* The Holy Father, however, expresses this even more powerfully in the witness of his own preaching and his extraordinary capacity to engage people through the use of seemingly simple words, his memorable images and similes and his direct and positive body language. It is clear that the closer we can stay to the simplicity and directness of the language of the Gospels the more likely we are to touch hearts.

The need to find a new "language" is not new for people of faith. Throughout its history, the Church has learned to proclaim the unchanging message of Christ in new idioms and in ways that respond to different cultural contexts. The Church has long been "multi-lingual". The new language, in which it must be fluent in order to be present in the new forum of ideas and information, will stand beside the other languages of its tradition. Those who are concerned that the language of the digital culture is too banal or ephemeral to translate the profundity of the Christian message should remember that it is not a language that will substitute the precise language of dogma and theology or the rich language of homiletics or liturgy but rather will serve to establish an initial point of contact with those who are far from faith. Those who respond to this initial contact will be invited to more profound forms of engagement, where they will learn these other languages in their proper context. The Chief Rabbi of Britain, Jonathan Sacks, makes an instructive distinction between the language of "broadcasting" where the aim is to engage the general public and that of "narrowcasting" where the focus is on those who already share our worldview. *Anyone who has ever delivered a religious broadcast knows how difficult it is to speak to an unknown and open audience. To our fellow believers we can address words of fire; to a wider public only the vaguest generalities. Broadcasting as opposed to narrowcasting is low on authenticity. But if we are to have a public culture, and one with a religious dimension, it is a discipline we have to undergo. We have to learn to speak to those we do not hope to convert, but with whom we wish to live. Narrowcasting frees us from that burden. But it moves us nearer a situation in which opinion is ghettoized into segmented audiences, and where the increase of choice means that we only have to listen to voices with which we agree. (Jonathan Sacks, *The Persistence of Faith*, London, 1991, p64).*

Engaging the culture of the social networks – anthropological dimension

I believe we should begin by recognizing and celebrating the potential of digital technology and the social media to facilitate human communication, to allow for the sharing of words and images almost simultaneously across enormous distances and with people who might previously have been isolated. This in turn allows people to use the technologies to promote greater understanding and harmony among people, *creating a sense of the unity of the human family which can in turn inspire solidarity and serious efforts to ensure a more dignified life for all (Pope Francis, WCD Message, 2014)*. In 2009, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI described these technologies as being *'truly a gift to humanity'* and in 2014, Pope Francis said that the potential of the internet to foster a culture of encounter and solidarity allows us to conclude that *it is something truly good, a gift from God*.

The technologies, however, will not automatically lead to a change for the better: *'Just because social communications increase the possibilities of interconnection and the dissemination of ideas, it does not follow that they promote freedom or internationalize development and democracy for all. To achieve goals of this kind, they need to focus on promoting the dignity of persons and peoples, they need to be clearly inspired by charity and placed at the service of truth, of the good, and of natural and supernatural fraternity' (Pope Benedict, Caritas in veritate, 73, 2009)*. There is a need for a determined commitment from individuals and institutions if this is to happen. *'It is not enough to be passersby on the digital highways, simply "connected"; connections need to grow into true encounters. We cannot live apart, closed in on ourselves. We need to love and to be loved. We need tenderness. Media strategies do not ensure beauty, goodness and truth in communication. The world of media also has to be concerned with humanity, it too is called to show tenderness. The digital world can be an environment rich in humanity; a network not of wires but of people (Pope Francis, WCD Message, 2014)*. The Church has an important contribution to make to the culture of the social networks by insisting on the importance of human agency and by challenging those dimensions of digital culture that threaten human flourishing and well-being.

Commentators frequently speak of user generated content with reference to the social networks, but we must remember also that the very culture of the social networks is user generated. If the networks are to be spaces where good positive communications can help to promote individual and social well-being then the users, the people who make up the networks, need to be attentive to the type of content they are creating, promoting and sharing. All of us are aware of cases where social media have been abused, where people have been attacked, ridiculed, had their privacy violated or are being manipulated. There is a role for Governments and International Organization to play in regulating this environment and the large corporations who operate in this space, but there is an

equally important moral or ethical obligation on all of us as individual agents to ensure that these environments are safe and humanly enriching. *All users will avoid the sharing of words and images that are degrading of human beings, that promote hatred and intolerance, that debase the goodness and intimacy of human sexuality or that exploit the weak and vulnerable (Pope Benedict XVI, WCD Message, 2009).*

In his address to the PCSC in 2011, Pope Emeritus Benedict drew attention to the example of Father Matteo Ricci and his engagement with the culture of China: *In his work disseminating Christ's message, he always considered individual people and their cultural and philosophical context, values, and language, accepting everything positive to be found in his or her tradition, and offering to enliven and uplift it with the wisdom and truth of Christ.* Even the most superficial familiarity with the culture of digital media and the social networks is sufficient to show that the main drivers of social media are activities related to the human need for connectivity and friendship, the search for knowledge and information, the wish for stimulus, the desire for self-expression and to share, and the hope for guidance and direction expressed in the 'following' of others. All these are core human activities which I believe point to the enduring openness of human persons for an encounter with Jesus. He alone can satisfy the human yearning for friendship and love; he is the Truth who frees us from sin and weakness; he calls us to the fullness of self-giving in love, and he leads his followers to the abundance of life in unity and communion. In leading people to an encounter with Christ, we can also liberate them from some of the risks we can recognise in digital culture: the loss of interiority, a superficial or merely quantitative understanding of friendship, the triumph of emotivism over reason, self-absorption or exhibitionism, and polarization.

The institutional challenge - strategy

In terms of evolving an appropriate institutional strategy for our engagement with social media, we are fortunate that we have within the Church a great wealth and experience in terms of the people who are working with Church newspapers, radio, television and web-sites, as well as those who have been leading the way in social media. I can understand the apprehension of some who are involved with what might be called traditional media but good communication will always require the skills of professional writers, editors and audio-visual producers. The development of an adequate strategy for the digital world, however, will require that these professionals rethink their way of working. It is not simply enough to take content produced for traditional media and post it on-line. What is needed is more inter-disciplinary collaboration in order to produce material that is truly multi-media and the allocation of resources in such a way as to permit real engagement with those who wish to discuss, question and deepen their understanding of such materials.

We should applaud the efforts of the wide community of Catholic institutions and individuals across the globe who are helping to establish the presence of the Church in the digital world. Their willingness to talk about their work, to honestly evaluate their initiatives and to share their learning and experience provides us with insights and indicators of best practice that can in turn be shared with others.

Another institutional challenge is that we have to learn to communicate in an environment where traditional 'authorities' do not have the same influence as they once had. People will no longer pay attention, if they ever did, simply because a Church leader is speaking. We have to learn to command attention more by the quality of our interventions, by our responsiveness to others and by our ability to engage meaningfully with those questions and debates that are already claiming public attention. Part of the challenge for the Church in the area of digital media is to establish a networked or capillary presence that can effectively engage the debates, discussions and dialogues that are facilitated by social media and that invite direct, personal and timely responses of a type that are not so easily achieved by centralized institutions. Moreover, such a networked or capillary structure reflects the truth of the Church as a community of communities which is alive both universally and locally. We should also bear in mind that the Church is both "Roman" and "Catholic" in the sense that it is universal. It is important that we remember both. Rome is a symbolic centre of unity and a centre of governance. The Catholic dimension, which probably best accounts for the universality of the Church, is the reality that the same Church that is present in Rome is alive and present by the grace of God on different continents throughout our world. What is important is that what is celebrated, what is lived at the local reality, is the truth of the reality of the Church. It is at the local level that the Church finds much of its vitality. It is at the local level that the Church structures reach and touch the lives of so many people.

I believe there is a need for greater theological reflection in the area of ecclesiology. Talking our lead from the work of Avery Dulles, we need to revisit the issue of our models of the Church. We live in a networked society, which sociologists characterize as being 'poly-centric' with people belonging to and attaching varying levels of influence to a variety of networks. In this context, we have to ask if our 'traditional' or 'instinctive' tendency to think of the Church in terms of an institutional model - a unified society with a clear 'mono-centric' authority - is not so removed from the cultural expectations of those we wish to engage as to be unhelpful. I think we can profitably read again Chapter 4 of *Lumen Gentium* which reminds us of the central role of the laity in bringing their faith and the values of the Gospel into all the existential contexts in which they live - they live in the ordinary circumstances of family and social life, from which the very web of their existence is

woven (Lumen Gentium, 31) and that they will have a legitimate autonomy of action, By divine institution the Holy Church is ordered and governed with a wonderful diversity (ibid, 32).

The personal challenge - conversion

By drawing attention to the importance of personal conversion, I wish to return to a basic truth of communications. Who we are, and how we behave, will always speak more eloquently than our words. Our words, our profession of faith and our expression of a desire to share this faith with others, will only speak to others if they come from our hearts. In order to effectively share our faith and our hopes, we must nourish our own faith in and relationship with Jesus and allow his grace to change us. Conversion is at its deepest a change of heart, a *metanoia*. This will clarify for us whether we are simply members of a sect or true witnesses to Jesus. If our faith is alive in our hearts, and is genuinely a ground for hope in our everyday existence, then it will be natural for us to desire to share it with others. *Be servants of communion and of the culture of encounter! I would like you to be almost obsessed about this. Be so without being presumptuous, imposing "our truths", but rather be guided by the humble yet joyful certainty of those who have been found, touched and transformed by the Truth who is Christ, ever to be proclaimed (Pope Francis, Meeting with Bishops of Brazil, 28 July 2013).*

Here as ever, we remember that good communication begins with listening: we must cherish God's word and meditate on it so that it reshapes us, so that our words will be born from our encounter with the Word. By keeping alive the intensity of our communion with Jesus in prayer, the sacraments and service of the poor, we will become credible witnesses to the power of God's grace and help others find their way to Him. *This is the challenge: to bring the person to Christ. This must be done, however, in complete awareness that we ourselves are means of communication and that the real problem does not concern the acquisition of the latest technologies, even if these make a valid presence possible. It is necessary to be absolutely clear that the God in whom we believe, who loves all men and women intensely, wants to reveal himself through the means at our disposal, however poor they are, because it is he who is at work, he who transforms and saves us (Pope Francis, Address to PCSC, 21 September 2013).*

We must recognise, however, that while we should seek to be professional and committed in our communication mission, that ultimately it is by God's grace and the action of the Holy Spirit that lives are changed and that people come to faith. We should never doubt what Pope Emeritus Benedict called the *power of the word of God itself to touch hearts, prior to any of our own efforts (WCD Message, 2013). As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it*

without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it. (Isaiah 55, 10-11).