

THE CARDINALS' FORUM
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on **“Co-Responsibility for the Church’s Being & Action in Parish Life”**

presentation by

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“Co-Responsibility” is an idea easy enough to understand – by virtue of our baptism, we are all in this Church thing together.

But it’s hard to be all in anything together when we are “socially distanced”! This is the changed environment in which we live.

For parish life, ecological changes actually preceded the coronavirus and will have a longer-lasting impact. As the Congregation for the Clergy points out,¹ parishes “must confront a peculiar characteristic of our contemporary world, whereby increased mobility and the digital culture have expanded the confines of existence” and “altered the concept of space, together with people’s language and behaviour, especially in younger generations” (no. 8).

My intervention this evening focuses on this twofold peculiarity.

We can all recall the time when parishioners could not go to Church or participate in the parish’s liturgical life, even if they wanted to! (In some places, this is still the case.) Here in Philly, we have “arisen” from the shut down, but it remains to be seen how the faithful will respond.

However, the pandemic did not shut down the parish! The doors may have been closed, but churches were not. Paradoxically, social communications may have made the Church more open than it had been pre-COVID.

We livestreamed Masses. We shared liturgical devotions. We preached through podcasts. We broadcast school celebrations and communal activities. Through digital media, then, parishes have gone out to people, just as a missionary Church should.

But there's a catch. The mobile environment which makes outreach possible also means that people can "go to church" elsewhere! In a digital world, time and space no longer pose limits on what people do.

Consequently, our conception of a parish must expand. As the instruction says,

the Parish territory is no longer a geographical space only, but also the context in which people express their lives in terms of relationships, reciprocal service and ancient traditions. It is in this "existential territory" where the challenges facing the Church in the midst of the community are played out (no. 16).

To meet those challenges, parishes must wade into the online world, there to find and share the "mystique" of believing together, there to encounter one another in the digital spaces in which people are so frequently and so immersively present.²

In this new ecology, the dynamics of parish life will be different:

- The shepherd/sheep paradigm – in which priests alone lead and parishioners simply follow – will no longer prevail. Instead, "sharing" and "interactivity" become the hallmarks of co-responsible community.
- The annual (October) counts of attendance – which envision parishioners as merely receivers of spiritual services – will no longer suffice to indicate parish vitality. Instead, "engagement" and "interaction" become the measures of co-responsible presence.
- And the architectural glory or liturgical beauty of the church – while still necessary for inspiration – will no longer manage, on their own, to attract people to participate in parish life. Instead, person-centered witness and charity-based teaching, both on- and off-line, become the means to co-responsible evangelization.

How to bring this co-responsibility about is, of course, the bigger question. I hope our discussion will yield some helpful ideas. For now, let me offer just three considerations:

First, *every parish today should have a formal communications plan, developed with broad-based input, and someone on staff with primary responsibility for fulfilling it.*

We already have maintenance plans carried out by facility directors, and we operate with budgets monitored by business managers. Yet if the Church's mission is to celebrate and proclaim the Good News of salvation, then planning and directing parish communications should be a priority.

Second, *parishes should invest in digital media, in terms of both material and human resources.*

Since the medium is the message, or at least affects how the message is received, parish communications must be done well. Just as the beauty of a church inspires, so the quality of audio and visual media should be compelling. The benefits of investing in technology are literally far-reaching in a digital space. And the costs can easily be alleviated by engaging parishioners – especially young people – who are capable of making the media work well.

The last consideration actually comes as an offer: Together with a team of apostolic interns from this Seminary – if we can figure out how to organize them! – *the Cardinal Foley Chair is willing to audit, advise, and assist any parish in this archdiocese with its social communications.*

In conclusion, there's no turning back! For parishes to survive in a post-pandemic world and to thrive in a digital culture, connecting the faith community through social media is an essential part of the new normal. And it's one way that we can, indeed, all be in this Church thing together.

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¹ Congregation for the Clergy, "The pastoral conversion of the Parish community in the service of the evangelising mission of the Church" (20 July 2020). [Online link](#).

² Cf. Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 87: "Today, when the networks and means of human communication have made unprecedented advances, we sense the challenge of finding and sharing a "mystique" of living together, of mingling and encounter, of embracing and supporting one another, of stepping into this flood tide which, while chaotic, can become a genuine experience of fraternity, a caravan of solidarity, a sacred pilgrimage. Greater possibilities for communication thus turn into greater possibilities for encounter and solidarity for everyone. ... To go out of ourselves and to join others is healthy for us. To be self-enclosed is to taste the bitter poison of immanence, and humanity will be worse for every selfish choice we make."