

Meeting the Digital Challenge to Evangelization

by

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issue #3, pp. 4-5

“What will spirituality be for those persons whose *modus cogitandi* is going through a ‘mutation’ because they dwell in the digital environment?” In posing this question to European bishops, Fr. Antonio Spadaro, S.J. laid out a series of challenges affecting evangelization in the age of digital communications.

Challenge #1: **move from *answers* to *questions*.**

The Church has plenty of answers to offer – two thousand years’ worth! So does everyone else in the digital realm, where thoughts abound, posts proliferate, and videos go viral. The potential problem is that the answers we are eager to give may not respond to the questions people are asking.

Evangelization requires that we discern what’s really going on in the digital environment, which means listening first. Can we hear, among the trending topics online, what people are really interested in? Can we figure out, amid the multitude of posts and comments, what people are really searching for?

Digital discernment seeks to identify life’s fundamental questions – those at the root of our shared experiences, however disquieting those may be. Recalling St. Augustine, before giving answers we must first discover what it is that makes the human heart “restless” today.

That requires dialogue not debate, and pondering more than positioning. Before spreading the Good News, we first need to establish that it really is Good because it fulfills what people really need. Before answering, we need to help people sort out the fundamental questions in their lives. We can’t begin with the conclusions!

Consider the 2014 Synod of Bishops, where married couples from different cultures spoke openly about their sorrows and joys, their worries and hopes. That gave a needed dose of realism to the

subsequent discussion about doctrine and practice. Dialogue like that should happen online, too. Listening to those affected by our teaching is crucial if we want to bring the Church to them, and them to the Church.

Challenge #2: move from *content-centered* to *person-centered* pastoral work.

Online content, stored in a cloud and transmitted wirelessly, orbits all around us. People now select what they want to read or watch or listen to. Information is on-demand and on personal terms.

Evangelization contends with this swirling information. But it must offer more than simply another container of religious content. It needs to engage others in a way that convinces them to share it with their friends and followers.

To do that, we cannot simply refer to established principles, regurgitate memorized texts, or expound on theological theories. People today choose what they “follow” and seek to contribute their own “comments.” As a result, says Fr. Spadaro, “The life of the Church is called to assume a form always more communicative and participative.”

Digital evangelization means first getting people’s attention about what the Church offers to ease their restless hearts. We do that by speaking plainly, not in esoteric terms. We do that by connecting what we believe to the everyday realities of life. We do that by touching people where they are before inviting them to come farther.

A person-centered approach to evangelization invites consideration rather than requires assent. Faith is proposed, not imposed. Ideally, we give others something to ponder, something for which they deeply long, something so wonderful that they will want to share it with others.

Challenge #3: move from *transmission* to *testimony*.

Learning in the digital realm is customized and user-generated. Gone are the days of magisterial lecturers or imperious preachers. The one-man, top-down approach to communications is being replaced by “sharing” information via social “networks.” Authority is giving way to authenticity.

This social dimension to digital communications calls for an evangelization first concerned with witnessing, with giving personal testimony to lived faith prior to elucidating thought about it.

Whatever the form, digital communication involves real people. Quoting Pope Benedict XVI, Fr. Spadaro reminds us that “when persons exchange information, they are already sharing

themselves, their vision of the world, their hopes, their ideals.” Sadly, research suggests that digital exchanges come from and spread more anger than happiness.

To counter this negativity, evangelization must first take the form of an encounter, in which we share who we are as believers before delving into what we believe. But this goes far beyond the potentially off-putting display of religious pictures or Bible quotes; spiritual texts or images are not nearly as convincing as spiritual people!

To share the faith means to share “me” – even in a digital profile, post, comment, or video clip. It means giving witness to what we believe not in a photo-shopped way but in the real joy of the Gospel that is integrated in all that we say and do. To “share” this lets us evangelize in person, even when online.

Challenge #4: move from *propaganda* to *proximity*.

Evangelization that is merely propagandizing or proselytizing misses the persons for whom it is intended. There’s a big difference, says Fr. Spadaro, between “emitting” religious content and “sharing” the Gospel.

Quoting Pope Francis, Fr. Spadaro reminds us of the immense power of digital communications to offer an opportunity for encounters among people: “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” (*Evangelii gaudium*, no. 87).

How do we effectively communicate this “mystique” of living together online? It doesn’t happen if all we do is preach to the choir of the like-minded or if our message does no more than rage against the night of society’s ills. Either extreme – the safe or the sanctimonious – closes us in on ourselves and offers only what Pope Francis calls “the bitter poison of immanence.”

Instead, evangelization today demands that we wade into the online crowds! In the vast network there we can draw near to and accompany others by sharing real experiences, celebrating personal milestones, or confronting difficult questions in charitable dialogue with the masses. Whatever the occasion, we need to “meet” others where they are, not by hiding behind digital media but by using it, as the pope says, to “go out of ourselves and to join others.”

To fulfill our mission as digital disciples, we can’t get others to the goal – to join us in belonging and believing – unless we first join near to them.

Challenge #5: **move from *ideas* to *story-telling*.**

In today's world, communications happens by way of emotive updates, photo albums, and film fragments. Together they constitute the streaming story of our lives.

At its root, evangelization entails narration – a telling of the story of redemption in the person of Jesus Christ. With so many opportunities offered online, meeting the challenge of evangelization today means learning how to tell that Gospel story with the enhanced power of digital media (web sites, blogs, podcasts, videos, etc.). Even more so, it means narrating that story with a whole cast of characters that remain always real people in need of salvation – the faithful and the nominal, the nones and the dones, indeed all of us.

Nowadays the Gospel as a sacred book to be studied and taught takes a secondary (but still important!) place to the Gospel as an inspired life to be liked and shared. Our primary task is to interiorize that Good News for ourselves – to live it and be enlivened by it – and then to interact with others in our social networks so as to walk them and bring the Gospel to them.

Pope Francis concluded his first message for World Communications Day with this exhortation: “The revolution taking place in communications media and in information technologies represents a great and thrilling challenge; may we respond to that challenge with fresh energy and imagination as we seek to share with others the beauty of God.”

It's now up to *all* of us to take up that challenge and so fulfill the pastoral mission of the Church in today's digital world.

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