

Sharing the Good News in a Digital Culture

Contextualizing the New Evangelization and Catechesis

In this essay, I would like to develop some thoughts on the contemporary cultural context in which the Church is called to evangelize and catechise. In doing so, I wish to celebrate the specific contributions of Bishop Franz-Peter Tebartz-van Elst to the work of the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of the New Evangelization, where he serves as Delegate, and, more generally, his lifetime involvement in the field of catechetical studies. In fairness to the reader, I must immediately concede that I am not a specialist in either the study of the new evangelization or catechesis but I will seek to contribute as someone whose work in the fields of communications and culture has required me to reflect critically on the dynamics of digital culture and to be attentive to the changing context in which the Church is called to realize its unchanging mission to make known the Good News of God's unconditional love for all people.

It is not easy to offer a comprehensive definition of the New Evangelization. I would, however, suggest that the 'newness' is both descriptive and prescriptive: it has to do both with the 'new' situation in which we find ourselves and with the 'renewed' nature of the response that is required if we are to be faithful to our abiding mission to make known the person of Jesus and his message. We must strive to understand the cultural context in which we are called to live *if we are to render an account of our faith in the present situation which, unlike in the past, has a variety of new and important aspects*<sup>1</sup> and our response must be *new in its ardour, methods and expression*.<sup>2</sup> In this context, it has become common to juxtapose New Evangelization and New Media. There is an immediate and obvious connection. It is clear that the use of new media can greatly enhance our efforts to communicate and make known the Good News but we must be careful that our reflection on this topic does not remain at the technical or instrumental level. It is not enough to ask how we can use the new media to evangelize; we must begin by appreciating how radically the media environment or landscape in which we are called to operate has been reshaped but we cannot avoid a consideration of the deeper ways in which the emergence of digital technology and social media

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<sup>1</sup> Instrumentum Laboris, 13<sup>th</sup> Ordinary Assembly of Synod of Bishops, 2012, no. 42.

<sup>2</sup> John Paul II, Address to 19<sup>th</sup> General Assembly of CELAM, 1983, no. 9.

have changed deeper cultural patterns relating to identity, belonging, public opinion and community dynamics.

### Rethinking the relationship of Catechesis and Media

The last twenty-five years have seen an exponential rate of development in the capacities of the technologies available to support and facilitate human communication. The combination of these developments in mobile telephony, computer technology, fibre-optics and satellites mean that many of us now carry with us devices that allow us instant access to an extra-ordinary range of information, news and opinion from around the globe and that enable us to communicate by word, text or the sharing of images with people and institutions in every corner of the world. This revolution in information and communication technologies, however, cannot be adequately understood merely in instrumental terms: it is not simply a question of communication and the exchange of information growing in terms of volume, speed, efficiency and accessibility but rather that we are also witnessing concomitant changes in the ways in which people use these technologies to communicate, learn, interact and relate – we are living through a change of paradigm in the very culture of communication. As Pope Benedict pointed out: *The new technologies are not only changing the way we communicate, but communication itself, so much so that it could be said that we are living through a period of vast cultural transformation*<sup>3</sup> An empirical study sponsored by the British Government focusing on personal identity, published in 2013, supports this intuition. It concluded *inter alia* that *'particularly among younger people, their view of themselves is shaped increasingly by online interactions of social networks'*<sup>4</sup> and it further indicated that the elements that traditionally would have been considered most important in forming a person's identity, such as their religion, ethnicity, job and age are less important than previously.

The importance of media and communications technology for catechesis was already acknowledged by Pope Paul VI in 1975: *Our century is characterized by the mass media or means of social communication, and the first proclamation, catechesis or the further deepening of faith cannot do without these means, as we have already emphasized. When they are put at the service of the Gospel, they are capable of increasing almost indefinitely the area in which the Word of God is heard; they enable the Good News to reach millions of people. The Church would feel guilty before*

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<sup>3</sup> Benedict XVI, Message for World Communications Day, 2012

<sup>4</sup> Her Majesty's Government, Foresight, Future Identity Report, 2013

*the Lord if she did not utilize these powerful means that human skill is daily rendering more perfect. It is through them that she proclaims "from the housetops" the message of which she is the depositary. In them she finds a modern and effective version of the pulpit. Thanks to them she succeeds in speaking to the multitudes.*<sup>5</sup> The positive assessment of the potential of these technologies is insightful but the understanding remains limited insofar as they are seen primarily as a means – a new form of the pulpit – and there is no real awareness of the impact of the technologies on the existential and social context, on the media ecology. This awareness begins to emerge in the thought of John Paul II. In 1990, he insisted that it would be necessary to insert the message of Gospel into the "new culture" created by modern communications. *This is a complex issue, since the "new culture" originates not just from whatever content is eventually expressed, but from the very fact that there exist new ways of communicating, with new languages, new techniques and a new psychology.*<sup>6</sup>

The new culture of communication requires that those who seek to evangelize and catechize rethink their approach. We cannot simply do what we have always done, albeit with new technologies. As Pope Benedict XVI reminded us: *In the early life of the Church, the great Apostles and their disciples brought the Good News of Jesus to the Greek and Roman world. Just as, at that time, a fruitful evangelization required that careful attention be given to understanding the culture and customs of those pagan peoples so that the truth of the gospel would touch their hearts and minds, so also today, the proclamation of Christ in the world of new technologies requires a profound knowledge of this world if the technologies are to serve our mission adequately.*<sup>7</sup> I would like to identify some of the features of this new culture and tease out the implications that follow for preachers and teachers. I do not intend to offer definitive solutions – the cultural transformation is still ongoing and my observations are necessarily tentative – but I will offer some ideas in order to stimulate further debate and to encourage others to take up this reflection.

I intend to begin by focusing on the communicative environment in which we are called to present our teaching and message. I will then seek to look at the broader cultural context in order to isolate some characteristics of contemporary culture that shape the values and expectations of young people, often without their being aware of it, and which must be taken into account if our efforts to engage with them are to be fruitful. Before entering into these issues, it is necessary to recall that the digital space is a reality in the lives of many people today and that it is fundamental to their

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<sup>5</sup> Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 1975, no. 45.

<sup>6</sup> John Paul II, *Redemptio Missio*, 1990, no. 37.

<sup>7</sup> Benedict XVI, *Message for World Communications Day*, 2009.

existence. We must not think of it as a ‘virtual’ space which is somehow less important than the ‘real’ world. If the Church is not present in this space, if the Good News is not proclaimed ‘digitally’, then we risk abandoning the many people for whom this is where they ‘live’: this is the forum in which they get their news and information, form and express their opinions, ask questions and engage in debate.

### Catechesis and Communication – finding a new language

I am convinced that a particular task for catechists, in collaboration with others who are involved in evangelization, is that of helping the Church to find a language 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.

#### *Style of communication*

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.*<sup>8</sup> 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.

It is a basic truth of communications that our witness – our actions and our patterns of behaviour – is often more eloquent than our words and proclamations in expressing who we are and what we believe. *To proclaim the Gospel through the new media means not only to insert expressly religious content into different media platforms, but also to witness consistently, in one’s own*

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<sup>8</sup> Francis, Address to General Coordination Meeting of CELAM, 2013, no. 3.

*digital profile and in the way one communicates choices, preferences and judgements that are fully consistent with the Gospel, even when it is not spoken of specifically.*<sup>9</sup> We witness in a particularly compelling way when we give priority to those with whom we communicate by listening attentively and responding to their perspectives and opinions. Engagement with their questions, and more importantly with the questioners, opens up the possibility of a more profound dialogue. One can discern concerns about the ultimate questions of human existence: What can we know? What ought we to do? What may we hope? Careful attention, rooted in respect for the questions and the questioner, is required to allow these deeper concerns to emerge. Adapting a more dialogical style is demanding but when we reply to blogs, comment on articles and posts and explain our positions in different social media we are not just engaging our direct interlocutors but, given the nature of social media, wider publics and audiences.

### *Mode of communication*

Within the Church, we are accustomed to the use of texts as a normal mode of communication. Many of the on-line resources that have been developed by different Church institutions continue to be shaped by our traditional reliance on text. One can find on the web many wonderful homilies, speeches and articles but it is not clear if they speak to a younger public that is fluent in a different language, a language rooted in the convergence of text, sound and images; a public that is used to clicking quickly through pages and material unless its attention is captured. 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”. In the production of catechetical materials, and in our formulation of underlying methodological approaches, we need to bear in mind that we seek to engage a generation that has been raised ‘digitally’ and that has demanding standards with regard to production standards and its expectations concerning the relevance and accessibility of content. We are operating in a context where many of the commercial producers of content and social media platforms are clearly in competition for the attention of new audiences. While there are good reasons to be critical of the attention economy, which we will address soon, we cannot ignore the need to present our content in a more compelling and stimulating formats.

In our catechesis, we aim not merely to lead people to an intellectual conviction or certainty concerning our beliefs or to assent to our moral teachings but primarily to a relationship with Christ who is the fullness of the truth and who calls people to follow a way that leads to the fullness of life.

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<sup>9</sup> Benedict XVI, Message for World Communications Day, 2011.

We express our message in and through the words we use to tell people who Jesus was but the message is more fundamentally the person himself. Jesus preached beautifully, he spoke beautifully, but above all he embodied these words in his own life. His words about the importance of forgiveness, healing and the loving service of each other, were embodied in the example of his own life. So when we teach and preach the message of Jesus, we are handing on a message and a teaching that can never be separated from the life and the person of Jesus himself. We are also teaching not just about a historical figure who lived two thousand years ago and whose message has been recorded; but about a person who is still present to us in and through the life of the Church, particularly through our administration of the sacraments, and to whom we give witness by our service to those who are in need. 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.

### *Vocabulary*

We are required to be more attentive to our vocabulary. Much of our religious and ecclesial language is difficult and challenging even for believers. Many of our religious icons and symbols need to be explained for our contemporaries. We can no longer presume that young people, even in countries with a long Christian heritage, are familiar with our most basic beliefs. 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. In the immediate context, however, 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.*<sup>10</sup> 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

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<sup>10</sup> Francis, Meeting with Bishops of Brazil, 2013, no. 1.

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.

### Digitalization and Contemporary Culture – discerning opportunities and challenges

Benedict XVI spoke of the digital arena as a ‘continent’ where believers would seek to share their faith but he also identified the need for an appropriate ‘inculturation’. He has drawn 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.*<sup>11</sup> The particular challenge for catechists and those who wish to share the Good News of the Gospel is to identify the positive features of contemporary culture and to affirm these values while also being alert to those tendencies which make it difficult to present our message. As we have seen, we need a language language that is appropriate for this new forum and that does not betray the depths and nuances of the insights we seek to share. We will have to challenge aspects of the culture of social media. It is important that our reflection on social media would be critically aware of these considerations, if our engagement is not to be naïve.

The Dutch theologian, Henk Witte, has highlighted the fact that digitalization has evolved in a particular cultural context and that it has served as an ‘accelerator’ of pre-existing dynamics: *Digitalization may be considered as the technical foundation of social-cultural developments. Culture was already developing in a postmodern direction. Digitalization, however, works like a catalyst. It makes that some processes that are considered as typically postmodern become visible and unavoidably swifter ... think of individualization, the predominance of particularities over unity, the failure of metanarratives, and, consequently, the absence of a shared view of the past and a shared hope for the future, the preference for experience and emotion.*<sup>12</sup> We need to be attentive to the fact that digital culture is clearly marked by the influence of what Pope Francis has called *the “myths” of a modernity grounded in a utilitarian mindset (individualism, unlimited progress, competition, consumerism, the unregulated market).*<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Benedict XVI, Address to Plenary Assembly of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications, 2011.

<sup>12</sup> Henk Witte, “Is Catholicity still an Appropriate Concept in a Postmodern World?” in *Catholicity Under Pressure: The Ambiguous Relationship Between Diversity and Unity*: Leipzig, Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2016, p. 158.

<sup>13</sup> Francis, *Laudato Si*, 2015, no. 210.

We cannot ignore the ‘counter-cultural’ values of the Good News we are called to make known. To speak of Good News is already to challenge the suppositions of a media environment that tends to focus on bad news. We speak of a God who loves unconditionally in a world where people seem obliged to perform and to compete if they are to earn the attention and respect of others. The Church speaks of truth in an environment where skepticism and distrust is the norm. It seeks to speak to all in a milieu where the focus is often on niche markets and interest groups. It invites people to commitment in a world where novelty reigns. For this reason, we cannot simply canonize digital culture but we must be willing to challenge those underlying cultural presumptions which contradict the Gospel and which are also destructive of human and social well-being. We must avoid doing so in a moralistic or judgmental fashion which will only serve to alienate others. We are once again invited to speak the truth in love while affirming the positive.

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 relationship* and friendship, the *search for knowledge* and information, the *pursuit of guidance* and direction expressed in the ‘following’ of others, the *desire to share* and to express oneself and the *yearning for stimulus* and transcendence. 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, he leads his followers to the abundance of life in unity and communion and he continues to make himself known in beauty and art. 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.

In our catechesis we should aim to address the values which draw people to social and digital media and which are indicative of certain truths of human nature. We must do so, however, with a different mentality to the social media companies which ultimately seek to monetarize these needs. Our approach must be marked by a profound *sense of gratuity* if we are to be convincing witnesses to God’s love and if we are overcome the suspicions of an increasingly cynical public.

*Sense of gratuity*

God's love – expressed in our Scriptures as tenderness, compassion, indulgence and mercy – is a pure gift. This gift liberates us from any need to prove ourselves, to merit or to earn God's grace. Our true worth comes from being loved by God – we are freed from having to achieve worth and value for ourselves by the accumulation of wealth, power, fame and recognition. God is not blind to our faults and our worthlessness – he sees into the deepest recesses of our hearts - yet he continues to look on us with love. The unconditional nature of God's mercy ultimately gives us the freedom to see ourselves as we truly are, as God sees us. If God had not reached out to us in mercy, we would be condemned to pretend to be better than we are, to deny the wrongness of our failings or to despair. In a world where people are constantly obliged to assert themselves, to present themselves in the best possible light, and to perform in order to earn the attention and approval of others, there is great freedom – a merciful release – to be found in knowing that we are loved by God as we are.

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.*<sup>14</sup> 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.*<sup>15</sup>

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*

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<sup>14</sup> Francis, Address to Plenary Assembly of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications, 2013.

<sup>15</sup> Francis, *ibid.*

*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.*<sup>16</sup>

### *Need for relationship*

The phenomenal expansion of social networking sites testifies to the desire of people for connectedness, for friendship and for human relationships. This desire, notwithstanding the casual and superficial nature of much of the actual communication, is ultimately an expression of the truth of human nature; the desire for connectedness is innate in human beings. From the perspective of theology, it can be presented as a manifestation of our created nature; made in the image and likeness of God, a God whose essence is relational, human beings desire union with each other and are called at the heart of their being to be persons of love. In a digital context, the language of Pope Benedict during his visit to Australia for World Youth day in 2008 is particularly appropriate: *Loving is what we are programmed to do, what we were designed for by our Creator.*<sup>17</sup> The truth of this insight into what it means to be human – that all people, irrespective of creed, race or culture, have a fundamental disposition to seek unity and understanding - gives us an ultimate ground to hope that universal forms of dialogue can yield fruit even in the face of the challenges that we must acknowledge.

This is a point of engagement. We have to see that the desire for friendship and connection which is so much a feature of the lives of young people is a mark of hope. We have to offer them the possibility of finding deeper ways of expressing that friendship. We have to liberate them from a quantitative notion of relationship (expressed in numbers of friends, likes and followers) and lead them to a more qualitative understanding. We need to draw them into communities where they can find close friends, where they can see friendship not just as being about collecting numbers, but friendship as something which invites the person to a service of others, to care for others. Ultimately, our hope will be that this very yearning for connectedness can be vindicated in an

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<sup>16</sup> Francis, Message for World Communications Day, 2014.

<sup>17</sup> Benedict XVI, Address to Disadvantaged Youth, Sydney, 2008.

encounter with the living God; since it is only with God that the human heart will be at rest. This insight is as true today as it was when it was formulated 1500 years ago.

### *Search for truth*

One of the strongest features of digital culture has been the developments of search engines which present themselves as being supportive of the human desire for knowledge and instruction. In the last few years, the users of these sites are becoming increasingly aware that the sites are not as neutral or objective as might be expected. There has been a growth in the public awareness of false or fake news. This culture is profoundly marked by the, often unarticulated, relativism that is so prevalent in Western culture and the refutation of which was a key element in the teaching of Pope Benedict. If there is no such thing as truth, as right or wrong answers, then searching for truth and guidance becomes meaningless. It is a shared commitment to searching for truth which gives human dialogue and debate their ultimate value; otherwise, they become exercises in coercion and manipulation in which each seeks to assert his or her own view without any reference to the claims of truth. The generalized and uncritical social reception of the tenets of relativism are especially influential in the digital world where the sheer volume of information and opinion, much of it contradictory, can lead to an almost resigned acceptance that it is meaningless to speak of truth and objectivity. A commitment to promote the values of reason and logic in public debate should be the hallmark of the contributions of those who wish to share their faith in social media. An insistence on these values will both foster the possibility of dialogue in the public forum and address the prejudices of those who seek to relegate religion to the private or subjective realm.

Catechesis should draw attention to those objective ethical theories, such as the natural moral law tradition, which are rooted in the conviction that the rightness or wrongness of human ethical choices can be discerned by a process of reflection on what it means to be human. Choices which, by their very nature, promote the human flourishing of individuals and society are judged to be good; while those that are intrinsically damaging to the well-being of persons and of human community are judged to be bad. These objective theories, which are best understood as involving a commitment to a method of moral reasoning rather than as providing a shortcut to truth, require that humans work together to decide which choices and practices are to be encouraged and which should be discouraged. This discernment requires a careful consideration of all the relevant perspectives that are brought to ethical debates by different protagonists so that our human efforts to work out what is ethical are as objective as possible. These theories promote a dialogical approach to ethics, that is accessible to all human beings notwithstanding their religious or ideological

differences, and provide a theoretical underpinning for the possibility of the genuine public debating of ethical issues. It is a shared commitment to searching for truth, rooted in the conviction of the ultimate objectivity of truth, which gives such debates their ultimate value – otherwise they become exercises in coercion and manipulation in which each seeks to assert his or her own view without any reference to the claims of truth. Pope Francis highlighted the dangers of what he calls ‘practical relativism’ which he argues is even more dangerous than doctrinal relativism. *In the absence of objective truths or sound principles other than the satisfaction of our own desires and immediate needs, what limits can be placed on human trafficking, organized crime, the drug trade, commerce in blood diamonds and the fur of endangered species? ... when the culture itself is corrupt and objective truth and universally valid principles are no longer upheld, then laws can only be seen as arbitrary impositions or obstacles to be avoided.*<sup>18</sup>

An additional element that complicates the search for truth is the extraordinary range of words and images generated by these media, the speed with which they are produced and the fact that there is a constant stream of news and information means that there is very little room and time for a sustained and considered engagement and that there is real danger that our cultural discourse becomes superficial. The American Archbishop, Charles Chaput, expressed this risk succinctly in 2009: *Visual and electronic media, today’s dominant media, need a certain kind of content. They thrive on brevity, speed, change, urgency, variety and feelings. But thinking requires the opposite. Thinking takes time. It needs silence and the methodical skills of logic.*<sup>19</sup> We must foster these habits and educate people to discern and reason rather than being manipulated by emotion or social pressure.

### *Pursuit of guidance*

A common, and understandable, response to the phenomenon of relativism is that people turn only to sources of information and opinion that they judge to be trustworthy. Often the judgment as to what sources are trustworthy, however, is rooted in the person’s pre-established world view and serves only to confirm people in their opinions rather than leading to a real search for truth and understanding. In the political arena, there is the risk that people will only engage with media that they know to support their particular views and they will not be exposed to alternative positions or to reasoned debate or discussion. They become trapped in ‘echo chambers’ or ‘cocoon’, hearing

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<sup>18</sup> Francis, *Laudato Si*, 2015, no. 123.

<sup>19</sup> Charles Chaput, *Catholics and the ‘Fourth Estate’*, <http://www.archden.org/index.cfm/ID/2265>

only the voices of those who agree with them.<sup>20</sup> This in turn will create increasingly polarized and confrontational forms of politics where there is little room for the voices of moderation or consensus. If the digital networks are to achieve their potential in promoting human solidarity, the art of dialogue must be recovered. When people listen to the ‘other’ and allow his or her voice to breach their defensiveness, they open themselves to growth in understanding. If they are willing to listen to others, they will learn to see the world with different eyes and will grow in appreciation of the richness of the human experience as revealed in other cultures and traditions. The more people grow in knowledge of others, the more they grow also in self-knowledge. *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.*<sup>21</sup>

Engagement with others alerts people to those basic desires to love and be loved, for protection and security, for meaning and purpose that are shared by all humans. Attentiveness to the human condition, and to the one world which all share, highlights the truth that these desires can only be satisfied fully if people construct a society that is committed to a shared concern for the well-being of all rather than to an ethos of unbridled competition where the happiness of some can only be achieved at the expense of others.

Good discourse is a human rather than a technical achievement; those attitudes and commitments which facilitate meaningful engagement between people and peoples must be nourished and encouraged. If networks are to realize their potential to be a forum to help people grow in understanding and appreciation of each other, then we should seek to be respectful in our modes of expression. Human discourse will only be fruitful when aggressive forms of expression are avoided. People will only express themselves fully when they are confident that their views are welcomed and not merely tolerated. As a community we can only grow in knowledge and insight if all feel free to contribute with honesty and authenticity. Although social media often offer greater visibility to those who are most provocative or strident in their style of presentation, true understanding is best nourished by reasoned debate, logical argumentation and gentle persuasion.

### *Desire to share*

Many commentators draw attention to the fact that many people avail of social and digital media in order to support and help other members of different communities. Considerable numbers of

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<sup>20</sup> Cass R. Sunstein, *Going to Extremes: How like minds unite and divide*, New York, Oxford OUP, 2009.

<sup>21</sup> Francis, *Message for World Communications Day*, 2014.

developers and programmers make their work available to others without seeking any payment or to claim intellectual ownership.<sup>22</sup> We should celebrate these forms of altruism which in many ways testify to the ultimate nature of what it is to be human. It is finally the gift of God's unconditional love that enables us to respond generously to others. The invitation of Jesus to be people of love, to think of others rather to pursue our own needs, is an invitation to discover a way of life that ultimately offers deep fulfilment to individuals and that will contribute to the greater good of communities and society.

We should also recognise that some forms of 'sharing' are more self-referential than other-centred. By insisting on the intrinsic worth and value of every human being, we can liberate them from the perceived need to present well for others as a way of gaining their attention and admiration. Some social media practises which emphasize the need for one to be always present, looking perfect and consuming conspicuously are in the final analysis forms of slavery that are harmful for individuals and that serve to promote inequality and social resentment.

### *Yearning for stimulus*

The last number of years have seen the development of much literature which is critical of digital culture in terms of its impact on human attentiveness. Some commentators have highlighted what they see as the negative impact of social media on people's ability to concentrate and to develop higher forms of reflection and thinking.<sup>23</sup> Others, such as Tristan Harris at the Center for Humane Technology, suggest that this not an accidental development but results from competition between different social media platforms for the attention of the public, and their discovery that the more basic the content the more successful they are in retaining users on their platforms. In the so-called attention economy, companies make money in proportion to the time the users spend on the platforms – the amount of advertising companies can sell and the volume of data they can harvest is directly related to the time spent on-line by consumers. Many of the platforms and services that are presented as 'free' are in fact paid for by users in ways of which they are not aware. Those who are involved in catechesis should endeavour to educate people to be more alert to their use of time and their attentiveness.

The gradual loss of the boundary between the provision of information and entertainment witnesses, and further contributes, to a loss of a social appetite for serious engagement with important issues. Media attention can also be very fickle and one seemingly compelling issue is abandoned as another

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<sup>22</sup> The Creative Commons promote free and open source software and code as intentional existence to the commercialization of the digital space.

<sup>23</sup> Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows: What the Internet is doing to our Brains*, New York, Norton and Co., 2010.

is judged more likely to engage audiences. This serves to alienate people from meaningful engagement with ideas and each other. In this context, I would suggest that an essential dimension of the Church's catechetical activity must be to provide occasions and opportunities, both physical and digital, for people to learn the arts of silence and contemplation, to recover an appetite for solitude and interiority. This would undoubtedly be a fruitful starting point for our proclamation of the Gospel but it would be invaluable also as a service to meaningful human communication.

In this regard, it is important to cultivate in those we seek to catechize an appreciation of the beauty of nature and of art as privileged loci of openness to the presence of spirit. This awareness can be developed with good on-line content but we must be attentive to the frequency with which digital tools can become barriers to real engagement with nature and art. Pope Francis speaks of the importance of aesthetical education both as an end in itself and as an antidote to the consumers that menaces our culture. Although he is clearly addressing the issue of the environment, his remarks are of far more general relevance *“the relationship between a good aesthetic education and the maintenance of a healthy environment cannot be overlooked”*. *By learning to see and appreciate beauty, we learn to reject self-interested pragmatism. If someone has not learned to stop and admire something beautiful, we should not be surprised if he or she treats everything as an object to be used and abused without scruple. If we want to bring about deep change, we need to realize that certain mindsets really do influence our behaviour. Our efforts at education will be inadequate and ineffectual unless we strive to promote a new way of thinking about human beings, life, society and our relationship with nature. Otherwise, the paradigm of consumerism will continue to advance, with the help of the media and the highly effective workings of the market”*.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Francis, *Laudato Si*, 2015, no. 215.

