

YOUNG PEOPLE AS PROTAGONISTS ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Introduction

Over the last decade or so, social media has become islands of evangelization where more and more initiatives are flourishing. In turn, new technologies are paving the way for innovative forms of communication and helping to influence evangelization in uncharted waters. The younger generations of children and young people are naturally becoming familiar with the possibilities that digital communication offers and are becoming key players through their concrete actions. In his Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Christus Vivit*, which Pope Francis addressed to young people and to the whole People of God, he also encourages the new generations to look at the Church with new eyes and to be courageous in their actions.

The youth of Generation Z and Alpha are becoming the driving force behind the Church's evangelization efforts. By gaining experience, a relevant media culture, and learning ethical principles, they are guiding the Church in hitherto unknown *areopagi*. They cast their evangelical nets and reach the inhabitants of the “digital continent” with an often imaginative ingenuity, “living in the midst of society and the world in order to bring the Gospel everywhere, to work for the growth of peace, harmony, justice, human rights and mercy, and thus for the extension of God’s kingdom in this world.”¹ With the help of experienced educators, media theorists, and professionals, they are building the foundation for new forms of online evangelization.

Discovering the signs of the times, creating tools and launching projects with young people in the field of media is becoming an urgent challenge for the Church of the 21st century. Social media is fermenting as a leaven for pastoral action and even for proclamation of the kerygma. Hence the importance of adequate training, of a network of contacts with young people from all over the world and of evangelizing with young people *online*. The following article, starting from the exhortation *Christus Vivit*, will present some reflections related to the Church's teaching on the involvement of young people in media projects – “...since they are already so familiar with social networks, they should be encouraged to fill them with God, fraternity and commitment.”²

Digital environment

The exhortation *Christus Vivit*, in numbers 86-90, presents the digital environment as an indispensable feature of the modern world. Culture is becoming increasingly ‘computerised’, forms of communication are changing, the digital world is digitizing culture, sometimes hindering the establishment and development of interpersonal relationships, which can even take on an inhuman form that depreciates human dignity (pornography, fake news, dark web, cyberbullying). However, the Internet has become a place of daily presence for millions of young people, who sometimes consider virtual contact as the only appropriate and healthy

¹ Francis, *Christus Vivit*, Vatican 2019, no. 168.

² *Ibid*, no. 241.

communication. Younger generations are therefore faced with the challenge of mature interactions in the real and virtual world.³

The digital world can be dangerous; it can deceive by throwing people into the waters of loneliness or emotional isolation. However, “there are young people even there who show creativity and even genius. That was the case with the Venerable Carlo Acutis.”⁴ This young Catholic understood the mechanisms of communication on the Internet; he was aware of the dangers, he did not fall into its traps, and at the same time he used his peculiar skills and new technologies for evangelization with perfect precision and insight.⁵ As for innovations in the digital world, so-called artificial intelligence – an advanced programmed computer system that attempts to match human intelligence by performing various tasks – has recently become immensely popular. The well-known ChatGPT, designed by OpenAI, is a tool that implements artificial intelligence, and its mission is to benefit all humanity.⁶

The proclamation of the Gospel in the various digital *areopagi* presupposes a dialogue with culture. Evangelization requires a real interest in the world of social media – they are the path on which, especially in the new media, we encounter many people, their many questions and their many expectations.⁷ On the other hand, today’s digital culture can cause a sense of feeling isolated and disconnected and “we have to realize that the wisdom needed for life bursts the confines of our present-day media resources.”⁸ Digital culture, which leads to cultural transformation, is having a profound impact on our ability to communicate, learn and establish relationships, and new technologies and the development of the Internet are changing the way we approach evangelization in the Church. “We are experiencing an epochal change: a metamorphosis not only cultural but also anthropological that generates new languages (...)”⁹

Digital evangelization

Many years ago, in 1976, Pope Paul VI wrote in a prophetic way about approaches for new evangelization: “This question of ‘how to evangelize’ is permanently relevant, because the methods of evangelizing vary according to the different circumstances of time, place and culture, and because they thereby present a certain challenge to our capacity for discovery and adaptation.”¹⁰ In turn, Pope John Paul II clearly saw that the development of the media would bring new opportunities for evangelization: “For the Church the new world of cyberspace is a summons to the great adventure of using its potential to proclaim the Gospel

³ Ibid, no. 86-90.

⁴ Ibid, no. 66, 104.

⁵ Ibid, nos. 66, 105, 106.

⁶ OpenAI, <https://openai.com/about>.

⁷ Synod Biskupów, Orędzie XIII Zwyczajnego Zgromadzenia Ogólnego Synodu Biskupów do ludu Bożego, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20121026_message-synod_pl.html, no. 10.

⁸ Francis, *Christus Vivit...*, no. 195.

⁹ Francis, Global Education Pact,

<https://www.educationglobalcompact.org/resources/Resources/vademecum-italiano.pdf>.

¹⁰ Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, Vatican 1976, no. 40.

message.”¹¹ Pope Benedict XVI was also aware of the importance of the digital generation and of the riches brought by new technologies, which are a gift for the Church and for the world. “It falls, in particular, to young people, who have an almost spontaneous affinity for the new means of communication, to take on the responsibility for the evangelization of this ‘digital continent’.”¹²

In his message for the 48th World Communications Day in 2014, Pope Francis then invited young people in particular to be bold in their evangelization efforts: “Let us boldly become citizens of the digital world. (...) 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.”¹³ Then, in the introduction to the book *The Church in the digital world*, Francis wrote that young people have a special role to play in new modes of communication, and their task is to become protagonists of new forms of social communication. “We know that the virtual can never replace the beauty of face-to-face encounters. But the digital world is inhabited and must be inhabited by Christians.”¹⁴

The Church’s teaching endorses the use of the digital environment for evangelization. This is confirmed by numerous documents, such as the Messages for World Communications Day, which invite responsible engagement in the new evangelization. The technological revolution underway before our eyes requires commitment and a new perspective. Certainly, the best response to this challenge can be provided by young people who, thanks to their ingenuity, bring great freshness to the Church.¹⁵ “There is really a lot to do to learn how to listen; and to engage and form young, digital natives. The web and social networks can be inhabited by those who bear witness to the beauty of the Christian faith, by those who propose stories of faith and lived charity.”¹⁶

Digital Salesian Family

The Salesian Family, by its nature, is called to work with young people. Technological and civilisational changes raise further questions about the presence of the Salesian charism in the digital environment and about evangelization in the digital world, which for some time

11 Message of the Holy Father John Paul II for the 36th World Communications Day, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/communications/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_20020122_world-communications-day.html.

12 Message of the Holy Father Benedict XVI for the 43rd World Communications Day https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/messages/communications/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20090124_43rd-world-communications-day.html.

13 Message of the Holy Father Francis for the 48th World Day of Social Communications, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/messages/communications/documents/papa-francesco_20140124_messaggio-comunicazioni-sociali.html.

14 Fabio Bolzetta, *La Chiesa nel digitale. Strumenti e proposte*, Tau 2022, s. 13-14; Vatican News, Franciszek: chrześcijaństwo musi być obecne w sieci, 2022, <https://www.vaticannews.va/pl/papiez/news/2022-06/franciszek-chrzescijanosc-musza-byc-obecna-w-sieci.html>.

15 Magdalena Jeżak-Śmigielńska, Maciej Makuła, Marek Weresa, Środowisko cyfrowe jako przestrzeń ewangelizacji na podstawie adhortacji Papieża Franciszka *Christus vivit*, *Łódzkie Studia Teologiczne*, 29 (2020) 1, p. 41.

16 Fabio Bolzetta, *La Chiesa nel digitale...*, p. 13.

has become the natural environment of young people. The Salesian Family and its individual members have many unique predispositions to set sail for the digital missionary continent, as we have observed for years on all continents. This became particularly evident during the pandemic, when huge Salesian forces were mobilised to contact young people digitally. Many Salesian institutions had professional activities to present in this regard, which have had and still have tangible results.

With regard to the involvement of the Salesian Family in educational, information and evangelization activities in traditional and social media, mention should be made of: Salesian television and radio stations, magazines and newsletters, the Salesian Bulletin, the enormous commitment of the media during the pandemic period, online broadcasts, influencer marketing, the professionalisation of content, spokespersons for many institutes, the professional management of communication crises, wise management of internal and external institutional information, growing awareness of studies, formation and courses on media and communication, organisation of symposia and conferences related to new trends such as the development of artificial intelligence, the metaverse or live streaming. In addition, there are courses on the risks of social media: cyberbullying, fake news, deep fake, patostreaming, cyberbullying, tabnabbing, digital exclusion, phishing, vishing, smishing, scam, FOMO, flaming, trolling, hate speech, sexting, sextortion, stalking, child grooming, computer viruses, spam, botnet and many others.

Sometimes, a lack of proper understanding of Church media teaching and a lack of motivation to work extensively with young people in the creation and implementation of Salesian media projects can be problematic. The communicative generations, especially Gen Y, Gen Z and Gen Alpha, are today determining the form of interpersonal and corporate communication, as well as that of the Church. It is worth remembering that so-called mediated communication, while using social media, is not face-to-face, live communication, but is a way of interpersonal communication as normal and appropriate as possible. Understanding contemporary communication processes and evangelization in the digital world requires preparation, study, strategy, prudence, networking, commitment of human and financial resources and, above all, adequate spiritual discernment.

Conclusion

Pope Francis has confidence in young people regarding the aspect of evangelization in social networks. He only asks that we encourage their aspirations, their enthusiasm and their initiatives in this field, because social networks can become a place for the proclamation of the kerygma and a renewed desire to experience a personal God.¹⁷ The Pope encourages young people to actively and courageously create the future: “Please do not leave it to others to be protagonists of change! You are the ones who have the future! Through you the future enters the world. I also ask you also to be the protagonists of this transformation.”¹⁸

¹⁷ Francis, *Christus Vivit...*, nos. 210, 214.

¹⁸ Francis, *Christus Vivit...*, no. 174.

Young evangelizers reach believers and non-believers with the Gospel message through their enthusiasm.¹⁹ Of course, evangelical proposals on social media should be used with care and caution, but being driven by fear is not compatible with the joyful news of the Gospel. This is why Francis often addresses young people: "Do not be afraid to go and bring Christ into every area of life, to the fringes of society... He loves you, dear young people, for you are the means by which he can spread his light and hope. He is counting on your courage, your boldness and your enthusiasm."²⁰

The digital continent is the largest missionary area today. Pope Benedict XVI encouraged the evangelization of this *digital continent*.²¹ Sociological and statistical studies show that today the natural environment of youth is constituted by social media and that is where young people spend much of their time. New technologies are an interesting proposition for the universal Church and, used appropriately, can reach the hearts of the faithful with the message of the Gospel. Finally, it is worth recalling the words of John Paul II, who saw in new technologies inventions given by God to man. Therefore, the words: "Do not be afraid! Do not be afraid of new technology!"²² are particularly relevant today.

References

Adam Kłonowski, Videos to make your day, Wykorzystanie aplikacji mobilnej TikTok w działalności duszpasterskiej Kościoła katolickiego w Polsce, *Ateneum Kapłańskie* 178(2022), z. 2(678), p. 341–356.

Alexandre Awi Mello, Arise! Ministry with Young Adults in a Time of Innovation, 2020, http://www.laityfamilylife.va/content/dam/laityfamilylife/Pdf/Keynote_Fr.Alexandre%20Awi%20Mello_USCCB_AriseMeeting_120920_ENG.pdf.

Message of the Holy Father Benedict XVI for the 43rd World Communications Day https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/messages/communications/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20090124_43rd-world-communications-day.html

Fabio Bolzetta, *La Chiesa nel digitale. Strumenti e proposte*, Tau 2022.

Francis, *Christus Vivit*, Vatican 2019.

Message of the Holy Father Francis for the 48th World Day of Social Communications, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/messages/communications/documents/papa-francesco_20140124_messaggio-comunicazioni-sociali.html.

Message of the Holy Father John Paul II for the 36th World Communications Day, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/communications/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_20020122_world-communications-day.html.

19 Adam Kłonowski, Videos to make your day, Wykorzystanie aplikacji mobilnej TikTok w działalności duszpasterskiej Kościoła katolickiego w Polsce, *Ateneum Kapłańskie* 178(2022), z. 2(678), p. 252–353.

²⁰ Francis, *Christus Vivit...*, no. 177.

²¹ Message of the Holy Father Benedict XVI for the 43rd World...

²² John Paul II, *Rapid Development*, 2005, no. 14.

Junno Arocho Esteves, Arkansas Catholic, *Christus Vivit* details challenges of digital age evangelizing, 2019, <https://www.arkansas-catholic.org/news/article/6001/Christus-Vivit-details-challenges-of-digital-age-evangelizing>.

Magdalena Jeżak-Śmigielska, Maciej Makuła, Marek Weresa, Środowisko cyfrowe jako przestrzeń ewangelizacji na podstawie adhortacji Papieża Franciszka *Christus vivit*, *Łódzkie Studia Theologiczne*, 29 (2020) 1.

Meredith Gould, *The Social Media Gospel. Sharing the Good News in new ways*, Collegeville 2013, p. 39-40.

Miriam Díez Bosch, Josep Lluís Micó Sanz & Alba Sabaté Gauxachs (2017), Typing my Religion. Digital use of religious websites and apps by adolescents and youth for religious and interreligious dialogue, *Church, Communication and Culture*, 2:2, 121-143, DOI: 10.1080/23753234.2017.1347800.

Mirosław Chmielewski, Ewangelizacyjna misja Kościoła a social media, *Studia Leopoliensia* 10(2017), p. 191-205.

OpenAI, <https://openai.com/about>.

Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, Vatican 1976.

Radosław Mazur, Kultura cyfrowa jako kontekst współczesnej katechezy, *Colloquia Theologica Ottoniana* 37 (2021), DOI: 10.18276/cto.2020.37-09, p. 149–167.

Rzecznicy Episkopatów Europy: Media społecznościowe szansą dla Kościoła 30-06-2018 <https://episkopat.pl/rzecznicy-episkopatow-europy-media-spoecznościowe-szansa-dla-kosciola/>.

Soo Young Theodore Park, The Value of Spiritual Conversation in the Digital Age, Ignatian, *Journal of Theological Research*, 31 (2021) 75-111.

Synod Biskupów, Orędzie XIII Zwyczajnego Zgromadzenia Ogólnego Synodu Biskupów do ludu Bożego, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20121026_message-synod_pl.html.

Vatican News, Franciszek: chrześcijanie muszą być obecni w sieci, 2022, <https://www.vaticannews.va/pl/papiez/news/2022-06/franciszek-chrzescijanie-musza-byc-obecni-w-sieci.html>.

Youth in the light of *Christus Vivit*, Everything he touches becomes young, new, full of life. Training material for young people, International Forum of Catholic Action, Rome 2020, <http://www.catholicactionforum.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/YOUTH-IN-THE-LIGHT-OF-CHRITUS-VIVIT.-English.-WEB-VERSIÓN.pdf>.

Maciej Makuła SDB