

CHRISTIAN VALUES IN THE DIGITAL SOCIETY. INITIATIVES SEEKING COMMUNION BETWEEN THE DIGITAL AGE AND RELIGION

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Abstract. The scenario we find ourselves in worldwide is that of a globalized world. However, the fact that this phenomenon is taking place in general, based on the continuous increase in the interconnection between the different nations of the world in the economic, political, social and technological fields, makes more evident the inequalities that exist between the different States that make up our world. It is very interesting to analyse how an institution as old as the Catholic Church has been facing the challenges that adapting to the current model of society undoubtedly entails for a traditional institution.

Today our society has been completely transformed and the digital era has burst onto the scene. The Catholic Church has not been oblivious to the changes that our society is experiencing, and so we will make a brief analysis of the most significant changes that have taken place in the way in which the Catholic Church tries to carry out its pastoral function. We will analyse how the Catholic Church is implementing new tools to adapt to the changes that are constantly taking place in our society.

Keywords: digital era, Church, evangelization, society

According to encyclical letter *Laudato si'*, of the Holy Father Francisco, on care for the common home:¹ “the urgent challenge of protecting our common home includes the concern to unite the entire human family in the search for sustainable and integral development, for we know that things can change.” Then he adds, “humanity still has the capacity to collaborate to build our common home. I wish to acknowledge, encourage and thank all those who, in the most varied sectors of human activity, are working to ensure the protection of the home we share.” He also adds that, the attitudes that obstruct the paths to a solution, even among believers, range from denial of the problem to indifference, comfortable resignation or blind trust in technical solutions (LS 13). We need a new universal solidarity. As the Bishops of South Africa said, the talents and involvement of all are needed to repair the damage caused by human

¹ Franciscus PP., Litterae encyclicae *Laudato si'* de communi domo colenda (24.05.2015), AAS 107 (2015), p. 847-945 [hereinafter: LS], no. 17.

abuse to God's creation.² We can all collaborate as God's instruments for the care of creation, each one from his or her own culture, experience, initiatives and capacities.

With respect to the importance of technology and its advances, following the line set forth by Pope Francis in *Laudato si'* (LS 102), technology has remedied innumerable ills that have harmed and limited human beings. We cannot fail to appreciate and be grateful for technical progress, especially in medicine, engineering and communications, and how can we fail to recognize all the efforts of many scientists and technicians who have provided alternatives for sustainable development?

The answer that holy father Francisco gives is that, "well-oriented technoscience can not only produce truly valuable things to improve the quality of human life, from useful domestic objects to large means of transportation, bridges, buildings and public places. It is also capable of producing beauty and of making the human being immersed in the material world «jump» into the realm of beauty." There are precious pictorial and musical works achieved with the use of new technical instruments. Thus, in the intention of beauty of the technical producer and in the contemplator of such beauty, the leap is made to a certain properly human fullness.³

Pope Francis says, that it is right to rejoice in the face of these advances, and to be enthusiastic about the vast possibilities that these constant novelties open up for us, because "science and technology are a marvelous product of human creativity given to us by God"⁴.

It should be considered that, "classical religious texts can offer meaning for all ages, they have a motivating force that always opens new horizons [...] Is it reasonable and cultured to relegate them to obscurity, just because they have arisen in the context of a religious belief?"⁵ In reality, it is naive to think that ethical principles can be presented in a purely abstract way (LS 199),

² Southern African Catholic Bishops' Conference, Pastoral Statement on the Environmental Crisis (05.09.1999).

³ Franciscus PP., Litterae encyclicae *Lumen fidei* (29.06.2022), AAS 105 (2013), p. 555–96, no. 34: "The light of faith, united to the truth of love, is not alien to the material world, because love is always lived in body and soul; the light of faith is an incarnate light, coming from the luminous life of Jesus. It illuminates even matter, trusts in its ordering, knows that in it a way of harmony and ever wider understanding opens up. The gaze of science thus benefits from faith: faith invites the scientist to be open to reality in all its inexhaustible richness. Faith awakens the critical sense, insofar as it does not allow research to be satisfied with its formulas and helps it to realize that nature is not reduced to them. By inviting us to marvel at the mystery of creation, faith broadens the horizons of reason to better illuminate the world that is presented to the studies of science" – the underline is added.

⁴ Ioannes Paulus PP. II, Allocutio Hirosimae, ad mathematicarum et naturalium scientiarum cultores habita (25.02.1981), AAS 73 (1981), p. 420–28, no. 3.

⁵ Idem, Adhortatio apostolica *Evangelii gaudium* de Evangelio Nuntiando nostra aetate (24.11.2013), p. 1019–138, no. 256.

detached from any context, and the fact that they appear in religious language does not detract from their value in public debate. The ethical principles that reason is capable of perceiving can always reappear in different guises and expressed in different languages, including religious ones.”

We start from the premise that since the 20th century, the phenomenon of globalisation has developed, based on the continuous increase in the interconnection between the different nations of the world in the economic, political, social and technological spheres. It is very interesting to analyse how an institution as old as the Catholic Church has been facing the challenges that adapting to the current model of society undoubtedly entails for a traditional institution.

The technological factor has undergone exponential development in recent years. The development of the internet has made it possible to purchase a product manufactured anywhere in the world without leaving home, and even the way of communicating through new digital platforms has completely changed the paradigm in the field of information communication and we are in some way subjected to the empire of the digital.

To live this historical moment of the birth of a new culture means for the Church to accept the challenge of inculturation, which she carries out in a double movement: to assimilate the positive aspects of this culture while purifying the negative ones; and to contribute to it the originality of her own human and spiritual richness. If we continue reading we may read the following: The Church is entering the complex world of the Internet in a decisive and growing way in various languages. It is emerging as an “Agent of meaning” that offers frames of reference for understanding the world. It also carries out a work of archiving and of archiving and codifying the cultural heritage of other epochs in these new formats [Ruiz 2022].

One of the most representative examples of the importance of the digitisation of information in order to make the exchange of information at a global level more fluid is that the Vatican archive has begun to be digitized.

It is significant, to say the least, that the Vatican archive has begun to be digitised, so that information that has remained within the Vatican walls for centuries can now be made accessible on the web.⁶ Traditionally, the archives held in the Vatican archives have been understood as secrets inaccessible to third parties. Now, without a doubt, the Church is being brought closer to society by, among other things, this initiative to digitise its archives and make them available on the Internet. Authoritative voices in the Holy See assure that practically all documents will be available for consultation.

⁶ See “The «secrets» of the world, on the web” in the documentary heritage of the Holy See (the documentary heritage of the Holy See), Religious values, 2014, digital magazine: <https://www.valoresreligiosos.com.ar> [accessed: 11.05.2022].

As the Argentinian Cardinal Jorge Mejía, former director of the Secret Library and Archives, explains, “in principle, no text is excluded.” However, the aforementioned cardinal specifies that “the only exception could be the documents of the Apostolic Penitentiary, which deals with cases of conscience, for obvious reasons of discretion and respect for individuals.”

There is also, as in any archive, a time constraint (i.e. the time between the events and the access to the documents for them to be effectively part of history). In the case of the Vatican, the gap is usually around 75 years. And the practice is that they are opened per papacy. Currently, access goes up to 1939, i.e. until the end of the pontificate of Pius XI.⁷

1. THE CATHOLIC CHURCH DOES NOT TURN ITS BACK ON NEW TECHNOLOGIES

There are many small initiatives that seek a communion between the digital age and religion. Even Pope Francis has taken advantage of an innovative space like the TED Talks to embrace disruption. “It would be good if the growth of technological projects also corresponded to greater equality and social inclusion,” he said via videoconference in one such talk last year [García 2018].

The Catholic Church is no stranger to social reality. On the 47th World Communications Day, Pope Benedict XVI addressed the Christian community with the following words: “The ability to use the new languages of communication is a requirement not so much for the sake of fashion but above all to allow the Gospel to take on forms of expression that will touch the hearts and souls of all.” The Holy Father had encouraged such initiatives as they complement the practice and propagation of the Good News [Haedgel 2015].

Mobile applications enable Church representatives to address a wider public, especially young people. Pope Benedict XVI encouraged such initiatives as they complement the practice and spread of the good news.⁸

Just as the current Pope maintains a close relationship with the faithful, the mobile app revolution in churches around the world reconciles young people with religion and creates a bond between believers.

The church has always been a social network and what it is doing today is simply adapting its mode of operation to the expectations of the world and to the new challenges of communication. We can note that the Vatican has a portal open to everyone with the creation of the Vatican website.⁹ In this website,

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Read in Message of His Holiness Benedict XVI for the twenty-eighth world youth day, from the Vatican, October 2012.

⁹ See <https://www.vatican.va/content/vatican/es.html> [accessed: 11.05.2022].

we can have access to: 1) information about the history of the Vatican and the successive popes; 2) links to prayers; 3) the Holy Father's own work; access to news related to the Catholic Church; 4) photographs, among much more content.

It is clear that the possibility for everyone to access these resources brings the Church much closer to the faithful.

In 2008 the US site Life Church had launched a mobile application for reading the Bible. For millions of readers around the world, a wildly successful free Bible app, YouVersion, is changing how, where and when they read the Bible.¹⁰

Built by LifeChurch.tv, one of the nation's largest and most technologically advanced evangelical churches, YouVersion is part of what the church calls its "digital missions." They include a platform for online church services and prepackaged worship videos that the church distributes free. A digital tithing system and an interactive children's Bible are in the works. The app is now the most widely used app in the world, with versions in over 600 languages and an audio book. Available for Android, iOS and Windows Phone, this is now the fifth edition and has been downloaded more than 140 million times.

It was in March 2010 that the Messe Info app was launched in France,¹¹ where you can find mass schedules as well as the major Christian feasts. Then, in November 2010, the reference site of the Catholic Church launched its mobile application: Eglise Info, which allows you to follow the Church's news live. Since then, more and more churches have decided to go online.

The African continent, which has a dense Christian population, is characterised by sometimes delicate dealings and difficult communication. The Church plays a major role on the continent.¹²

Thanks to the smartphone revolution and the creation of mobile applications by the Church in Africa [Mourdoukoutas 2017],¹³ they have made it

¹⁰ See "In the Beginning Was the Word; Now the Word Is on an App" published in The New York Times Journal, July 2013.

¹¹ See <https://messes.info> [accessed: 11.05.2022].

¹² As we can read at Historical figures throughout the executive summary are courtesy of Todd M. Johnson of the Center for the Study of Global Christianity at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary in South Hamilton, Mass. Johnson is co-editor of the Atlas of Global Christianity, Edinburgh University Press, 2009: "Today, only about a quarter of all Christians live in Europe (26%). A plurality – more than a third – now are in the Americas (37%). About one in every four Christians lives in sub-Saharan Africa (24%), and about one-in-eight is found in Asia and the Pacific (13%)."

¹³ In the same article we can read the following: "Challenges. The greatest obstacle to digitizing Africa is financial. Despite the price of smartphones dropping to under \$100 in 2015, that amount is still high for Africa's poor, and the added cost of data plans is often prohibitive. Remote areas in Africa face additional challenges, as it is often difficult to connect these regions to the Internet due to poor infrastructure and lack of funding. Investors are hesitant to finance Internet cable expansion into rural areas, since the profit margin is lower than in urban areas."

possible to create a communication link between parishes and parishioners. See the paradigmatic example of Nigeria (an African country where the majority of Christians are concentrated), where certain virtual communities have more than ten thousand members.¹⁴

These mobile applications, in addition to motivating parishioners to pray, make it easier for priests to provide them with spiritual guidance. The latter pastoral and evangelising function is facilitated by the anonymous nature of the web.¹⁵

While supporting the pastoral and evangelising function of the Catholic Church, these applications allow for the administration and census of the population in a continent where government is sometimes ineffective.¹⁶ In these places, churches provide the faithful with social assistance and various services.

2. FROM CHRISTIAN APPS AND OTHER PROPOSALS BASED ON THE TOOLS ENABLED BY THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE TECHNOLOGY

2.1. App called *La Quête*

One of the first approaches to new technologies was carried out by a French startup that created an app called *La Quête*. Romain Husson, one of its two founders, says that the initiative arose with the aim of providing an extra source of funding for Catholic churches so that they would not depend exclusively on the masses [García 2018]. “For the faithful, all they have to do is

¹⁴ As we can read in “Global Christianity – A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World’s Christian Population,” published in December 2011 in the journal: <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2011/12/19/global-christianity-exec/> [accessed: 11.05.2022]. We must pay attention to another publication, vid. Catholic Social Teaching, Historical Overview and Application to the Challenges of Africa, published in <https://repository.globethics.net/bitstream/handle/20.500.12424/166575/Catholic%20Social%20Teaching%2C%20Historical%20Overview%20and%20Application%20to%20the%20Challenges%20of%20Africa.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y> [accessed: 11.05.2022]. What we want to point out is that: “It is glaring that times and situations have tremendously changed in the Nigerian society. What is abundantly clear to the hierarchy in Nigeria today is the obvious fact that Catholic Church is losing members in droves to other religious groups, and must do something expedient to win them back to the fold. There are too many frontal challenges suffocating the progress of the Church, the African Christian Churches, the non-Christian believers and Islam. The worst is the attack it gets from the Moslem nationals.”

¹⁵ Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, Pastoral Guide for diocesan priests in churches dependent on the congregation for the evangelization of peoples, Rome, June 1989.

¹⁶ See <https://repository.globethics.net/bitstream/handle/20.500.12424/166575/Catholic%20Social%20Teaching%2C%20Historical%20Overview%20and%20Application%20to%20the%20Challenges%20of%20Africa.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y> [accessed: 11.05.2022].

download the application free of charge, transmit their bank details and register their parish manually or by geolocation. Then give the amount you want and the payment will be made at the end of each month,” he adds.

2.2. Electronic brush

Also, as an initiative of a Catholic church in the capital of France, aware of its dwindling cash collection, they implemented an electronic brush for the faithful to contribute between two and 10 euros by means of their contactless cards. “A whole generation is using fewer and fewer notes and coins. They attend mass, but they don’t have the facilities to donate anything” [ibid.] argues this pioneering diocese as the main reason for the inclusion of this contactless payment method. Today, the installation of machines that allow donations to be made by contactless cards in most Christian churches has become commonplace.

2.3. Free WIFI network access available

The use of technology is intimately linked to the possibility of internet access. In Spain, we can identify an initiative put into practice in the church of San Antón (Madrid, Spain), which has an open wifi available to everyone.

The director of the church, aware that we live in an age where mobile phones are indispensable and everyone has one, said: “We want to open a line of communication, through Whatsapp, for example, for those who live far from home and want to talk to their countries of origin. It’s a way of ensuring that no one is isolated,” he noted.

With regard to the electronic resources that can be found on the web, we highlight those listed on the website [Hutchings 2010], see the following: 1) Bailey, Brian, and Terry Storch, *The Blogging Church: Sharing the Story of Your Church Through Blogs* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007); 2) Barzilai, Gad, and Karine Barzilai-Nahon, “Cultured Technology: Internet & Religious Fundamentalism.” *The Information Society* 21(1) (2005); 3) Campbell, Heidi, *Exploring Religious Community Online: We Are One in the Network* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2005); 4) “Spiritualising the Internet: Uncovering Discourses and Narratives of Religious Internet Usage,” *Online: Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* 01(1) (2005); 5) *When Religion Meets New Media* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010); 6) Castells, Manuel, *The Internet Galaxy: Reflections on the Internet, Business and Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); 7) Church of England Board for Social Responsibility, *Cybernavts Awake! Ethical and Spiritual Implications of Computers, Information Technology and the Internet* (London: Church House 1999); 8) Dawson, Lorne L. and Douglas E. Cowan (eds.), *Religion Online: Finding Faith on the Internet* (London: Routledge, 2004); 9) and Jenna Henneby, “New Religions

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2.4. Proposal that confessions can be made via an ipad

There are other initiatives that have to do with bringing the Catholic Church closer to the digital age, such as the proposal that confessions can be made via an ipad. In the words of Adrián Gutiérrez, director of the church of San Antón (Madrid, Spain), the aim is to provide new solutions through innovation, and the project of making confessions with an ipad “is a way of making them accessible to people who, for example, have hearing problems. You can write down your sins and, in this way, it is not necessary for everyone to know what you want to confess,” he explains.¹⁷

Of course, this proposal has the disadvantage that the absolute confidentiality of the confession is not guaranteed. We must be aware that the benefits of new technologies are associated with the possibility of cyber-attacks that can steal data. This is undoubtedly a very delicate issue that must be considered in order to be able to facilitate this type of confession for the faithful.

¹⁷ Ibid. and also consulted at <https://repository.globethics.net/> [accessed: 11.05.2022].

2.5. To broadcast their trades via streaming so that they can be seen anywhere in the world

Unfortunately, it is becoming increasingly common for citizens not to attend mass regularly.¹⁸ It is for this reason that, in order that the Word of God can be heard by as many people as possible, projects of this kind are born. That is the reason why the NGO “Mensajeros de la Paz (Messengers of Peace)”¹⁹ decided to broadcast its services by streaming so that they can be seen anywhere in the world.

3. CRITICAL STANCE OF CHURCH SECTORS TOWARDS THE USE OF TECHNOLOGY AND THE POSSIBLE BREAKDOWN OF THE ECCLESIAL COMMUNITY

Despite the fact that the Catholic Church has always stood out throughout its history for adapting to the environment in which it operates without renouncing its dogmas of faith. This capacity for mutation has allowed it to survive.

It is also true that there are sectors of the Church that have their misgivings about the profound transformation brought about by the irruption of technology into the life of the Catholic Church [González 2018].

Some sectors of the Church fear that the possibility of praying from home and in front of a mobile phone could, on the contrary, destroy the ecclesial community. Faced with the option that everything can be done remotely, this more traditionalist sector maintains that the faithful might even stop feeling the need to go to church. Attending mass, meeting and talking with church members – all these Christian customs could be replaced by new technologies.

CONCLUSIONS

Finally, and as a sort of summary, we may conclude after reading this article, that the determined will of our most recent Holy Fathers to ensure that the Catholic Church does not develop behind the back of the tremendous technological evolution that has taken place in recent years, has been reflected in the development and implementation of numerous digital resources, which in any case, manage to bring the Catholic Church closer to the faithful, as well as to accommodate the changes that occur in reality.

¹⁸ According to Spanish CIS barometer data, almost 60% of those who consider themselves Catholics stated that they hardly ever attend Mass.

¹⁹ NGOs represented mainly in the church of San Antón (Madrid, Spain).

However, we must not lose sight of the fact that the significant economic differences between Europe and Africa necessarily translate into greater difficulty for African countries to guarantee access to technological means to bring the faithful closer to the Catholic Church. This is without prejudice to the exponential development that has taken place in the involvement of the Catholic Church with new technologies.

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