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Preaching in a Digital Age

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During the Vatican's first radio broadcast, Senator Guglielmo Marconi (d. 1937) had the honor of introducing Pope Pius XI (d. 1939). As one of the early inventors of radio, Marconi was asked to build a station for the church on Vatican Hill. By 1931 construction was complete, and Marconi prepared his audience for an unprecedented event. He explained in English that for the first time in history, a pope's voice would be heard at the same moment around the world.

The radio address was a milestone in technology's ever-expanding ability to navigate time and space. Nine years after this first radio broadcast Fulton J. Sheen led the first televised religious program on Easter Sunday in New York (see 89ff. above). Parishes that were promoting local TV broadcasts in the 1950s are now programming the content of their own YouTube channels. Similarly, almost every public appearance of the pope can be live-streamed in high definition video on mobile devices—complemented by a bevy of Facebook pages, Instagram accounts, podcasts, playlists, and e-books.

The Roman Catholic Church has moved relatively quickly in adopting these new technologies. Early on it voiced sustained opposition to some media—particularly film, a resistance that persisted from the silent film era through a 1958 ban on film projections during the liturgy. Vatican II (1962–1965), however, ushered in an era of prudent acceptance of new communication methods, including a papal Twitter account in 2012. Pope Benedict XVI (b. 1927) captured this cautious optimism in a message delivered on World Communications Day in 2011. Recognizing that the internet had instigated a "period of vast cultural transformation," he underscored the promise of digital networks. "This means of spreading information and knowledge," he said, "is giving birth to a new way of learning and thinking, with unprecedented opportunities for establishing relationships and building fellowship" (Benedict XVI, 2011).

Given this potential of new media—and the announcements every few months of new "must-have" devices, expanded features, and updated apps—preachers and other religious leaders interested in using the most effective means of communication at their disposal are faced with the difficult question: "What ought we to do?" How might technology feasibly be integrated with the resources, traditions, and fluencies of a local or even universal church? Where might the Gospel message be found, for example, on Snapchat?

Such questions could prompt an "arms race" mentality, in which the metric of success is calculated according to the number of active new media accounts. Some are tempted to dismiss or reject completely technologies that emerged after the heyday of their generation. Still others desire a catered menu, which organizes and enumerates the many available digital services so that they might select à *la carte* a collection of communication styles that best suits their preferences.

When making such decisions about media and technology, it is advisable to pause momentarily and reflect on the fundamental nature of these terms that have become inflated over the years with so many hopes and anxieties. The noted media theorist Marshall McLuhan (d. 1980) famously tried to provoke this kind of critical pause with his seemingly paradoxical statement, "the medium is the message" (McLuhan 1994, 7). Taken conservatively, the line challenges us to consider how meaning changes based on the medium through which it is communicated; for example, how "I love you" texted on a phone carries an entirely different resonance than "I love you" spoken in person or written in rose petals. Tools, materials, and contexts alter the rhetorical situation. They transform content.

"Technology" as a term, and close relative of "media," stems from the Greek *techne*. In antiquity it referred to a specific form of knowledge that was created during artistic production. Aristotle (d. 322 BCE) offers the example of a flutist whose playing demonstrates substantial knowledge (Aristotle 2000, 312). This Greek framing of *techne* becomes important to French philosopher Bernard Stiegler (b. 1952), who uses it to situate his definition of human *techne* or "technics." For Stiegler, technics describe the sense-making activities that humans use to transfer meaning from their "interior milieu" or inner thoughts into their "exterior milieu" or physical environment (Stiegler 1998, 55). A carpenter's hands and hammer, therefore, become a technology that impresses an idea of "chair" into a piece of wood. The flute would also count as a technology, as it vibrates into the air notes that derive from the player's internal rhythm. Even a preacher's voice echoing over the congregation becomes a technology, each syllable enunciating a new signal into the room. The same holds true for a dancer's movements or an architect's drafting—all of these would be for Stiegler "technics" or practices and tools (technologies) for projecting ourselves onto the world. In Stiegler's terms, technics is a defining characteristic of being human.

Thus, a more provocative interpretation of McLuhan's "the medium is the message" becomes clear. Not only does the medium affect the messages it carries but also, in Stiegler's estimation, society pays far too much attention to the content a medium produces. The words spoken, the text written, or the movie filmed consumes popular interest. McLuhan called for a reversal, a move from questions of "what" media produce to investigations of "how" they communicate. For example, rather than examining the notes on the Facebook page of someone who has died, we might instead question how this posting of condolences changes the expression and reception of grief.

The focus on "how" media function was intimately connected to McLuhan's own faith life. His conversion to Roman Catholicism later in his career made him a regular figure at daily Mass. There, he noted an extraordinary transformation of the liturgy even before the reforms of Vatican II. Surprisingly, he dates it at the introduction of the microphone. McLuhan found that the solitary meditative space, which he once enjoyed at a discrete distance from the presider's recitations in Latin, disappeared under the amplified signal of loudspeakers. What had once been an almost chant-like murmur became clear and forceful, as if the priest was engaged in a personal dialogue with him. He makes the somewhat bold claim that this shift from physical projection to electronic projection of the spoken word served as the catalyst for the use of the vernacular during liturgy. The microphone emphasized the necessity of being heard by the congregation and being understood. It is difficult to validate such a theory; anecdotes of increased microphone sales to churches after the council could simply have been the result of lower cost or greater familiarity with the technology. Still, McLuhan's assertions are worth noting as a reminder that choices in *techne* bear consequences. He was fond of saying that every extension which media grant to our capacities (such as the ability to extend one's voice across a vast space) comes simultaneously with a type of amputation. Loss attends every gain. Whereas the microphone increased clarity, heightened a sense of proximity within the congregation, and suggested the possibility that everyone's voice might be equally heard within a church, it also detracted from a sense of private space, the availability of personal reflection, and—in McLuhan's estimation—the architecture of existing churches: built around the acoustics of the human voice and meant to magnify perceptions of distance, place, and space (McLuhan 1999, 110). His plea in all of this is to be more thoughtful of the *effects* of media—how they transform meaning, how they influence behavior, and how they reconfigure our perception.

If McLuhan's invitation to focus on effects offers a strategy to those searching for a foothold in the dramatic shifts of digital culture, how does

one go about attending to these effects? A number of approaches hold promise, but two seem especially useful to those in positions of ministry and leadership. The first comes from another seminal figure in media studies, Harold Innis (d. 1952), one of McLuhan's foremost influences. Beginning his career as an economist, Innis studied the history of some of Canada's natural resources or "staples" like the fur trade. He became fascinated by how the material makeup of a nation's media influenced its efficiency and organization. His subsequent work broadened this scope to communication styles of history's most prominent empires and institutions. He proposed that the longevity and success of a society was in large part attributable to the media they used to negotiate time and space. Just as the Vatican's first radio address transcended longstanding challenges to reaching audiences across great distances, so too did the invention of papyrus, parchment, and paper present new communication opportunities for their respective societies. Innis classified these media into two types. Light media, like paper, were aligned with conquests of space and could be easily reproduced and transported. On the other hand, durable media, like stone tablets, were aligned with time and far more permanent (albeit more difficult to produce). In Innis's estimation, light media have historically been favored by societies needing to assert military control over broad regions. Ancient Romans, he claimed, were able to administer their empire through the affordability of papyrus, which could be procured inexpensively and used to disseminate information to distant lands. Conversely, durable media have been much more helpful to religious societies looking to organize and exercise spiritual authority. Monastic scribes, for example, took painstaking effort to copy manuscripts on parchment, safeguarding the wisdom of past ages and consolidating knowledge into future centers of learning. Innis's takeaway is that sustained prosperity requires a balance of both durable and light media (Innis 2007, 159–60).

In terms of the present age, it is clear that the internet has initiated a boom in light, portable media. Voices around the world continuously update newsfeeds on Twitter, family members thousands of miles apart chat in video streams on Skype, and mobile users share images with hundreds if not thousands of followers. Longstanding monopolies of knowledge have broken down and rendered information much more accessible to a wider audience. This abundance, while meriting praise and optimism, is also indicative of a relative lack: the scales have shifted away from more durable and permanent media. Following Innis's argument, this imbalance would signal a dearth of spiritual channels and expressions in the popular media landscape.

The charge for current religious leaders, therefore, is not necessarily to condemn light media but rather to seek out ways to enrich the church's longstanding traditions and resources in durable media. With Stiegler's and McLuhan's broader approaches to technology and communications in mind, a worthy aim would be to consider how the church might celebrate the technics and media in which it is so fluent: the great architectural spaces for worship and community; the sacramental symbols of water, fire, oil, and incense; the liturgical rites of movement and song; the rich iconography of church history; the practices of meditation and prayer; the oral tradition of proclamation and fellowship. How might these media be put in renewed service of people missing more durable modes of communication and the spiritual growth which they facilitate?

This reassessment of the church's own durable media and fluencies is one way of responding to McLuhan's plea to think more expansively of media's effects. A second would be to reflect on how the church historically has used media in its ministry. Eileen Crowley offers a helpful overview of this history in *Liturgical Art for a Media Culture*. In it, she identifies a number of uses for technology in religious practice. The first and perhaps most evident is evangelization (see 105ff. above). The effort to disseminate religious messages to persuade believers and nonbelievers alike has drawn a host of technologies, from magic lantern shows during the Reformation to cinematic, audiovisual light shows in modern megachurches. Crowley points out that evangelical and "growth-oriented" denominations tend to focus their resources on this particular use of media and have far outpaced the majority of Roman Catholic parishes. A second role for media has been liturgical renewal that, while popular in the first two decades after Vatican II, lost its impetus in the late 1980s (Crowley 2007, 28). Furthermore, the ecclesial content that is produced today tends to lag significantly behind the professional, creative industries in terms of practices and applications (Crowley 2007, 32).

One use that Crowley implies more than analyzes is media as a locus for pastoral intervention. Emerging technics are in need of guidance, leadership, and spiritual care. The "vast cultural transformation" that Benedict identified has changed not only "the way we communicate, but communication itself" (Benedict XVI 2011). Human technics have been reconfigured and with them, everyday behaviors and perceptions. The adoption of portable, light media has been so accelerated that there has been little time for reflection and analysis. In the midst of frequent upgrades some prominent voices have tried calling attention to digital technology's effects on the mysteries and phenomena of being human. Sherry Turkle has discussed the ways in

which empathy and intimacy are diminished outside of face-to-face conversations (Turkle 2015). Jaron Lanier has speculated about encroachments on privacy and financial security when online services continually exchange their resources for users' information and creative output (Lanier 2011). Jonathan Crary has written about the impact on memory and individuality as networked societies enter a 24/7 work cycle (Crary 2014). These are just a few examples, and whether or not one agrees with their critiques, they are evidence of a growing movement that questions the adaptations society has made to integrate networked technologies into daily practice.

Media and Evangelization

In the Roman Catholic Church the new evangelization is understood as a calling to deepen one's faith, believe in the Gospel, and then proclaim it to others (see 105ff. above). The homily is one important vehicle for such evangelizing. Astute preachers and pastoral leaders use all available instruments to reach as many people as possible with a fresh interpretation of the Gospel. Pope Francis (b. 1936), like his predecessor Benedict XVI, uses Twitter (@Pontifex) to send brief messages daily. The Twiplomacy Study (2015) reported that while President Barack Obama (b. 1961) may be the most followed world leader, Pope Francis—with accounts in nine languages—is the most influential, judging by how often his messages are retweeted.

Why are social media services important venues for evangelization? The shift in the religious behavior of people offers at least one compelling reason. Tracked by different organizations, including the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate and the Pew Research Center, findings indicate that people are increasingly disassociating themselves from the religions of their childhood. The number of affiliated regular churchgoers is declining in the United States and abroad, while the number of unaffiliated, nonbelievers, and atheists is rising.

According to a study by the Pew Center, 29 percent of millennials (born between 1977 and 1992) are unaffiliated (Pew Center, 2014). Eighty-six percent say they believe in God but only 58 percent are certain that God exists. According to this survey 81 percent of them are on Facebook. Although employing Facebook is no guarantee that pastoral leaders and preachers will connect with these young adults, it can be a significant way to reach them.

The post-millennials (also generation Z or pluralists) represent the generation born after 1997. The social networks of this young age group are the most diverse in terms of race, sexual orientation, genders, economic status, and spiritual or religious beliefs. Time will tell if this "iGeneration"

will become disenchanted with the religion in which they were raised, if they were raised in one at all.

The pastoral instructions of popes, bishops, and religious leaders in the Roman Catholic Church have expressed concern about these documented shifts. Communication from recent popes invites the church to heed the call to a new evangelization. They have summoned the church and its leadership to proclaim the person of Jesus Christ in ways that can be attractive; at the same time they challenge habitual assumptions. Documents from the Pontifical Commission on Social Communications such as *Communio et Progressio* (1971) and *Aetatis Novae* (1992) as well as the themes for the World Communications Days since 2002 have either pointed to or stressed the important role that the internet and social media can play in the work of evangelization. Rethinking traditional forms of evangelization such as preaching in the digital age is the challenge.

Social networking services can help pastoral teams and homilists in their ministries as evangelizers in achieving a variety of different goals:

Preparing for preaching. The internet is a boon to those looking for fresh material, insights, and models in the process of preaching preparation. Schools of theology and divinity schools send out weekly scriptural reflections or exegetical guides on readings for the coming Sunday. Many preachers have taken to blogging and populate the internet with sermon outlines, illustrations, and even full-blown homilies. Texts and articles on preaching are available through multiple outlets such as the American Theological Library Association (ATLA.com), and dynamic preaching exemplars can sometimes be found on YouTube.com. Most helpful are sprawling digital commons such as Textweek.Com that draw together hundreds of links for sermonic browsing and borrowing.

Publishing homilies. Innumerable platforms are available for sharing homilies and other evangelizing materials. These include Facebook.com, Linkedin.com, and Twitter.com. Blogging platforms can also be used for posting homilies, such as WordPress.com or Blogpot.com. Digitally recorded homilies can be uploaded on YouTube.com or Vimeo.com. Sites such as Podomatic.com enable preachers to disseminate their preaching as podcasts. Communities interested in live-streaming video services—a contemporary twist on televised Masses—can engage a company such as Ustream.tv. Many congregations are establishing their own websites, which among other things can also archive homilies.

Getting Feedback. There are multiple ways that preachers can get feedback on their preaching or continue conversations with parishioners about topics raised in a homily. Parish chat rooms are a possibility, as well as many of

the social media platforms noted above. More systematically, organizations could employ a site like SurveyMonkey.com for designing, disseminating, and analyzing surveys about past preaching events, or soliciting ideas for future preaching. Communication platforms such as Skype.com could allow preachers to receive feedback from peers on sermon ideas or brainstorm ideas for the coming Sunday or feast.

Connecting with people. Weekly paper bulletins or seasonal publications are slowly giving way to electronic newsletter services like ConstantContact.com and MailChimp.com. A more geographically appropriate platform is NextDoor.com, a private social network designed for neighborhoods. Territorial parishes might find this resource useful in connecting with members who are geographically close. Some communities are creating their own parish app for staying connected to their members. A service such as Parishapps.com from Our Sunday Visitor is directed explicitly at Roman Catholic parishes. More broadly, given the many parish consolidations that have occurred in Roman Catholic dioceses, live streaming technologies could be employed to connect satellite churches to a local parish, or even cathedral, for key worship events such as Triduum.

There are certainly challenges to engaging the digital world for preaching. Maintaining a website or parish app, streaming liturgies, archiving homilies, or hosting a feedback chat room could be a full-time job. It is not unusual for larger congregations to establish an information technology (IT) department. While preachers do not have to assume responsibilities for these many aspects of a digital presence, the more their digital fluency the more effectively these new technologies can become. Lastly, some of these programs do require subscriptions or other fees. Budgeting for these services will require advance planning. Local businesses who sponsor the weekly bulletin will be just as eager to advertise online where links to their companies will be just a click away. Gradually moving away from light media such as paper is a sensitive and laudable environmental action.

Media in the Preaching Event

Employing media while preaching offers another opportunity to render a homily more accessible and intelligible. Although worship is not essentially a time for entertainment—although hopefully it is enjoyable—studies suggest that attention spans of adults can be relatively short and even shorter for the young. It can be difficult for even the best preachers to keep everyone's attention during a homily. Notable is the rise in reported cases of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder—the Centers for Disease

Control and Prevention (CDC 2014) project it affects over 11 percent of all children. Educators maintain that learners of every age absorb and retain more information when they hear it and see it at the same time.

Preachers understand that a well-chosen visual aid can help get a point across. In this digital age, preachers are invited to rethink their use of images not only as a visual aid to complement a spoken point but also as a potentially transformative element capable of articulating a point or dimension that speech alone is unable to capture. Media projection will not make a bad sermon good, but it can make a good sermon better.

Although projecting still slides is yet the norm, flashing videos or clips on the screen can make a sermon more accessible. Some software to achieve these purposes is specifically marketed for the worship environment, e.g., through EasyWorship.com and WorshipHouseMedia.com. Of course, such videos are not a substitute for proclaiming the Word of God and should not displace it. Rather, they are intended to help the assembly make more dynamic connections between God's Word and their own lives.

It is critical that everyone in the church can see what is projected. In long, narrow churches monitors may have to be installed along the length of the nave. In more centralized worship seating plans, two or three well-placed screens will suffice. Some churches are designed where one enormous projection surface runs along the back wall of the chancel or sanctuary serving as a kind of contemporary ever-changing reredos.

The dynamic technologies required to support worship preaching can be very expensive. They also require a steep learning curve for the preacher and the technicians so that such digitally enhanced preaching becomes a seamless part of worship.

Conclusion

New and wondrous innovations inevitably lie ahead, each one replete with its own conveniences and concerns. In the face of this future, Benedict invites Christians to participate "confidently and with an informed and responsible creativity" (Benedict XVI 2011) in these new digital networks. The journey to this conscientious and thoughtful agency with technology, however, is neither an easy nor a clear one. There is no app for bearing witness online to the sacred mystery of other human beings; no map for the incarnation of grace in video games. The opportunity for pastoral work in this area ought to be greeted with enthusiasm by the preachers and other religious leaders. Certainly the need for guidance and attentive care of our technical and mediated lives will only increase. Here is where the new ministries of new media will emerge.

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