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Religious Taming¹ of the Digital Continent: from John Paul II to Francis

The adventures of Pope Francis on the digital continent

SUMMARY

Today, the Catholic Church skillfully adapts the achievements of modern communication technologies to support the pastoral ministry. The author of this article shows what attitude towards modern digital technologies was presented by the last three popes: John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and Francis. Each of them, in their own way, formed a dialogue with the faithful, using the digital tools in a conscious and thoughtful way. The Pope's relationship with the faithful, mediated by modern media, confirms that digital tools, now called the digital age, play an important role in the evangelization of the modern world.

KEYWORDS: Church, media, social media, internet, evangelization, Pope Francis, Benedict XVI, John Paul II

1 In Christianity, inculturation is “the adaptation of the way Church teachings are presented to non-Christian cultures and, in turn, the influence of those cultures on the evolution of these teachings,” according to <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Inculturation>. It is the “internal transformation of authentic cultural values through their integration into Christianity and the rooting of Christianity in other cultures”, according to the Final Report of the 1985 Synod of Bishops.

STRESZCZENIE

Religijne osvajanie kontynentu cyfrowego: od Jana Pawła II do Franciszka Przygody Franciszka na kontynencie cyfrowym

W dzisiejszych czasach Kościół katolicki w umiejętny sposób adaptuje osiągnięcia współczesnych technologii komunikacyjnych do wspomaganie posługi duszpasterskiej. Autor niniejszego artykułu ukazuje jakie stanowisko wobec nowoczesnych technologii cyfrowych prezentowali ostatni trzej papieże: Jan Paweł II, Benedykt XVI i Franciszek. Każdy z nich na swój specyficzny sposób nawiązał dialog z wiernymi, wykorzystując cyfrowe narzędzia w sposób świadomy i przemyślany. Relacje papieży z wiernymi, zapośredniczone przez nowoczesne media, potwierdzają, że cyfrowe narzędzia, pełniąc obecnie, w czasach zwanych erą cyfrową, niezwykle ważną rolę w ewangelizacji współczesnego świata.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: Kościół, media, media społecznościowe, internet, ewangelizacja, papież Franciszek, Benedykt XVI, Jan Paweł II

Historically, church institutions led by the popes referred to the emerging new media for content distribution such as printing, cinema, radio, and television carefully and sometimes negatively (censorship, the imprimatur). Their reactions are presented extensively by Katarzyna Ignatowicz-Pokorn in the monograph "Kościół w świetle mediów".²

Sometimes it was about the content (heretic), sometimes about competition, about getting the attention of the faithful (distraction from rituals, prayer). However, after many years, or rather, many centuries of experience, the Church has learned to co-exist and even co-operate with them, also inculcating and evangelizing with them.

In the face of ineffectiveness of the initial rejection and condemnation, adaptive doctrines were developed. The Church changed its approach and tactics, which was expressed by the famous *Inter Mirifica* decree proclaimed by Pope Paul VI.

2 K. Pokorna-Ignatowicz, *Kościół w świecie mediów. Historia – dokumenty – dylematy*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, Kraków 2002.

According to that Pope, as he expressed in the *Evangelii Nuntiandi* Apostolic Exhortation of 1975 on evangelization in the modern world:

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 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.³

To illustrate the interest of the magisterium of the Church, I shall present several photographs collected online, according to the Chinese saying, “A picture speaks a thousand words”.

This will be, therefore, *imaging Examples*, according to the Latin maxim *Verba docent, exempla trahunt* (Words instruct, instructions lead). They are divided into three categories, as in the grading of an adverb, from “near” to “near-nearer-the nearest”.

John Paul II – broad, broader, the broadest – a global village⁴

From the Rhapsody Theater to the World Theater

John Paul II recommended and pointed to Paul VI in his pastoral practice, especially during his numerous world pilgrimages, combining the traditional gatherings of the faithful with the multimillion auditors of the “global village”. He expanded the recommendation of acting through mass media to new spheres of the digital network connecting people across the globe in a tangle of unimaginable amount of words, sounds and images. Incorporating a twentieth-century institution like the Church in this

3 http://www.opoka.org.pl/biblioteka/W/WP/pawel_vi/adhortacje/evangelii_nuntiandi.html, nr 45 (accessed 1.02.2017).

4 Comprehensive statements of John Paul II and Benedict XVI are presented in Józef Kloch's collection “Internet i Kościół”, Elipsa, Warszawa 2011, and the monograph “Kościół w Polsce wobec Web 2.0”, Jedność, Kielce 2013.

vague (liquid) network was a pioneering and extremely difficult task, given the unruly spirit of freedom of the makers of the World Wide Web and the ever-changing transformation of its forms.⁵

John Paul II points to the world of the media which often interacts very deeply with the people of our time. For many, the Pope writes, the media constitute “the central information and formation tool, a guide and inspiration in individual, family and social behavior” (n. 37). That is why the world of the media, says John Paul II, must become a theater for the Church of today to proclaim the word of God. The Christian message must “cultivate a new culture” created by modern media.

Already in 1990, John Paul II wrote that with the advent of computer communication techniques, a new computer culture was born. The Church received new means of carrying out her mission, the ability to inform the world more quickly about its “credo” and to explain its position to every problem or event. However, John Paul II called it the “Areopagus” of the modern world.



Urbi et Orbi from a distant country.
Source: www.brewiarz.pl



A global pilgrim. Source: www.wadowice.pl

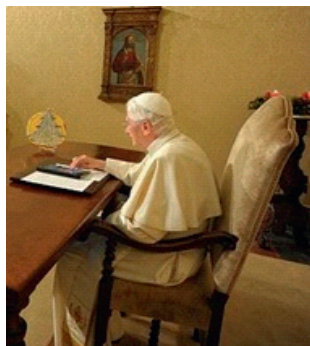


Without barriers. Source: www.el-financiero.com.mx/

5 Manuel Castells' *The Internet Galaxy* shows the spirit of the Californian counterculture as the *moving spirit* of the creators of new media.
Barlow's Declaration of Cyberspace Declaration of 1996.

Benedict XVI – deep, deeper, the deepest – a global exploration⁶

From the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith to the “courtyard of the Gentiles”



Preparations. Source: www.informador.com.mx



A debate with the Gentiles. Source: www.elfinanciero.com.mx



Exploration. Source: www.newsweek.pl
/ Fot.Reuters/ Kai Pfaffenbach

Due to the scale and nature of the new “Areopagus” mentioned by John Paul II, Benedict XVI called it “continento digitale”, a digital continent in which the Gospel must be preached with enthusiasm. Benedict XVI: for a Catholic, the Internet is like a “courtyard of the Gentiles”⁷ in the temple of Jerusalem, a meeting place for believers and nonbelievers in a fruitful dialogue.

6 The ideas of Benedict XVI are broadly presented in the collection “Komunikacja społeczna według Benedykta XVI”, prepared by Małgorzata Laskowska and Krzysztof Marcyński, SAC (Wydawnictwo Petrus, Kraków 2016).

7 The name comes from the vestibule of the Temple of Jerusalem, to which the Gentiles had admission. Only Jews could enter further.

In a message for the 43rd World Communications Day entitled “New technologies, new relationships. Promote a culture of respect, dialogue and friendship”, Benedict encouraged Christians to be the heralds of the Gospel on the digital continent. “The greatest gift you can share with them is the Good News of God, who became a man, suffered, died, and rose to save mankind.”

In the *Caritas in Veritate* encyclical, the Pope pointed out that the media “can become an opportunity for humanization not only when, thanks to technological development, they create greater opportunities for communication and information, but above all, when their organization and objectives are guided by the picture of the common person and good, reflecting its universal values. They have to focus on promoting the dignity of individuals and nations”. The mission of the Church is to bring the spirit into the uninterrupted communication flow of the Network.

Pope Benedict does not surf the net, use a computer and writes with a pen, or rather a pencil. But the world of the Internet surprises and fascinates him, said the Vatican daily “L’Osservatore Romano”.

Francis – close, closer, the closest – a global parish⁸

From “Buona sera” to “Buon appetito”

When Cardinal Bergoglio appeared in the window of the Apostolic Palace in Rome as Pope Francis, he began his first *Urbi et Orbi* message with the colloquial Italian “Buona Sera”, developing the personal style of Karol Cardinal Wojtyła. It was time of more than just global television with a simultaneous message to the people of the global village. To incorporate the Church into the digital network was a Herculean task.

But he is doing it. When on 26 July 2016, he was standing in the window of the Apostolic Palace, he responded to the request of the Polish organizers of the XXXI World Youth Day; he informed that the registration of the participants had begun with a tablet in his hand. Francis addend that thanks to this “electronic device”, he already enrolled in this Krakow event. He also encouraged young Catholics from all over the world to come to Cracow. The relevant tweet followed soon.

8 More extensively on the communications style of Francis is shown in the monograph “Sztuka komunikacji według Franciszka” edited by Małgorzata Laskowska and Krzysztof Marcyański SAC, and the Pope’s approach towards the new media is discussed by Tomasz Goban-Klas “Franciszek w erze komunikacji i mediów naszych czasów”, PWN, Warszawa 2016, 15-32.

Francis is creative about implementing the ideas of Benedict XVI about new media. By registering with a digital medium, and also entering the global television, Francis demonstrated that, in words and in action, he is the pope of the “digital global village”. He reaches out to it almost daily with his tweets sent from a white tablet that has been called the “iPapad”. One of the earliest entries was: “The true authority is service. The Pope must serve all, especially the poorest, the weakest and the least”⁹.

Claudio Maria Celli, President of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications, stressed that

for Francis, direct contact with people is the foundation of Christian life, and at the heart of this communication there are meetings with people living in today’s world. Francis is an active Twitter user, and the Vatican is considering the possibility of creating a papal Facebook page. At the same time, as yet another pope, he helps to understand that what counts first is personal witness, and social networks can only be a good place to provide such personal witness.¹⁰

And it was quite recently that Francis confirmed this opinion, giving his special blessing to Internet users. His short, handwritten letter was published on the pontifical Twitter and Instagram profiles, with the following words:

To you, who from the great digital community, ask for my blessing and prayers, I wish to say this: you shall be the precious gift in my prayer to the Father. And you, please don’t forget to pray for me, that I may be a servant of the Gospel of mercy. Franciscus.

Father Dario Viganò of the Vatican Media Secretariat explained that the Pope responded in this manner to numerous requests for blessing and prayer on his official profiles. The Pope’s message was translated by the Vatican Radio into 40 languages.

The Prefect of the Communications Secretariat Dario Edoardo Viganò adds:

The Pope expresses his passion and his style in a very straight-forward way. We see a Pope who is absolutely not afraid to emphasize the distance between the culture in which he grew up, the culture of printing which

9 http://wyborcza.pl/1,76842,13598816,iPapad_dla_Franciszka,_Byleby_nie_byl_za_drogi_papiez.html#ixzz485kR0eaZ

10 “Francis, from social networks to global communication”, Vatican Insider, <http://vaticaninsider.lastampa.it/en/inquiries-and-interviews/detail/articolo/celli-francesco-francisco-francisco-32615/>

shaped the linear thinking, based on argumentation, and the so-called “digital culture”, which is the environment of his pontificate, and which he has faced since his first words uttered in the evening immediately after the conclave. A new communication style was started, not easy to interpret in the right way...

We can therefore say that we are increasingly witnessing an extraordinary meeting of the “great-grandfather” Pope with thousands of young people, on occasions where ties between very large groups are born, and which are conducive to the formation of the global village described by McLuhan. The conversational style and the personal dialogue that the Pope has stimulated are becoming one, precisely because of the interlocutors, who are definitely children of a digital rather than printed culture, a magmatic community, fluid and with open contours.

Francis’s style of communication is based on principles close to his Argentinean priestly practice, but transposed in the scale of the universal Church¹¹.

In the *Laudato Si* encyclical there are brief but extremely important and profound remarks about the necessary correction of the development of the media, which – let us add – also in many of its forms – are an element cluttering up the world in its cultural dimension:

Furthermore, when media and the digital world become omnipresent, their influence can stop people from learning how to live wisely, to think deeply and to love generously. In this context, the great sages of the past run the risk of going unheard amid the noise and distractions of an information overload. Efforts need to be made to help these media become sources of new cultural progress for humanity and not a threat to our deepest riches. True wisdom, as the fruit of self-examination, dialogue and generous encounter between persons, is not acquired by a mere accumulation of data which eventually leads to overload and confusion, a sort of mental pollution. Real relationships with others, with all the challenges they entail, now tend to be replaced by a type of internet communication which enables us to choose or eliminate relationships at whim, thus giving rise to a new type of contrived emotion which has more to do with devices and displays than with other people and with nature. Today’s media do enable us to communicate and to share our knowledge and affections. Yet at times they also shield us from direct contact with the pain, the fears and the joys of others and the complexity of their personal experiences. For this reason, we should be concerned that, alongside the exciting possibilities offered by

11 http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jana-schilder/communication-lessons-from_b_4533339.html Communication Lessons from Pope Francis (accessed 1.02.2017).

these media, a deep and melancholic dissatisfaction with interpersonal relations, or a harmful sense of isolation, can also arise (47).¹²

Francis says that the Church is not afraid of the means of social communication; on the contrary, it needs them in its mission of salvation, that is, evangelization. He emphasizes that

the great digital continent is not just about technology, but it is made up of real people and what they have inside themselves: their own hopes, their own sufferings, their own fears, and the search for truth, beauty and good.¹³

Like for Paul, there is not neither Jew nor Gentile in it, neither wise nor foolish, rich nor poor, local or refugee –there are persons, faithful and unbelievers whom he meets in life and on the digital continent, evangelizing by word and example.

Pope Francis is a frequent and willing Twitter user. The 140 characters that systematically appear on the Holy Father's profile are mini-catecheses that reach out to users of this social platform in nine languages, regardless of religious denomination or the reader's residence.

The proof of the Pope's teaching in social media is his profile on Instagram. Each week brings new followers. Till now there have been nearly 4 million subscriptions to his channel. Among the most popular posts are those where the Holy Father holds children to bless them¹⁴.

The recommendations for social media users can be expressed in the deep words of the Pope:

The great digital continent is not simply technology, but it is made up of real people and what they have inside themselves: their own hopes, their own sufferings, their own fears, and their search for truth, good and beauty. It is necessary to be able to identify and carry Christ, to share joy and hope, as Mary, who brought Christ to the heart of man. One must skillfully enter into this mist of indifference, and not become lost in it.¹⁵

The formation of the conscious user of the new media – conscious of both the technological aspect of the new media, not just in their attractive surface content, but also the manipulation of their operators hidden in the

12 https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_encyclica-laudato-si.html (accessed 1.02.2017).

13 http://www.opoka.org.pl/biblioteka/W/WP/franciszek_i/przemowienia/massmedia_21092013.html (accessed 1.02.2017).

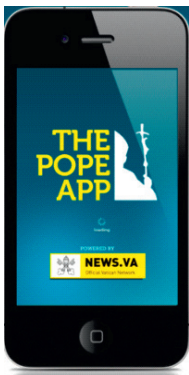
14 <https://www.instagram.com/franciscus/> (accessed 1.05.2017).

15 "One must accompany humanity in the digital age", Audience for plenary members of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications (21.09.2013).

algorithms, but also its higher aspect – theological and human one – of the communication of which they are a tool and which they should serve, what is not an easy task.

The Pope encourages education of families and in families regarding the media, saying:

The Christian community is called to help them in teaching children how to live in a media environment in a way consonant with the dignity of the human person and service of the common good.¹⁶



The Pope application. Source: The Pope App on the App Store – iTunes – Apple



Selfie with the Pope. Source: <http://www.quotidiano.net>



The closest encounters. Source: <http://www.latercera.com> (Reuters)

16 Message of his Holiness Pope Francis for the 49th World Communications Day “Communicating the Family: A Privileged Place of Encounter with the Gift of Love”. Message for the 49th World Communications Day.

Summary

Much has been written on the subject of social communication and in the context of the old and new media by the three popes of the “digital era”, but there is still a lack of holistic and in-depth discussion, as the subject matter is so fluid and variable (developmental) that they will only appear when the *mediamorphosis* (the overall change of the media system) will have stabilized and crystallized more. Nevertheless, in the teaching and example of Pope Francis we already find inspiration for both practice and theory of the media in the religious and social dimensions. Not without reason the popes, certainly not members of the *digital natives’* generation, with their example and their analysis, have showed the importance of evangelization in the modern world.

Working with new media



John Paul II. Source: <http://www.isidorus.net>



Benedict XVI. Source: <http://silviandantecattolico.blogspot.com>



Francis. Source: <http://blogs.reuters.com>

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