

THE DIGITAL IMPACT IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY. RELIGIOUS ASPECTS

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“Your pages are not a collection of paper. There is a life inside, made of so much reflection, of so much passion, of sustained struggles and contradictions encountered. But above all, so much work”. So Pope Francis spoke in the meeting with the Community of Writers and Journalists of *La Civiltà Cattolica* last February for the journal’s number 4000. And so I come among you, aware of the richness of your charisma, content and perspective of which you are carriers, the baggage of human and professional experiences of your publications, of being rooted in the territory, where people live: able to listen to their minds and hearts, to come across their expectations, problems and hopes, to enlighten them by providing quality information.

Digital technology has quickly set itself in personal and collective life, modifying communication habits and models, our way of being and doing. There are no “means” or “instruments” before our eyes today, but «an existential dimension», «a living environment, a network where people communicate, expanding the boundaries of their own knowledge and relationships» a space social¹.

In the sign of convergence

We are daily reached by an incredible amount of information: the world is squandered in front of a large amount of accessible data with great ease. «There is no scope for human experience in which the media have not become a constituent part of interpersonal relations and social, economic, political and religious processes».²

Until a recent past, the family, school, parish, the same social communication tools were essential parts of the socialization process of the teenager; they played a role of mediation, which regulated cultural content and ways of fruition. The new environment mirrors, produces and amplifies a series of social processes that reduce the centrality of these institutions. The verticality of the editorial structure is dismantled, according to a disintermediation process that often moves from suspicion and distrust to the institution. A disaffection that does not spare the Church and increases when it is combined with the inconsistency of the faith of the adult.

The horizontal, autonomous and direct access, the functionality and fascination of digital devices, the possibilities to inform, express and share redesign the very meaning of concepts such as “tradition”, “experience”, “relationship” and “time”.

The reasons for access are manifold: «communicate with your friends, meet new ones, create communities and networks, search for information and news, to share your ideas and opinions». The digital allows seamless interconnection; it is space that expands proximity with a quick, essential and pervasive

¹ Francesco, *Discorso ai partecipanti alla Plenaria del Pontificio Consiglio delle comunicazioni sociali*, 21 settembre 2013.

² Benedetto XVI, *Messaggio per la 42ª Giornata Mondiale delle Comunicazioni Sociali, I mezzi comunicazione sociale: al bivio tra protagonismo e servizio. Cercare la Verità per condividerla*, 24 gennaio 2008.



language; is a resource that develops a new way of knowing, thinking, expressing, managing relationships. «In the digital world, transmitting information increasingly means entering them into a social network, where knowledge is shared in personal exchanges». Thus, a new “agora”, a public and open square, emerges, a place to live according to a participatory logic, a “place” in which «new relationships and forms of community can emerge»³.

A context that – with the freedom of access and expression – promotes participation and interaction and, on the religious level as well, coexistence between different positions.⁴ The availability of information, messages and proposals exposes, in fact, the richness of a plurality of perspectives, with the risk of some fragmentation. In turn, a culture of immediacy, marked by the weakness of memory and the lack of sense perspectives, often involves content homologation, uncertainty and disorientation: «For any information I find – writes Kevin Kelly in a Wired editorial – there’s someone ready to say the opposite. My way of thinking is fluid as an item of Wikipedia. I exchange opinion more often. My interests are born and die quickly. I’m less interested to the Truth and more and more to the truths».

The new environment is characterized by the protagonism of users who not only choose the navigation route, but become coauthors, putting in the attic the classic distinction between the broadcaster and receiver, between producer and consumer: today «the sender is only partially an “original” with more or less sacral value, while the receiver assumes some functions of authorship or co-authorship and the distribution of media materials that were formerly the source of the broadcasting apparatus»⁵. Today, we consider “normal” and even indispensable these possibilities of social interaction, with their ways of organizing and distributing content. Social platforms are the main channel of impact and visibility for news and comments, extraversions and counter-replicas, with multitudes of people who intervene directly, regardless of particular skills and ethical references. Pictures, videos, audio, charts are easily posted; there is so much sharing, within which noise is not lacking.

The same force of content is clearly proportionate to that of relationships. Where the quality of the relationship is in crisis or in any case, the content is of little relevance. «The meaning and effectiveness of different forms of expression seem more determined by their popularity than by their intrinsic importance and validity»⁶; more from adapting the contents to the users’ expectations, than by their intrinsic truth. This audience culture, with greater consensus compared to educational authority, moves from an approach not simply intellectual, but empathic and emotional, less formal, more direct and personal.

Think back at the time of the Net

If, for the most part, what is described here is “the current communicative context”, one understands what it does for the Church. The question intersects more levels, from the “instrumental” to the more closely cultural and ecclesiological nature.

The first aspect – “instrumental” – is the one that directly involves all of our editorial structures and activities and is committed to promoting an integrated editorial project. In this respect, I limit myself to

³ Benedetto XVI, Messaggio per la 47^a Giornata Mondiale delle Comunicazioni Sociali, *Reti Sociali: porte di verità e di fede; nuovi spazi di evangelizzazione*, 24 gennaio 2013.

⁴ F. Garelli, *Piccoli atei crescono. Davvero una generazione senza Dio?*, Bologna, Il Mulino 2016.

⁵ R. Eugeni, *La condizione postmediale. Media, linguaggi e narrazioni*, Editrice La Scuola, Brescia 2015, p. 24.

⁶ Benedetto XVI, *Reti Sociali*, cit.



mentioning the beginning of the *Apostolic Letter* with which Pope Francis has set up the Secretariat for Communication: «The current communicative context, characterized by the presence and development of digital media, convergence and interactivity, requires a rethinking of the Holy See's information system and commits to a reorganization that, while appreciating what history has developed within the Apostolic See's communication, is proceeding decisively towards unified and unitary management»⁷.

The path demands not to go backward, but to make our «heritage of precious experiences» a «push for the future», capable of «providing strength and courage for the continuation of the journey»; above all, it demands «the willingness to harmonize with a new productive and distributive design»⁸. The ability to combine investment and sustainability is, in turn, an indispensable condition for securing the Church the availability of tools to carry out its mission, avoiding being afloat or insignificant⁹.

On a broader scale, digital culture leads us to rethink pastoral practice, our linguistic register and the same role as "recipients", which – as we have seen – today consider their "right" to participate as "natural". The Network takes a public voice that feeds dialogue and confrontation, without fear of expressing different feelings and positions. What does this say to our being a Church, to our way of interpreting and positioning ourselves? How can faith faithfully arise in this context? What interaction can be pursued between Christian thought and digital culture?¹⁰

Responses to these issues are still at an embryonic level, but it is felt that «a careful understanding of the digital environment is a prerequisite for a significant presence within it»¹¹.

The horizon of the mission

The starting point remains a minimum of knowledge and abilities of the communicative and relational dynamics of adolescents. Here the Pope's approach to the forthcoming Synod is significant, with the focus on direct involvement of young people, engaging in listening to them and making them feel at the process. Going to meet them also means considering new ways of communication as «an indispensable tool» for the proclamation of the Gospel: «their recent and pervasive diffusion and their remarkable influence make it increasingly important and useful for use in the priestly ministry»¹².

The Magisterium shows how today the Network can be the only – or, in any case, the first – "place" to come across in the Christian proposal: «The believers, in fact, warn more and more that if Good News is not made known even in the digital environment, it may be absent in the experience of many people for whom this existential space is important»¹³. Hence, the invitation not to «neglect to pay special attention to one who is in the condition of searching», as well as to «also consider those who do not believe, are disheartened and have in their heart desires of the absolute and truth that is not fleeting». Hence also the retrieval of the image of the "courtyard of the Gentiles" to describe the Network as «a

⁷ Francesco, *Lettera apostolica in forma di Motu proprio*, 27 giugno 2015.

⁸ Cfr. Francesco, *Discorso ai partecipanti alla Plenaria della Segreteria per la Comunicazione*, cit.

⁹ Cfr. Consiglio Episcopale Permanente CEI, *Comunicato finale*, 23 marzo 2017.

¹⁰ Cfr. A. Spadaro, *Cyberteologia. Pensare il Cristianesimo al tempo della Rete*, Vita e Pensiero, Milano 2012.

¹¹ Benedetto XVI, *Reti Sociali*, cit.

¹² Benedetto XVI, *Messaggio per la 44ª Giornata Mondiale delle Comunicazioni Sociali, Il sacerdote e la pastorale nel mondo digitale: i nuovi media al servizio della Parola*, 24 gennaio 2010.

¹³ Benedetto XVI, *Reti Sociali*, cit.

space even to those for whom God is still a stranger»¹⁴. From here, finally, is the need to «study new criteria and methods to communicate the Gospel of Mercy to all people in the heart of the various cultures, through the media that the new digital cultural context provides to our contemporaries»¹⁵.

To make a difference – and it is an integral part of the educational process – is the ability to propose a thread for reconstructing a context and interpreting reality; a reality that, in itself, does not have a unique meaning. Everything depends on the aspect it is caught, of the “glasses” one choose to look at it; by changing lenses, even reality looks different»¹⁶.

If not everything can be resolved on the Net, it is equally true that «many people are discovering, thanks to a contact initially on-line, the importance of direct meeting, community experiences or even pilgrimage, always important elements in the journey of faith»¹⁷. As the Directory of Social Communications points out in the mission of the Church, "it is not simply about updating or adapting; it is necessary to wonder how the Gospel proclamation has to be remodeled and how to start a dialogue with social media means and not just through of them, in the awareness that they are interlocutors with whom it is necessary to confront"»¹⁸.

To bring the Gospel to the Greek-Roman world, the Apostles learned to «give a careful understanding of the culture and customs of those pagan peoples in an attempt to touch their minds and hearts»; Now it is also possible to present in the new context the wisdom of Christian experience as a response to the expectations of the human heart¹⁹.

For believers it becomes decisive to live the Network with the attention to «keep alive the eternal questions of man, who testify to his desire for transcendence and nostalgia for authentic forms of life»²⁰. It requires a presence able to qualify for its identity: "In a context marked by a crisis that is both cultural and spiritual," wrote Don Antonio Rizzolo in the first editorial of *Credere*, "the newspaper is a reference point, provided it is clear to its Christian identity and know, then, to build a bond with its readers, with a simple language and a fresh and modern style". It is this identity – this editorial line – that allows you to come into contact with the message of the Gospel²¹, even when dealing with the most diverse topics, and that allows observing: "It is necessary to stay within the contemporaneity, but going beyond, with a careful work of discernment on the part of the ecclesial community"»²².

To make it reliable is the personal involvement, because «in these spaces, not only ideas and information are shared, but ultimately they communicate themselves »»²³.

On the other hand, «media neutrality is only apparent: only the one who communicates by putting himself into play can represent a point of reference»²⁴. It is not just about «putting explicitly religious

¹⁴ Benedetto XVI, *Il sacerdote e la pastorale nel mondo digitale*, cit.

¹⁵ Francesco, *Discorso ai partecipanti alla Plenaria della Segreteria per la Comunicazione*, cit.

¹⁶ Francesco, *“Non temere, perché io sono con te”*, cit. Cfr. P.C. Rivoltella (a cura di), *Papa Francesco. Comunicare speranza e fiducia nel nostro tempo*, Editrice La Scuola, Brescia 2017.

¹⁷ Benedetto XVI, *Reti Sociali*, cit.

¹⁸ CEI, *Comunicazione e missione. Direttorio sulle comunicazioni sociali nella missione della Chiesa*, Lev 2014, 13.

¹⁹ Benedetto XVI, *Nuove tecnologie, nuove relazioni*, cit.

²⁰ Benedetto XVI, *Verità, annuncio e autenticità di vita nell'era digitale*, cit.

²¹ Cfr. Francesco, *Comunicazione al servizio di un'autentica cultura dell'incontro*, cit.

²² CEI, *Comunicazione e missione*, cit., 3.

²³ Benedetto XVI, *Reti Sociali*, cit.

²⁴ Francesco, *Comunicazione al servizio di un'autentica cultura dell'incontro*, cit.

content on the platforms of the various media, but also to consistently testify in their own digital profile and in the manner of communicating, choices, preferences, judgments that are deeply consistent with the Gospel, even when it is not explicitly spoken of»²⁵.

Witnessing remains the educating figure in an exemplary manner, the experiential content of a proposal that introduces Christian life: "From the priests is asked the capacity to be present in the digital world in constant fidelity to the Gospel message to exercise their role as community animators are increasingly being expressed through the many "voices" emanating from the digital world, and announcing the Gospel using, alongside the traditional tools, the contribution of that new generation of audiovisuals (photos, videos, animations, blogs, websites), which represent unprecedented opportunities for dialogue and useful means also for evangelization and catechesis".²⁶

With all this, it will not simply replace the educator-witness with the referral to the contents of the Network. As Cardinal Martini had already observed almost thirty years ago, writing to an imaginary catechist: "You have repeatedly asked your priest to provide you with a suitable recorded movie to introduce the discussion. You have noticed how the image captures the attention of the boys and how incisive the message of some scenes. [...] But it seems to me a little naive to think that I have solved the problem of proclaiming the Gospel simply because it has found a tool that ensures the attention of the interlocutors. Nothing in fact can replace personal testimony and nothing can exonerate from the conversion path that everyone has to go through. The message of the Gospel is not a lesson to learn or a spectacle to see but the invitation and grace to live according to the Spirit of Jesus".²⁷

With this perspective, it will also be easier to value the deliveries of reflection coming from the Net and passing through a communication that enhances the narrative style in its ability to question the experience; communication taking care of relationships, rediscovering the logic of the gift, service for a culture of the encounter.

²⁵ Benedetto XVI, *Verità, annuncio e autenticità di vita*, cit.

²⁶ Benedetto XVI, *Il sacerdote e la pastorale nel mondo digitale*, cit.

²⁷ C. M. Martini, *Lettera a un catechista intelligente*, in ID., *Parliamo di televisione in famiglia*, Centro Ambrosiano, Milano 1991, 19-22: 20.