

Embrace New Methods: The Intersection of New Media and Catechesis

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A wise, Dominican sister I studied with in graduate school once described theologians as the “scouts” of the church; part of their task is to run ahead, discover what is over the hills in the distance, and report back so that the church can be prepared for what lies before us.

With that in mind, I write as a “techno-theologian,”¹ someone who has forged ahead, seen what lies before us in the intersection of faith and technology, and has returned to report on his findings. And I am here to tell you that we are not prepared.

The purpose of this article is not to examine specific platforms such as Twitter or Facebook. Nor is it to discuss the latest gadgets and gizmos we can bring into our catechetical programs. Instead, I want to pick up on some of the threads from Sr. Angela Ann Zukowski’s 2011 address at the NCCL conference in Atlanta. In that address, Sr. Zukowski spoke of the need to understand and engage the emerging digital revolution underway in our culture. This call has only taken on more urgency in the time since her address and remains one of the great challenges facing the church’s catechetical ministry in the near future.

A STORY: #CATHOLICRULESFORTWITTER

I want to begin with a story that illustrates just what opportunities and dangers await us as catechists in the digital continent. On Friday, April 1, 2010, I inadvertently started a minor Internet meme.² A friend of mine on Twitter, who had made a sarcastic comment about another Catholic institution’s inappropriate use of Twitter, had been called to task for her complaint. Frustrated, she tweeted out “I didn’t know Catholics couldn’t be sarcastic online. Could someone please send me the Catholic rules for Twitter?”

Being a somewhat impertinent and snarky individual myself, I immediately replied, “Never tweet anything from the NAB w/o express permission of @USCCB #CatholicRulesForTwitter.” Using the hash sign (#) before the phrase

“CatholicRulesForTwitter” created a “hashtag” — a simple way for topics and conversations to be found and linked together. Soon my friend responded with a few clever rules of her own, including the same hashtag.

Because I included the Twitter name for the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (@USCCB) as an “at” reply, whoever monitors their Twitter feed noticed that I had mentioned them. At first they thought we were being serious, but soon realized it was all in jest. And that’s when it got interesting.

As their last tweet of the week, the USCCB pointed their thousands of followers to the fun we’d been having: “If you want a good laugh, check out #CatholicRulesForTwitter.” And that’s when the whole thing went viral.

Soon, Catholics from around the world were tweeting their own rules and sharing funny rules from other people. Some of my favorites included:

@CatholicDan: “Tweets posted on Saturday night count as being written on Sunday. #CatholicRulesForTwitter”

@JonoSheal: “On fasts, only one full tweet is allowed. 2 smaller tweets permitted, if they do not equal a full 140 characters #CatholicRulesForTwitter”

@blueberries4me: “Married couples should not block the act of tweeting, but may abstain from tweeting on certain days if necessary.”

@iTh0t: “Mary turned to the disciples & said, ‘RT³ whatever he says.’ #CatholicRulesForTwitter”

In fact, within 24 hours over 400 “rules” had been posted, and small spin-offs began to list similar rules for Methodists, Lutherans, and other religious groups.

LIVING IN A TIME OF TECHNOLOGICAL DISRUPTION

This story, as amusing as it is, points to the ways in which new technologies are disrupting traditional methods of communication. That these technologies are disruptive should not surprise us; it occurs anytime a culture experiences a transition

1 “Techno-theologian” is a phrase originally coined, to the best of my knowledge, by Richard Drabik of the University of Dayton.

2 A meme is a small idea – be it a catchphrase, joke, or image – that is easily and rapidly adapted and reproduced. Online, memes are often said to have “gone viral.”

3 “RT” stands for “retweet” and indicates that something is being quoted from someone else.



to new communication methods. Indeed, the 1960 *Confraternity Teacher's Guide* includes this sage advice regarding "new media" and catechesis:

The catechist will find that catechetical material in filmstrips, both black and white and in color, is steadily increasing in volume. He will find satisfactory filmstrips which correlate with courses of study and with the catechism.... The number of catechetical subjects available on sound motion-picture film is comparatively limited. *The teaching value of the silent movie is greatly reduced by the fact that today pupils are accustomed to sound movies.* (Emphasis mine.)

While this appeal to sound movies may seem quaint today, it does make the point that the message we proclaim can only be heard if we use the methods employed by the hearer. As younger generations grow up with new ways of interacting with one another we would do well to ask to which methods of communication are today's youth accustomed? What methods are we using that may be losing their effectiveness due to the adoption of newer ones?

Bishop Ron Herzog, in his 2010 address to his peers at the November meeting of the USCCB, echoed the *Confraternity Teacher's Guide* when he said,

Although social media has been around for less than ten years, it doesn't have the makings of a fad. We're being told that it is causing as fundamental a shift in communication patterns and behavior as the printing press did 500 years ago. And I don't think I have to remind you of what happened when the Catholic Church was slow to adapt to that new technology.

While these new technologies are disruptive in a variety of ways, they will be especially challenging to catechesis due to three factors: their democratizing tendencies, their subjugation of geography, and their cheapening of information.

First, new digital technologies democratize the tools of communication. In the past, mass communication was in the hands of very few people. In the ancient and medieval worlds, it took years to reproduce a book. Even after the advent of the printing press, mass production of books and newspapers was only available to those with the capital to invest in expensive and immobile machinery.

Today anyone with an Internet connection and something to say can have a blog up and running in a matter of minutes. Communicating "on the go" — a staple of science fiction as late as the early 1990s — is now so ubiquitous as to be unremarkable, including textual, audio, and video media. Mass communication tools are no longer in the hands of a few, but the many, and people are participating in them in a way Gutenberg could only have dreamed.

Second, these tools overcome what Sherry Turkle has called the "tyranny of geography." In the past, people had a limited pool of contacts with whom they could communicate easily. Today we can easily connect with people from across the globe. As a result, it is easier than ever before to find people with whom we share passions and interests. I can just as easily discuss the latest news from the Vatican with my colleagues down the hall as with a catechist in South Sudan, something I do regularly via an online forum.

Finally, new technologies — and the Internet in particular — have made accessing the world's knowledge extraordinarily



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cheap and easy. Gone are the days of long library searches and endless cross-referencing. The answer to any question, whether complex or trivial, is little more than a Google search away. As a result the participants in our programs will have little need for an “expert with the answers” since their questions regarding the content of doctrine and dogma will be easily satisfied. Helping people find good sources of information will become more important than helping them find the answers.

IMPLICATIONS FOR CATECHESIS

These three trends — the democratization of communications tools, the defeat of geography, and easy access of information — produce a powerful confluence of social and cultural forces; they will have some important implications for the future of catechesis.

Catechists and catechetical leaders will no longer be able to function simply as overseers of programs and classrooms, as the “sage on the stage.” Rather, we will need to view ourselves at the hub of a network of relationships. Catechetical leaders will need to become adept at helping make connections across these networks by introducing parishioners to authors and experts who can answer their questions or further their interests in particular subjects. Social media is already facilitating these types of connections and there is every indication that this trend will only continue.

Catechesis will also need to adapt to the particular needs of discrete communities and interest groups, replacing the “one-size-fits-all” approach of many programs. Catholic blogs are one model for this diversity; it’s possible to find blogs targeting very specific groups and interests, from Catholic mothers (CatholicMom.com) to professionals (IntegratedCatholicLife.org) to the intersection of faith and beer (CatholicDrinkie.com). Because of the low start-up costs for these sites, it’s possible to target small but passionate groups of followers.

The church would do well to encourage these types of “micro-communities” by helping Catholics with similar interests to connect with one another online or face-to-face for fellowship and support.

Finally, we need to give the faithful access to the tools of the faith in these new formats. For all the cool things I can do on my smartphone, I still cannot access an elegant, easy-to-use version of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* or *New American Bible* without a steady Internet connection. The recently released online version of the *Catechism* is a step in the right direction, but in my rural diocese we have areas — including one of our major population centers — that have no wireless data from my carrier. Giving faithful Catholic app developers access to the text of the *Catechism* and *NAB* would help to fill this gap and provide the church with a needed digital tool for catechesis and evangelization.

I’m not going to pretend that navigating the digital culture will be easy or without its pitfalls. Catechetical leaders will make missteps and mistakes as we seek to learn these new tools and apply them to the work of evangelization and faith formation. Yet the work we do now to acclimate ourselves to these new technologies will pave the way for greater innovation and engagement in the future. The church cannot afford to fear these new technologies or ignore their impact on our work of evangelization. We must embrace new methods if we are to fulfill Christ’s call to make disciples of all nations — even on the digital continent. ■

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