

The New Evangelization in a Digital Culture

Archdiocese of Milwaukee

Gigs, Geeks and God - January 15, 2015

1. Introduction

- a. Not going to talk about specific tech today
- b. Going to talk about how technologies are impacting our culture and what this means for the evangelizing mission of the Church in the 21st century.
- c. *Over history, a small number of inventions have been truly revolutionary
 - i. *Wheel: made human activity easier, increased load capacity of transportation
 - ii. *Electric light bulb: extended human activity beyond sunset, into previously inaccessible areas
 - iii. *Vaccinations - have eradicated whole diseases and extended human lifespan and quality of life
- d. By all indications, the modern invention that will have the greatest impact is the *hyperlink
 - i. Invented by Sir Tim Berners-Lee in 1989 (26 years ago)
 - ii. Reference between two data points, usually visualized as text or an image, and followed by a mouse click
 1. Establishes a relationship between these two data points
 - iii. Impact
 1. *Subverts hierarchy/destroys boundaries
 - a. "Relationships without permission" (Doc Searls, David Weinberger)
 - b. "Levels the playing field" by making everything immediately accessible
 - i. No longer necessary to go through layers (of an organization, of knowledge)
 - ii. Decontextualizes everything
 - c. Allows individuals to bypass the "chain of command"
 - d. Bypasses the "hierarchy of truths"
 2. *Democratizes Access
 - a. Access to arcane knowledge no longer accessible only to the fortunate
 - i. Example: Access to Dead Sea Scrolls previously controlled (for good reasons!)
 - ii. Now, anyone can access digitized files
 - b. No more gatekeepers
 - i. To knowledge
 - ii. To sharing knowledge
 3. *This reveals a fundamental truth: individuals are more nimble than organizations

- a. Organizations are just masses of people working for a common purpose
 - b. That many people needs rules, protocols, etc.
 - c. These are necessary -- but also slow down reaction times.
 - d. Humans can respond faster
 - i. Make direct connections
 - ii. Use human language
 - 1. Not institutional jargon
2. For the rest of this presentation we'll be looking at
3. *Digital Culture
- a. In the short time since its invention, the hyperlink has given life to an entirely new geography (the World Wide Web) and a new culture (digital culture)
 - i. *Bishop Herzog:

“Although social media has been around for less than 10 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.”

- Bishop Ron Herzog, USCCB Address (2010)

- ii. *Culture: “totality of socially transmitted behavior patterns, arts, beliefs, institutions, and all other products of human work and thought.”
(*American Heritage College Dictionary*, third edition)

b. Characteristics of Digital Culture

i. *Behavior patterns

- 1. carrying mobile devices everywhere we go
 - a. Corresponding expectation that information, people are always accessible
- 2. responding to notifications
- 3. texting
- 4. sharing (status updates, photos of meals)
- 5. disruption of existing businesses

ii. *Arts

- 1. selfie
 - a. Patton Oswalt used a selfie for the bio picture on the jacket of his new book
- 2. mash-ups
- 3. blogs
- 4. podcasts
- 5. memes
- 6. wiki (communal contribution)

iii. *Institutions

- 1. distinct from businesses
- 2. Wikipedia

- iv. *Beliefs
 - 1. "Information wants to be free"
 - a. anti-censorship
 - b. anti-monitoring/right to anonymity
 - c. sharing
 - i. open licensing
 - 2. Relationships are built on trust
 - a. Humans have a predisposition to human relationships
 - b. Human relationships are built on trust, not on productivity, commodity
 - c. If hyperlinked culture is about relationships, trust is the greatest currency
 - d. Who do you trust
 - i. for information
 - ii. for security
 - iii. for support
- 4. *Relationships and the New Evangelization
 - a. What does all of this have to do with the New Evangelization?
 - i. *Circles of the New Evangelization
 - b. *Goal of the New Evangelization is to facilitate a radical encounter with Jesus Christ in order to form disciples
 - i. In other words: to help foster relationships between Jesus and disciples
 - c. Obstacles
 - i. *Changes in notion of the self
 - 1. What is the "digital self"?
 - a. Idealized Avatars/Profiles
 - i. Circles of access to "authentic" self
 - ii. Eliminations of flaws
 - 1. *Ready Player One* (Ernest Cline, 2012) avatars
 - 2. Raises question: who is "real" online?
 - b. Accessed in multiple ways
 - i. Various devices
 - 1. Computer
 - 2. Cell phone
 - 3. Tablet
 - ii. Not every device has same capabilities
 - 1. Don't always have complete access to our "whole" digital self
 - iii. As a result, multiple transitory identities
 - 1. Who I am on Facebook may be different from World of Warcraft, Twitter, SnapChat, etc.

2. Easy to try out different identities, aspects of our personalities
 - a. This includes aspects of our fallen nature
 - i. Porn
 - ii. Trolling/Cyberbullying
 - iii. Virtual violence
 3. Also easy to discard identities
 - c. Connected
 - i. Are digital relationships “real”?
 1. Importance of authenticity
 - ii. Relationships divorced from geographic proximity
 1. Tied to common interest, beliefs
 - d. Parts hidden, even from ourselves
 - i. Huge archive of our online selves
 - ii. Companies don’t give us access to all the information they have collected on us
 - iii. This archive is permanent in a way traditional relationships/identity aren’t
 1. In college I could be a different person than in high school
 2. Now there is always a permanent record of what you say, do
- ii. *Conflicting conceptions of salvation
 1. Our understanding of salvation arises from our understanding of the human person
 - a. Changes in understanding of “the self” changes our understanding of salvation
 2. Salvation in a digital world
 - a. Idealized self leads to a self-made salvation
 - i. “I can be anything I want to be” vs. “I strive to be what God is calling me to be.”
 - ii. Ultimate in self-determination
 1. Appearance
 2. Voice
 3. Name/Handle
 - iii. All aspects of the self are selectable from a drop-down menu
 - b. Utopian vision of self, community
 - i. Social activism online
 - ii. Leads to exclusion of unpopular, undesirable beliefs, behaviors, etc.
 - iii. Ultimately, overestimates ability of technology to forge a just world

3. Even so, people still strive for “more,” even if they can’t always articulate what that “more” is
 - a. *Wise Blood* (Flannery O’Connor, 1952)
 - i. Protagonist, Hazel Motes, seeks to fill his life with sex, worldly goods (car), power over others
 - ii. Finally sees all these things as hollow pursuits, gives away all his things, blinds himself and lives as an ascetic

5. *The “hyperlinked parish”

- a. St. John Paul II – New Evangelization is new in method, expression, ardor
 - i. Parishes must adapt to this emerging digital culture
 - ii. *Adaption of parishes called for by Pope Francis in *Evangelii Gaudium*

“The parish is not an outdated institution; precisely because it possesses great flexibility, it can assume quite different contours depending on the openness and missionary creativity of the pastor and the community. While certainly not the only institution which evangelizes, if the parish proves capable of self-renewal and constant adaptivity, it continues to be ‘the Church living in the midst of the homes of her sons and daughters’. This presumes that it really is in contact with the homes and the lives of its people, and does not become a useless structure out of touch with people or a self-absorbed group made up of a chosen few.”

– *Evangelii Gaudium* no. 28

- b. What does a “hyperlinked” parish look like?
 - i. Not talking about participation in new media
 - ii. Although of course we should support and encourage this!
 - iii. Rather, how could the insights and strengths of a hyperlinked culture be brought to bear on the culture of an individual parish?
- c. *Recognizes changing nature of relationship with parishioners
 - i. Today parishioners choose how/when to connect with parish
 - ii. We may need to rethink “categories” of parishioners based on their relationship with the parish
 1. Intentional disciples
 2. Sunday participants
 3. “Virtual parishioners”?
 4. CEOs
 5. Visitors
 - iii. Reach beyond the borders of the Church to other believers
 1. Success of pro-life movement in no small part to “unsanctioned” relationships between Catholics, Evangelicals, others
- d. *Church leaders seek to “link” parishioners with resources, other members of the faithful who can help them on their faith journey
 - i. Parishes as hubs of connectivity rather than dispensary of sacraments, teaching, etc.

- ii. Will require parishes to recognize and cultivate the charisms of the Holy Spirit present among the faithful
 - 1. This includes charisms that fall outside our own comfort zones or that fail to fall into neatly hierarchical categories
 - iii. Will require us to get out of the way of the movement of the Holy Spirit among the faithful
 - 1. Recognize that our baptismal call to holiness is the basis for Christian activity, not (just) a mandate from clergy
 - e. *Engages in conversation using human language
 - i. in terms of actual language
 - ii. in terms of how we reach out
 - 1. Are we meeting the real needs of parishioners through our ministries?
 - a. E.g.: How many troubled marriages are in your parish?
 - i. If you don't know: consider that your parish probably isn't that different from culture at large
 - ii. How much time and effort does your parish put into marriage ministry or support for those whose marriages have fallen apart?
 - f. *Creates and shares resources
 - i. Cardinal Wuerl: "New Evangelization is not a program."
 - ii. "New Evangelization must be good cheese."
 - iii. Hyperlinked parish will share fruits of its creation with others – spirit of generosity
 - g. *Exercises appropriate transparency
 - i. "Information wants to be free."
 - ii. Doesn't mean that parishioners have a right to all information
 - iii. Does mean they are empowered with appropriate information
 - iv. Transparency builds trust
6. Conclusion: the great Jesuit missionaries traveled to new lands and adapted to the cultures in which they found themselves, w/o compromising their faith and the faith of the Church.
 - i. Today our parishes must recognize that, in addition to traditional geographical boundaries, they are also part of the digital continent.
 - ii. Must adapt to the digital culture as much as we have the American culture w/o abandoning Christ's command to "make disciples of all nations," but making his message of salvation heard available to all who would hear it – on earth, through text messages, on YouTube, on Twitter, and through whatever enables us to connect in real and human ways with our brothers and sisters.
7. Thank you.