

BUILDING A CULTURE OF ENCOUNTER IN SOCIAL MEDIA

The media can be a hindrance if they become a way to avoid listening to others, to evade physical contact, to fill up every moment of silence and rest, so that we forget that “silence is an integral element of communication; in its absence, words rich in content cannot exist” (Benedict XVI, Message for the 2012 World Communications Day) The great challenge facing us today is to learn once again how to talk to one another, not simply how to generate and consume information. The latter is a tendency which our important and influential modern communications media can encourage. Information is important, but it is not enough. All too often things get simplified, different positions and viewpoints are pitted against one another, and people are invited to take sides, rather than to see things as a whole.

POPE FRANCIS, MESSAGE FOR WORLD COMMUNICATIONS DAY 2015

How I wish that our own way of communicating, as well as our service as pastors of the Church, may never suggest a prideful and triumphant superiority over an enemy, or demean those whom the world considers lost and easily discarded. Mercy can help mitigate life's troubles and offer warmth to those who have known only the coldness of judgment. May our way of communicating help to overcome the mindset that neatly separates sinners from the righteous. We can and we must judge situations of sin – such as violence, corruption and exploitation – but we may not judge individuals, since only God can see into the depths of their hearts.

It is our task to admonish those who err and to denounce the evil and injustice of certain ways of acting, for the sake of setting victims free and raising up those who have fallen. The Gospel of John tells us that “the truth will make you free” (Jn 8:32). The truth is ultimately Christ himself, whose gentle mercy is the yardstick for measuring the way we proclaim the truth and condemn injustice. Our primary task is to uphold the truth with love (cf. Eph 4:15). Only words spoken with love and accompanied by meekness and mercy can touch our sinful hearts. Harsh and moralistic words and actions risk further alienating those whom we wish to lead to conversion and freedom, reinforcing their sense of rejection and defensiveness.

POPE FRANCIS, MESSAGE FOR WORLD COMMUNICATIONS DAY 2016

Access to the media – thanks to technological progress – makes it possible for countless people to share news instantly and spread it widely. That news may be good or bad, true or false. The early Christians compared the human mind to a constantly grinding millstone; it is up to the miller to determine what it will grind: good wheat or worthless weeds. Our minds are always “grinding”, but it is up to us to choose what to feed them (cf. SAINT JOHN CASSIAN, Epistle to Leontius).

I wish to address this message to all those who, whether in their professional work or personal relationships, are like that mill, daily “grinding out” information with the aim of providing rich fare for those with whom they communicate. I would like to encourage everyone to engage in constructive forms of communication that reject prejudice towards others and foster a culture of encounter, helping all of us to view the world around us with realism and trust.

POPE FRANCIS, MESSAGE FOR WORLD COMMUNICATIONS DAY 2017

1. The importance of presence

No one doubts the growing power of social media, which are changing not just how we communicate but communication itself. Vastly increased interconnectivity is a gift to humanity, and per se a force of good, with the potential to turn strangers into neighbours. The digital media revolution is being likened to the birth of the printing press; then, as now, rumours, claims, accusations can spread quickly, gaining momentum and influencing events. Like any new technology that brings power, it is vulnerable to perversion (ISIS, pornography, “fake news”, villification, etc.) But to deplore and reject this new environment because of its dark side is simply not an option; it is the place we now live. As Archbishop Eamon Martin of Armagh puts it,

The internet has become like the nervous system of our culture, in which more and more people are expressing and exploring their identity, picking up and discarding their values and attitudes, expressing their feelings and prejudices, befriending and unfriending each other, measuring each other's status and importance, relevance and appearance. If our young people and people are living in this gigantic network, then we, as people of faith need to be in there, dialoguing with the inhabitants of this world, with the men and women who dwell in the web. ('The new media and the work of evangelisation', May 23, 2014).

It is a mistake to focus on the technology as the principal dimension of the new media; that would be like reducing a home to a house. The internet is an experience, one made possible by the technology, just as a home is made possible by walls, windows and running water. What matters about the house is the home – the interconnected lives that inhabit it – rather than the bricks and mortar.

One way of looking at this new environment is to ask, “to what desires is this technology responding?” The answer is a very old one: for knowledge and relationships. In other words, while the environment is new, the desires – and the temptations – which drive it are not. Just as in the physical world, desires can be wrongly directed, or chase after illusions, several studies have found correlations between social media use and depression. People can spend hours connected to their friends but come away feeling envious or inadequate, or become obsessed with searching for something or someone they think will make them happy. The search for knowledge can be a chase after windmills.

We need to learn, said Pope Francis in September 2013, “how to enter into dialogue with the men and women of today in order to appreciate their desires, their doubts and their hopes”, adding that the task was “to use modern technologies and social networks in such a way as to reveal a presence that listens, converses and encourages” [address to Pontifical Council for Social Communications].

As Pope Benedict XVI put it in his World Communications Day message for 2011: “Entering cyberspace can be a sign of an authentic search for personal encounters with others, provided that attention is paid to avoiding dangers such as enclosing oneself in a sort of parallel existence, or excessive exposure to the virtual world. In the search for sharing, for “friends”, there is the challenge to be authentic and faithful, and not give in to the illusion of constructing an artificial public profile for oneself.”

We have one life, which is both physical and digital; it is a major error to think of them as separate existences, or to hide behind a “cyber” persona. Thus Benedict XVI urged Catholics to re-personalize social media. People on social networks “must make an effort to be authentic since, in these spaces, it is not only ideas and information that are shared, but ultimately our very selves” [Message for World Communications Day, 2013].

2. Adapting to the environment

But the new environment matters in so far as it presents challenges and opportunities as well as constraints and dangers. Fr Antonio Spadaro SJ, author of *Cybertheology: Thinking Christianity in the Age of the Internet* (2014), sees three major shifts involved in the new media environment.

1. *From answer to question.* In the era of Google, answers are everywhere, at the touch of a button. The challenge is to help ask the right questions, to present the Gospel not as a book of right answers, but the book of right questions. We are helping people to ask questions they may not have thought of, which is different from answering questions no one is asking, as Pope Francis warns us against in *Evangelii Gaudium* #155.

2. *From broadcasting to sharing.* The true novelty of social media is that it allows relationships and responses; when we connect with others, we can see their relationships. Communicating in the digital world no longer means transmitting and broadcasting but engaging and sharing. Shared content is always tightly linked to the person offering it. “When people exchange information, they are already sharing themselves, their view of the world, their hopes, their ideals. It follows that there exists a Christian way of being present in the digital world: this takes the form of a communication which is honest and open, responsible and respectful of others.” (Benedict XVI). Francis calls this form of communication a ‘culture of encounter’. It means creating dialogue and relationship, genuine “interconnectivity”.

3. *From filter bubbles to diversity.* Because social networks connect people, they can insulate them, caging them in a “filter bubble” in which I am surrounded by people who think like me. The risk is to lose sight of those who think differently from me, and to see them as the enemy. Embracing diversity means welcoming those who do not think like me, and who challenge me; it means learning to cope with views and standpoints that offend me or appal me. This is true both in relations between those in the Church and outside it, and between Catholics. Social media doesn’t just build bridges, but often creates walls.

As Pope Francis puts it in his Communications Day message (January 2014), “The variety of opinions being aired can be seen as helpful, but it also enables people to barricade themselves behind sources of information which only confirm their own wishes and ideas, or political and economic interests. The world of communications can help us either to expand our knowledge or to lose our bearings.”

This suggests the challenge: or we merely connected, or are we going to connect?

3. Being ourselves, but not obsessed with ourselves

Being present on social media requires authenticity. It has to be your voice, and it is important to find your voice. It also requires being engaging: to have things worth sharing, and to want to share them; the worst kind of presence in social media is the one who lectures, or simply declares. The third is to have a purpose, or viewpoint: what are my values? What do I represent? How can I best share those?

While sharing yourself and who you are is a good thing, narcissism is not. Some people on social media develop a kind of fascination with what others think of them; they become deeply sensitive to any perceived slight, and become haughty and defensive. The other major temptation is linked to narcissism: conflict escalation. Disagreement can go viral, and become tribal. A argues with B, and A’s followers and B’s followers all begin pitching in, and pretty soon we have two sides yelling and jeering at each other, presenting cartoon versions of the other’s views. Twitter, especially, is fast-paced and minimalist; it can quickly become a race to the bottom. Be aware, then, of the signs of conflict escalation, and if it is getting out of hand, dial it down.

Remember, too, not to go after outliers. There will also be a certain percentage of people in your timeline who will goad and insult you. Many will be trolls, people who -- in Wikipedia’s definition -- “sow discord on the Internet by starting arguments or upsetting

people, by posting inflammatory, extraneous, or off-topic messages in an online community (such as a newsgroup, forum, chat room, or blog) with the deliberate intent of provoking readers into an emotional response or of otherwise disrupting normal on-topic discussion.” A September 2014 study of the personality disorders of trolls identified Machiavellianism (willingness to manipulate and deceive others), narcissism (egotism and self-obsession), psychopathy (the lack of remorse and empathy), and sadism (pleasure in the suffering of others).

There is only one response to trolls: ignore them, or block them. They are there to bait you, and you shouldn't take the bait.

But don't go the other way, trying to avoid disagreement at all costs. Social media offer an environment of openness and honesty, where passionate views are freely traded and inspected. Twitter, in particular, rewards wit and pungency; if you put your views out there, you can expect them to be questioned, challenged, or even made fun of. Vigorous exchanges are the norm – especially if the subject matter is religious, ethical or political.

You don't need to be opiniated, however. You can share content – a link to an article, or a retweet – that you found helpful, and others might to. Or you can ask questions no one is answering. Or you can share a doubt, and ask others to help resolve it.

As a Catholic sharing your faith with others who are not Catholic or religious, keep in mind the perception of the Church as rules-obsessed, tradition-bound, and “dogmatic”. Feed these prejudices, and people stop listening. The truth by itself doesn't persuade – we're just offering one answer among many – unless it is couched in terms that reflect our faith. Pope Francis invites us to communicate with mercy – to stress not what has already been well heard, but the part that hasn't got through: the compassion of God, the unconditional embrace of others, our shared dignity and humanity, and so on. If people are wounded, the first thing they need to hear from the Church is healing; only later will they be ready to talk about the cause of the wounds.

3. A digital ‘culture of encounter’

Social media create unparalleled opportunities for exposure to other people and points of view; but like mass immigration, this can lead to walls of prejudice and mistrust. Diversity does not follow on automatically from difference; it needs to be created. How can I build bridges, encounter the other, create a culture of encounter?

In his message for the 48th World Communications Day, Pope Francis spoke of ‘Communication at the Service of an Authentic Culture of Encounter’. “To dialogue”, he said, “means to believe that the ‘other’ has something worthwhile to say, and to entertain his point of view and perspective. Engaging in dialogue does not mean renouncing our own ideas and traditions, but the claim that they alone are valid or absolute.”

He adds: “It is not enough to be passersby on the digital highways, simply ‘connected’; connections need to grow into true encounters. We cannot live apart, closed in on ourselves. We need to love and be loved. We need tenderness.”

Building a culture of encounter on the internet requires a dual effort: on the one hand, being alive to the particular dehumanising temptations it presents; secondly, deliberately choosing to act in ways that build the virtues and witness of the culture of encounter. Pope Francis urges, for example, the ability “to recover a certain sense of deliberateness and calm” in order to discern.

This calls for time and the ability to be silent and to listen. We need also to be patient if we want to understand those who are different from us. People only express themselves fully when they are not merely tolerated, but know that they are truly accepted. If we are genuinely attentive in listening to others, we will learn to look at the world with different eyes and come to appreciate the richness of human experience as manifested in different cultures and traditions.

4. Five Principles

What follow are five "tips" for Catholic Voices present in social media to help them avoid some of the temptations and pitfalls, help build a culture of encounter, and be witnesses to their faith, not just in what they say but in how they are. They are gleaned from the experience and insights of Catholic Voices active in social media as well as the thinking of bishops and popes.

I. *Be discerning*

In the digital environment, too, where it is easy for heated and divisive voices to be raised and where sensationalism can at times prevail, we are called to attentive discernment. Let us recall in this regard that Elijah recognized the voice of God not in the great and strong wind, not in the earthquake or the fire, but in "a still, small voice" (1 Kg 19:11-12). We need to trust in the fact that the basic human desire to love and to be loved, and to find meaning and truth – a desire which God himself has placed in the heart of every man and woman – keeps our contemporaries ever open to what Blessed Cardinal Newman called the "kindly light" of faith.

(Benedict XVI, World Communications Day Message, May 2013)

Speed and spontaneity are part of the "grammar" of the internet, but reflecting before posting is key. What am I wanting to say? Who am I speaking to? What effect will it have?

If I am going to challenge or disagree, am I going to broaden perspectives or simply start a fight? Is my phrasing unnecessarily provocative? Does it demean or humiliate the other?

It is better not to post at all than to post in haste.

The basic principle should be that the stronger and more personal the comment or tweet, the longer we should wait before posting it. Do not be afraid to let hours or even a night go by before replying; and be prepared to delete it all and start over again, giving thanks for the second chance.

Discern, too, how much time you are spending online. There is a reason why leaders of internet companies restrict their children's access to the internet: being online is addictive. It is easy to come to prefer the virtual to the real, or to crave the thrill of a sharp exchange with a total stranger.

Ask yourself if you're being pulled in, evading what you should be doing. Monitor your time on social media, and get ready to ration it.

And if you come across a user who spends all their life online -- they're the ones with tens of thousands of tweets to their name -- give them a wide berth.

II. *Be missionary*

We see then that the task of evangelization operates within the limits of language and of circumstances. It constantly seeks to communicate more effectively the truth of the Gospel in a specific context, without renouncing the truth, the goodness and the light which it can bring whenever perfection is not possible. A missionary heart is aware of these limits and makes itself "weak with the weak... everything for everyone" (1 Cor 9:22). It never closes itself off, never retreats into its own security, never opts for rigidity and defensiveness. It realizes that it has to grow in its own understanding of the Gospel and in discerning the

paths of the Spirit, and so it always does what good it can, even if in the process, its shoes get soiled by the mud of the street.

(Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* no. 45)

Missionaries are willing to shed what will be an unnecessary obstacle to others in the cause of sharing the Gospel. They are attentive to vocabulary, willing to explain, and patient. They don't take knowledge for granted.

We are "called to radiate light and communicate life" yet sometimes "are caught up in things that generate only darkness and inner weariness, and slowly consume all zeal for the apostolate." (*Evangelii Gaudium* #84)

Be engaging. Passion, wit, insightfulness and originality are all rewarded; don't waste your time in rehearsing the ills of the world and the ignorance of your enemies, but help people live better lives, open them to hope.

Missionaries understand that they are being watched. One of the illusions of social media is its sense of intimacy: an intense discussion can quickly lead you to forget the obvious -- that this is not a private exchange with an individual, but a very public spectacle for hundreds, even thousands of others. Speak to one, witness to many. Never forget the invisible audience watching and listening and judging.

III. Be a nurse, not a prizefighter

Digital communication offers a number of possibilities, the most important of which is the proclamation of the Gospel. Certainly, though important, acquiring technical knowledge is not enough. Firstly it means encountering real women and men, who are often wounded or lost, in order to give them real reasons to hope. Proclamation requires authentic human relationships destined to culminate in a personal encounter with the Lord.

(Pope Francis, Address to participants in the Plenary Assembly of the Pontifical Council for the Laity, 7 December 2013)

The Church, in Pope Francis's famous phrase, is like a "battlefield hospital" tending to the wounded. Yet sometimes Catholics create more patients than they nurse.

Most of us are wounded: our egos are fragile; we hate to be shown up, or talked down to; we dislike being corrected. We need to be aware of those wounds -- our own, and those of others.

If someone acts aggressively to you, assume it is their wounds which are speaking. Behind a desire to engage a discussion on Catholic teaching lurks a personal experience of suffering, or rejection. They cannot tell you about that experience -- because social media is public -- and you do not have the right to ask about it. But you should assume that their aggression reflects their pain, not a desire to attack you or the Church. You and the Church are lightning rods.

Therefore do not judge or assume. Never question intentions. Try to speak from experience: rather than tell them they are wrong, present an alternative experience. When you meet anger and hurt, don't send them back; mop them up.

The biggest losers on the web are those who seek to win and sometimes do. They proclaim "Gotcha!" and revel in the victory. It is hard to win graciously. And what profit is there in a graceless victory?

Rather than seeking to win, ask: what witness can I give? It might be speaking of your own experience, sharing a little knowledge -- or perhaps linking to articles or sites or pictures that show the workings of grace.

Many people who come to the Church often cite hearing someone or seeing someone saying something that struck them, or which nagged at them. It was something, or someone, that made them see differently, that lifted the scales from their eyes.

Inviting people to see the Church differently by communicating the truth about it is what Catholic Voices exists for. The enemy of such a witness is a desire to "win" and "defeat". There is no battle that we need to win, for the battle is already won. What remains is to spread the news online.

IV. Meet bullets with love

St Paul's exhortation is directed to each of us: "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (Rom 12:21). And again: "Let us not grow weary in doing what is right" (Gal 6:9). We all have our likes and dislikes, and perhaps at this very moment we are angry with someone. At least let us say to the Lord: "Lord, I am angry with this person, with that person. I pray to you for him and for her". To pray for a person with whom I am irritated is a beautiful step forward in love, and an act of evangelization. Let us do it today! Let us not allow ourselves to be robbed of the ideal of fraternal love!

Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* no. 101

Being attacked is not a reason for attacking. We should absorb hate, not throw it back. And we should always avoid the weapons of the weak: never use sarcasm, or make fun of others; be polite and civil at all times, even when (unjustly) provoked. It is better to lose face and allow a falsehood than to respond in kind.

It's good to remember that most people don't disagree with what the Church stands for, only what they think it stands for.

But even when they are genuinely hostile and provocative, responding makes ourselves accountable to them. Ask yourself: *is this criticism worth my time? Do I confer legitimacy on them by responding?*

As Fr James Martin SJ writes of being provoked online: "There's a reason it's called bait: fish that take it don't end up well."

The basic rule is: be positive, or stay silent. Saying nothing has a power and dignity of its own, and very often it is the best, even the only possible, response. A good rule of thumb is never to say to someone online what you would not say to their face.

Remember, *this isn't about you*. You are the glass through which others will see the Church. Your fear, self-consciousness and defensiveness are the products of your protesting ego. Put it in the back seat. And ask yourself all the time what kind of witness you are giving.

There are two simple ways of cutting through the hostility: being sorry, and saying thank you.

A rapid and frank apology shows that, even when we haven't lived up to it, we still believe in a higher standard.

Thanking others is a powerful, and disarming, exit out of confrontation. There are many things we can thank others for:

- for expanding our understanding, helping us to see that our view was limited, or partial;
- for helping us to see a point of view different from our own.
- for taking the time to discuss.

V. Be a body-builder

How many wars take place within the people of God and in our different communities! In our neighbourhoods and in the workplace, how many wars are caused by envy and jealousy, even among Christians! Spiritual worldliness leads some Christians to war with other Christians who stand in the way of their quest for power, prestige, pleasure and economic security. Some are even no longer content to live as part of the greater Church community but stoke a spirit of exclusivity, creating an “inner circle”. Instead of belonging to the whole Church in all its rich variety, they belong to this or that group which thinks itself different or special.”

(Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* no. 98)

The internet abounds in what Pope Francis describes as “self-absorbed promethean neopalagianism”, a tendency to analyse and classify others -- including bishops -- as “bad” or inadequate or heterodox Catholics. That means being conscious of our inner pharisee – the feeling of power of believing myself the guardian of the authentic truth and law. If it is called for, the Magisterium of the Catholic Church has that power. And we are not it.

That doesn't mean we can't defend or explain Catholic teaching, or point out when others misapprehend it. But we do so by referring to that teaching, rather than to the supposed inadequacies of a person in apprehending that teaching. We aim to clarify and illuminate, to expand others' understanding as well as our own; we are engaged in a common search for the truth, and we help each other find it.

Pope Francis likes to say that diversity is divine, but division is diabolic. One of the gifts of the Holy Spirit is what the pope calls “reconciled diversity”: we do not have to agree with each other in order to build the Body – just avoid two recurrent temptations:

The first temptation seeks *diversity without unity*. This happens when we want to separate, when we take sides and form parties, when we adopt rigid and airtight positions, when we become locked into our own ideas and ways of doing things, perhaps even thinking that we are better than others, or always in the right, when we become so-called “guardians of the truth”. When this happens, we choose the part over the whole, belonging to this or that group before belonging to the Church. We become avid supporters for one side, rather than brothers and sisters in the one Spirit. We become Christians of the “right” or the “left”, before being on the side of Jesus, unbending guardians of the past or the avant-garde of the future before being humble and grateful children of the Church. The result is diversity without unity. The opposite temptation is that of seeking *unity without diversity*. Here, unity becomes uniformity, where everyone has to do everything together and in the same way, always thinking alike. Unity ends up being homogeneity and no longer freedom. But, as Saint Paul says, “where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom” (2 Cor 3:17). [Holy Mass on the Solemnity of Pentecost, June 4, 2017]

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