

Evangelization of the Christian Church in the Twenty-First Century: A Digital Theological Perspective

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[Abstract] The medium of evangelization has been evolving in the last four centuries. From oral, print, to digital media, the transmission of the Gospel progresses along with technologies. Outlining the shift in these last few centuries, this paper highlights the increasing significance of digital media as tools of evangelization and examines the translatability of the Gospel in a different medium. This paper employs the methodology of digital theology, that is, in what ways does digital media alter or transform theology, to examine the linkage between social media and Christianity. More specifically, this paper will evaluate in what ways evangelism is enabled or hindered by digital media in three aspects: (I) materiality; (II) authority; and (III) communications. Mindful of the debates about materiality online, especially those related to the Eucharist, the paper investigates the different responses of Christian congregations on this matter. Drawing studies from digital theologians, this paper also discusses in what ways the authority of the Church shifts due to equal participation from all parties—whether from pastoral leaders and lay persons. Building on this aspect, the paper also takes into consideration different forms of communications among Christians, both within and outside churches, that may shape the dynamics of evangelism. Finally, this paper employs the theology of Stanley Hauerwas, an American Methodist whose theology has been hugely shaped by Catholic ecclesiology, to argue for the importance of Christian witness online and reflect on the concepts of Church and world in the digital sphere.

During the pandemic, we have all relied heavily on digital media to connect with the world. This perhaps resonates with many Hong Kongese, especially in early 2022, when Hong Kong had a massive lockdown due to the fifth wave of COVID-19.¹ We keep refreshing news on digital media, whether one prefers to receive updates on Facebook or YouTube, or even in WhatsApp or Signal groups among family and friends. We are forced to be familiar with digital media because it is the channel through which we get the latest news.

Whatever social networking services (SNSs) you may use, I am sure you have heard of the phrase “If you like our channel, please click ‘subscribe’ and follow us.” In the digital space, we are trained to get more likes and follows on our social media account, as if these numbers determine the truthfulness of the news and the statements we communicate online. However, in what ways do these kinds of learnt behaviors shape evangelization in the 21st century? To what extent does digital media assist Christians in attracting more followers for Jesus Christ?

The medium of evangelization has been evolving over the last four centuries. From oral to print to digital media, the transmission of the Gospel has progressed along with technologies. Outlining the shift in these last few centuries on the 400th anniversary of *Propaganda Fide*,² this paper highlights the increasing significance of digital media as tools of evangelization and examines the translatability of the Gospel in a different medium.

Employing the methodology of digital theology, this paper argues God’s immanence in digital media through the evangelizing activities of the people of God. More specifically, this paper evaluates the ways in which evangelization is enabled or hindered by digital media in three aspects: (I) materiality; (II) authority; and (III)

¹ Tang Lik-hang 鄧力行, “The Catholic Diocese Instructs Churches to Use Outdoor Areas Nearby to Livestream Masses for Those Who Cannot Enter the Buildings” 天主教區指示聖堂可用附近空曠場地供未能進堂者參與直播彌撒, *Christian Times* 時代論壇, April 20, 2022, <https://bit.ly/3bdgdjz>; Ko See-man 高思憫, “The Hong Kong Christian Council Replies: Church Open for Anti-Epidemic Activities Are Not Bounded by the 599g Prohibition on Gathering” 協進會獲覆：教會開放作抗疫活動不受限於 599g 限聚令, *Christian Times* 時代論壇, April 1, 2022, <https://bit.ly/3yaxgf7>; Tang Lik-hang 鄧力行, Wu Chang-sum 胡清心, and Ko See-man 高思憫, “Churches Are Closed: Forty-Five Percent of the Eight Major Denominations Won’t Publicise Their Online Worship” 教會被關閉：八大宗派四成半網上崇拜不公開, *Christian Times* 時代論壇, March 25, 2022, <https://bit.ly/3n69Bqb>.

² Peter Guilday, “The Sacred Congregation De Propaganda Fide (1622–1922),” *The Catholic Historical Review* 6, 4 (January 1921): 478–94.

communications. Taking these concerns into account, the next section examines the correlation between the concept of evangelization and digital theology, especially regarding how Christian individuals perceive their roles in the digital world. Mindful of the perception of digital media from Vatican documents, the paper then reflects on the Catholic approach to culture and suggests how this can be applied to digital culture. Finally, this paper employs the theology of Stanley Hauerwas, an American Methodist whose theology has been shaped to a large extent by Catholic ecclesiology, to argue for the importance of Christian witness online and to reflect on the concepts of church and world in the digital sphere.

Shifting the Medium

In the contemporary discourse about digital media, one may highlight how inhuman it may be compared to in-person evangelization, making it an inferior medium for spreading the Gospel. Yet this was hardly the first shift in evangelization medium; one could point to the time when missionaries stepped onto the land of Africa and attempted to teach Africans to write their vernacular languages.³ A shift of medium requires readjustment as well as adaptation to the new medium. According to Marek Adam Rostkowski, Propaganda Fide has been instrumental in training indigenous clergy and structuring a uniform program for missionary work. It is evident that the Hong Kong Catholic Church also intends to develop a program for evangelization online.⁴

In 2021, the Centre for the Study of World Christianity at the University of Edinburgh hosted the Yale-Edinburgh conference on oral, print, and digital culture to tease out the issues of these shifts of medium for evangelization in mission history.⁵ Alexander Chow of the University of Edinburgh argues that online worship, in essence, is not that different from the practices of some churches streaming Sunday services to different rooms, since the required equipment is still the same; the major distinctions are

³ Lamin O. Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2009).

⁴ Marek Adam Rostkowski, "Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples: Four Hundred Years in the Service of the Missionary World," *International Bulletin of Mission Research* 46, 3 (2022): 312.

⁵ Alexander Chow, "Editorial: Oral, Print and Digital Cultures," *Studies in World Christianity* 28, 1 (2022): 2-3.

the physical distancing and how the culture may have to adapt due to the social etiquette created by the practices.⁶

Andrew F. Walls (1928–2021), pioneer of the field of world Christianity, introduces the “pilgrim” principle and argues that Christians are always, in some sense, pilgrims in culture. For him, “all Christians of whatever nationality, are landed by adoption with several millennia of someone else’s history, with a whole set of ideas, concepts, and assumptions which do not necessarily square with the rest of their cultural inheritance; and the Church in every land, of whatever race and type of society, has this same adoptive past by which it needs to interpret the fundamentals of the faith.”⁷ If one agrees with Walls’s argument that the Church should be a pilgrim in culture, then the current question here is not whether the Church has to adapt to digital culture but, rather, in what ways the Church assists Christ-followers and those of other faiths to interpret the fundamentals of the faith in the digital culture. For this, the next section ponders some new challenges proposed by scholars in the field of theology and religious studies.

New Medium, New Challenge

A new medium comes with new challenges and opportunities for engagement with the unreached. This section will be dedicated to three concepts in digital theology and will consider how these concepts affect evangelization: (I) materiality, (II) authority, and (III) communication.

(I) Materiality

One of the major concerns about church online is its disembodiment.⁸ This then comes to the debate about whether church online is virtual, using the language of media studies. Digital theologians tend to avoid the term “virtual,” as it implies that the

⁶ Alexander Chow, “What Has Jerusalem to Do with the Internet? World Christianity and Digital Culture,” *International Bulletin of Mission Research* 46, 1(2023): 23-31.

⁷ Andrew F. Walls, “The Gospel as Prisoner and Liberator of Culture,” in *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), 9.

⁸ Katherine G. Schmidt, *Virtual Communion: Theology of the Internet and the Catholic Sacramental Imagination* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books/ Fortress Academic, 2020), 15-18; Justine John Dyikuk, “Digital Ecclesiology: Setting the Parameters for a Post-Pandemic Era Church,” in *Digital Ecclesiology: A Global Conversation*, ed. Heidi A. Campbell (College Station, TX: Digital Religion Publications, 2020), 35.

interactions between brothers and sisters online are unreal. Because of this, digital scholars also tend to use the term “digital church” rather than “virtual church.”

Speaking of Christian liturgy, for Catholics, the major weakness of digital churches is that an online Eucharist misses some crucial elements compared to an in-person one, because the former cannot replace the incarnational reality of the sacraments. The incarnation aspect here refers to Christ’s bodily presence in the church as well as in the Eucharist, where Christ’s body and blood are believed to be present in the consecrated elements.⁹ In the past decade, the Catholic Church has tended to hold a more negative view about online community because, for the Vatican, it cannot substitute for real interpersonal community.¹⁰ This point is widely debated not only among Catholics but also among Protestants. Scottish Episcopal theologians Oliver O’Donovan, Trevor Hart, and David Jasper comment that “God’s presence cannot be replicated in the virtuality of the internet,” concerning both the Church community and the Eucharist.¹¹

Because of the implications of the absence of Christ in online Eucharist, *Kung Kao Po* 公教報, the official newspaper of the Hong Kong Catholic Church, established a guideline for those who participate in spiritual communion 神領聖體 when physical gatherings were not possible during lockdown:

My Jesus, I believe that You are present in the Most Holy Sacrament. I love You above all things, and I desire to receive You into my soul. Since I cannot at this moment receive You sacramentally, come at least spiritually into my heart. I embrace You as if You were already there and unite myself wholly to You. Never permit me to be separated from You. Amen.¹²

In regard to the irreplaceable elements of in-person community, though this will be further discussed towards the end of this essay, such questions may be raised as these: In

⁹ Alexander Chow and Jonas Kurlberg, “Two or Three Gathered Online: Asian and European Responses to COVID-19 and the Digital Church,” *Studies in World Christianity* 26, 3 (2020): 299-300.

¹⁰ Pontifical Council for Social Communications, “The Church and Internet,” February 22, 2002, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/pccs/documents/rc_pc_pccs_doc_20_020228_church-internet_en.html.

¹¹ Oliver O’Donovan, Trevor Hart, and David Jasper, “Learning from the Pandemic,” *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 21, 2 (2021): 145.

¹² Kung Kao Po, “Spiritual Communion under the Wuhan Coronavirus” 武漢肺炎下神領聖體, *Medium*, February 7, 2020, <https://bit.ly/3kSJS25>; Calida Chu, “Theology of the Pain of God in the Era of COVID-19: The Reflections on Sufferings by Three Hong Kong Churches through Online Services,” *Practical Theology* 14, 1 (2021): 25-26.

what ways does an online church community represent the body of Christ and realize the *imago Dei* if physicality is absent in its gathering? And to what extent does this characteristic assist or hinder evangelization? Keeping this in mind, I will turn to another aspect—authority.

(II) Authority

One of the questions that has arisen about the Christian use of digital media is the authority of the interpretation of scripture and hence the role of evangelists in the digital space.¹³ In the past, printed materials about biblical hermeneutics tended to be selected by Christian publishers. However, in the digital era, people can express themselves freely online via social media; their followers, in turn, can read biblical interpretations in their social media posts. This is one step more advanced than print culture, in which people gained access to the Bible in their own language, without the need to hear sermons from priests.¹⁴

Heidi Campbell of Texas A&M University studies the shift of authority among a new class of Christian workers that she calls religious digital creatives (RDCs) who have become influencers within their religious organizations online.¹⁵ Campbell argues that the authority of RDCs is determined by four factors: role, power, relation, and algorithm.¹⁶ First, according to German sociologist Max Weber (1864–1920), the role of RDCs tends to be endorsed by three forms of “pure-legitimate authority”—legal, traditional, and charismatic—which consolidates their authority. Second, the RDCs’ authority is shaped by particular social settings which control how power is distributed within the social and cultural rules. Third, authority is also affected by the RDCs’ relationship with other internet users. If influencers have good relationships and engagement with their followers, they undoubtedly have higher authority among their followers. Fourth, the authority of these RDCs is controlled by the algorithms within their social media platforms. For example, if these RDCs are good at creating posts that are favored by the algorithm, they may have greater authority due to higher numerical rankings, including more followers, likes, and citations.

¹³ Dyikuk, “Digital Ecclesiology,” 35.

¹⁴ Steve Hollinghurst, “Finding Jesus Online: Digital Evangelism and the Future of Christian Mission,” in *Missio Dei in a Digital Age*, ed. Jonas Kurlberg and Peter M. Phillips (London: SCM Press, 2020), 75-97.

¹⁵ Heidi A. Campbell, *Digital Creatives and the Rethinking of Religious Authority* (London: Routledge, 2021), 4.

¹⁶ Campbell, *Digital Creatives*, 22-23.

Campbell's arguments complexify the phenomenon of RDCs becoming authoritative figures online, especially those who do not normally have a ground to elaborate their theological perspective in another medium. The popularization of digital media does, in some ways, assist democratic movements¹⁷ and cause decentralization of power online.¹⁸ But this is not a one-way street—the authority of these RDCs and their probability of challenging the Church are much dependent on their relationship with the Church; for example, the use of social media by Pope Francis, as someone who is granted authority within the Catholic Church, is unlikely to challenge the institution which endorses his role in the Church. Nonetheless, the shift of power is observable in the digital world. A key point which can be taken away is that, although the institutional structure has not shifted as much, at least in the Catholic Church, the role and the authority of RDCs have been much amplified because of the far-reaching possibilities enabled by technology. The work of evangelization itself now does not depend only on the institution and on the authority granted to certain clergies but can be spread through the social networks of the RDCs.

(III) Communication

Communication online is an expression of human relationships.¹⁹ Not bounded by geographical location, it maintains and sustains relationships between friends, colleagues, and loved ones. The use of digital media has undoubtedly shifted our communication style, whether for daily conversation or for evangelization. Before the invention of emojis, perhaps no one communicated with others using icons, except those using

¹⁷ Cameron Hume and Rosella Payne, "'Digitalising Democracy' with the Archbishop of York," *Faith in Politics Podcast*, season 3, episode 10, July 15, 2020, <https://soundcloud.com/user-904487027/july-podcast>.

¹⁸ Shatin Baptist Church's own magazine, *CHURCHazine*, invited several evangelical leaders and, indeed, Christian Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs), to discuss the phenomenon of the rise of KOLs and how they have become popular even without the authoritativeness and professionalism other Christian leaders may have. See Wan Man-yi ed., *CHURCHazine*, 31 July 2021, <https://bit.ly/3ymioe4>.

¹⁹ Note that I prefer to use the term "communication online" over "online communication," as the former implies that digital space is to be used as a medium to facilitate communication in the "offline" world, while the latter suggests that the communication which occurs in the online environment is irrelevant to the offline world. This distinction modifies Christopher Helland's usage of the two terms "religion online" and "online religion." Christopher Helland, "Scholar's Top 5: Christopher Helland on Online Religion and Religion Online", *NNMRDC Blog Series*, May 14, 2012, <https://digitalreligion.tamu.edu/blog/mon-05142012-1132/scholar's-top-5-christopher-helland-online-religion-and-religion-online>.

Augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) devices. But now, six billion emojis are used in communication every day.²⁰ This is also observable in the Christian world. For example, the sequences of emojis in figures 1 and 2 are used to represent baptism and the Virgin Mary, respectively (see figures 1 and 2).²¹ Even if you have not heard of these sequences of emojis, you are probably familiar with the prayer emojis with which you may respond to someone’s prayer request. This is not to declare that texts are no longer important in today’s world, but to highlight the phenomenon that language can evolve in different media, and it happens that online users are more comfortable with using emojis in digital media than in printed materials.



Figure 1 Baptism



Figure 2 Virgin Mary

As the Pontifical Council for Social Communications argued in *Aetatis Novae*, “communication in and by the Church is essentially communication of the Good News of Jesus Christ.”²² A new medium may cause new challenges, but this does not imply that Christians should detach from social media because of the potential to sin on this new platform.²³ The question Christians should ask is in what ways the church community can play a role in the digital space to assist in spreading the Good News of God, as well as to offer a good testimony in this medium.

American Jesuit priest Walter J. Ong (1912-2003) refers to communication via digital media, as well as telephone, radio, and television, as “secondary orality,”²⁴ in

²⁰ Oriol J. Bosch and Melanie Revilla, “The Use of Emojis by Millennials,” *Research and Expertise Centre for Survey Methodology, Working Paper 57* (July 2018).

²¹ Christian Emojis Collection, *Emojis.Wiki*, June 1, 2022, <https://emojis.wiki/christian/>

²² The Pontifical Council for Social Communications, *Aetatis Novae*, February 22, 1992, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/pccs/documents/rc_pc_pccs_doc_22_021992_aetatis_en.html.

²³ For example, Rokas Laurinavičius argues in his article “7 Deadly Sins in the Modern World You’re Probably Guilty of” that contemporary Christians would fall into the trap of sins because of social media apps. Rokas Laurinavičius, “7 Deadly Sins in the Modern World You’re Probably Guilty of,” *Bored Panda*, accessed May 9, 2022, <https://bit.ly/3FAC7IL>.

²⁴ Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy* (London: Routledge, 2012), 133-134.

contrast to primary oral cultures, where sayings are recorded in printed materials.²⁵ For Ong, the major differences are that the media of secondary orality create and renew the form of communication one may have, while also providing a larger platform, resembling Marshall McLuhan's (1911-1980) notion of the global village. Ong's argument contributes to the discussion below about how the church community may consolidate collective identity and assist evangelization.

Evangelization and Digital Theology

The church has played an important role in evangelization in the digital world. Because of this, the term "digital ecclesiology" has become increasingly popular, and Campbell has edited a volume dedicated to this term.²⁶ It became even more evident during lockdown, when churches around the globe were forced to close their buildings to avoid spreading COVID-19. In this section, I would like to reflect on the roles of churches in evangelization and their interaction with digital theology, and especially on God's activities in the digital space.

In recent years, those talking about *missio Dei* (the mission of God) in the field of missiology tend to highlight God's role in mission. Criticism may be raised that this concept seems to undermine the Church's role of participating in God's mission in the world.²⁷ While I am not suggesting that God has no part in mission activities, it is undeniable that the Church has propelled evangelization in the digital space as a visible organization online.

Indeed, as a digital theologian, I affirm God's immanence in the world, which includes the digital space. In my own working definition, digital theology is the process of faith seeking understanding to comprehend the nature of God, or of God's interaction with the digital space, or of the digital space's exploration of the mystery of faith. This employs Anselm's perception that theology is a process of "faith seeking

²⁵ Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 16-30.

²⁶ Heidi A. Campbell, "An Introduction to Digital Ecclesiology: What Does a Conversation on Digital Ecclesiology Look Like?" In *Digital Ecclesiology: A Global Conversation*, ed. Heidi A. Campbell (College Station, TX: Digital Religion Publications, 2020), 3-6.

²⁷ Jonas Kurlberg, "Introduction: *Missio Dei* in a Digital Age," in *Missio Dei in a Digital Age*, ed. Jonas Kurlberg and Peter M. Phillips (London: SCM Press, 2020), 12.

understanding.”²⁸ Therefore, my approach here is to analyze the ways in which the church assists with and illustrates God’s activities in the digital space.

To take part in the evangelization of God’s Word and God’s activities in the digital space, Catholic ethicist Kate Ott comments, “As Christians, we ask these two questions in relationship to who God calls us to be and what God calls us to do. The formation of self and our relationships in a digital world then relates directly to Christian concerns about virtue and how we can be most responsive to God in relationship with us.”²⁹

Here Ott speaks mainly to American audiences, who are comfortable with expressing themselves and highlighting how they may be different as individuals online. Perhaps the audience of the Propaganda Fide conference organized by the Centre for Catholic Studies, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, as well as the readers of the *Hong Kong Journal for Catholic Studies*, are not as expressive as Ott’s targeted audience on social media apps. But Ott’s perspective assists one in rethinking what God calls us to be and to do online to show God’s relationship with us.³⁰

In her monograph *Christian Ethics for a Digital Society*, Ott introduces the concept of “networked selves” to illustrate how we are all connected beings online, whether this is with our loved ones or with God. This argument can overcome the limitation of the mindset that testimony is merely about individual expression. As relational beings, we are all connected with others, and thus our posts, comments, and likes affect how others and God see us.

Expanding the notion of relationality, Douglas Estes reminds us that the need and desire to connect to other people is God-given.³¹ Because of God’s Trinitarian nature, human beings, as *imago Dei*, are relational. British sociologist of religions Tim Hutchings pushes further in this direction, arguing that “all forms of community (including online community) can be seen as an outworking of a divinely given impulse to connect.”³² Following this logic, digital media, although it can be alienating for some

²⁸ Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 2.

²⁹ Kate Ott, *Christian Ethics for a Digital Society* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2019), 62.

³⁰ Ott, *Christian Ethics for a Digital Society*, 62.

³¹ Douglas Estes, *SimChurch: Being the Church in the Virtual World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 58–59; Eric Stoddart, *Theological Perspectives on a Surveillance Society: Watching and Being Watched* (London: Routledge, 2016), 54–59.

³² Tim Hutchings, *Creating Church Online: Ritual, Community and New Media* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 34.

who do not use it on a daily basis, can be perceived as a shift of medium to convey God's message, in contrast to the attitude that digital media can have no share in God's ministry. This also refutes the argument that God may not be at work in the digital space. If one considers that God is omnipresent in creation, including non-human beings, then one will not be surprised by God's immanence and God's care in the digital space.³³

Constructing what they have termed "networked theology," Campbell and Stephen Garner suggest that "seeing the kingdom of God as a network provides a framework for how we interact with God, others, and the world around us."³⁴ For Campbell and Garner, mission and evangelism are operating in a networked relationship environment, where people reorient themselves to God and identify Christ as the center of their life. In a world where people are eager to display their lives online, Campbell and Garner's comments assist us in rethinking both our being and doing online and how these may reorient people of other faiths to Christ.

Evangelization in the Digital Space

Furthering the conversation about evangelization and digital theology, this section concentrates on how the Catholic Church perceives the interaction between digital media and the Church and on the ways in which evangelization has evolved due to the shift of medium from print materials to the digital space. As the Pontifical Council for Social Communications suggested in "The Church and Internet" in 2002, one of the major roles of the Church in relation to the media is "to encourage their right development and right use for the sake of human development, justice, and peace—for the upbuilding of society at the local, national, and community levels in light of the common good and in a spirit of solidarity."³⁵ Although the above sections have raised concerns about embodiment and its implications on Christian liturgy, the Catholic Church also sees a positive light in terms of the development of new media, which positive light is also evident in *Church in the Digital*, a guideline published in 2022 by the Vatican to offer tools for the Church in the digital space after the COVID-19 pandemic. Notably, Pope Francis highlights in the preface that "the web will not make us feel alone if we are really able to 'network,'

³³ This argument is proposed also by British practical theologian Eric Stoddart. See Stoddart, *Theological Perspectives on a Surveillance Society*, 52-61.

³⁴ Heidi A. Campbell and Stephen Garner, *Networked Theology: Negotiating Faith in Digital Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016), 13.

³⁵ The Pontifical Council for Social Communications, "The Church and Internet," February 22, 2002.

and if the virtual space does not replace but helps the web of our flesh-and-blood social relationships.”³⁶ The dichotomy between physical community and online community seems to be deemphasized, at least in the preface.³⁷

Returning to the dialogue in the previous sections about the shift of medium, one of the burning issues is perhaps how evangelization is adapted or transformed in the digital culture. In light of this, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, though it was published in 1975, before the widespread use of the internet, provides some valuable insights for dealing with digital culture:

What matters is to evangelize man’s culture and cultures...in the wide and rich sense which these terms have in *Gaudium et Spes*, always taking the person as one’s starting-point and always coming back to the relationships of people among themselves and with God.

The Gospel, and therefore evangelization, are certainly not identical with culture, and they are independent in regard to all cultures. Nevertheless, the kingdom which the Gospel proclaims is lived by men who are profoundly linked to a culture, and the building up of the kingdom cannot avoid borrowing the elements of human culture or cultures. Though independent of cultures, the Gospel and evangelization are not necessarily incompatible with them; rather they are capable of permeating them all without becoming subject to any one of them.³⁸

While the context which *Evangelii Nuntiandi* suggests is usually the missionary field, where missionaries need to evangelize in a culture other than their own, the implication here is rather similar, in that the Church is still required to be sensitive to the digital culture—not only about the change of language online, but also about how Christians can evangelize in a creative way, taking advantage of the new medium. This

³⁶ Benedict Mayaki SJ. “Pope: ‘Church in the Digital’ Offers Tools for a Church also Present Online,” *Vatican News*, June 20, 2022, <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2022-06/pope-france-church-in-the-digital-book-fabio-bolzetta.html>

³⁷ The affirmation of building community in the online space is strengthened even more in Vatican’s 2023 pastoral advice on social media. Dicastery for Communication, *Towards Full Presence: A Pastoral Reflection on Engagement with Social Media*, May 28, 2023, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/dpc/documents/20230528_dpc-verso-piena-presenza_en.html

³⁸ Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (On Evangelization in the Modern World), December 8, 1975, <https://www.usccb.org/evangelization/apostolic.shtml>;
Pope Paul VI, *Gaudium et Spes*, December 7 1965, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html

also raises questions about the capacity for attention of the audience of the Gospel. In the current generation of evangelists, most are digital immigrants. In other words, they were not born into a world where digital media has penetrated all parts of life. However, the next generation—that of the digital natives—has been raised in an environment in which digital media is a necessity for life. The way of life in the 21st century requires us to rethink and renew the way we evangelize in the digital space.

As *Evangelii Nuntiandi* continues,

the person who has been evangelized goes on to evangelize others. Here lies the test of truth, the touchstone of evangelization: It is unthinkable that a person should accept the Word and give himself to the kingdom without becoming a person who bears witness to it and proclaims it in his turn. ...Evangelization, as we have said, is a complex process made up of varied elements: the renewal of humanity, witness, explicit proclamation, inner adherence, entry into the community, acceptance of signs, apostolic initiative.³⁹

Rather than merely seeing evangelization as a task, or as only about doing, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* reminds us that evangelization is about the being of Christians—“the grace and vocation proper to the Church, her deepest identity.”⁴⁰

Bearing witness is not only about saying the Word, though it is important, but it is also about living out the Word of Christ and affirming one’s identity as children of God and as Christian communities. Being the light of the digital world means that the online presence of collective individuals also demonstrates a type of holiness that edifies others, whether in private posts or on a public forum.⁴¹ For this we now turn to the communal witness of the church online.

Church Communities in the Digital Space

One of the advantages of employing Stanley Hauerwas’s ecclesiology is his highlight of Christian witness in the church community. Raised as an American Methodist, Hauerwas spent a significant number of years teaching at the University of

³⁹ Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*.

⁴⁰ Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*.

⁴¹ Pope Paul VI, “*Lumen Gentium*,” November 21, 1964, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html.

Notre Dame, a private Catholic university in Indiana, United States.⁴² His ecclesiology has been shaped by Catholicism and can be helpful on discussing the conversations about Christian community in the digital space.

When talking about online witness, Christians, especially evangelicals, tend to think about individual behaviour online—for example, how one may reply to hostile comments on one’s social media account and whether one should post testimonies online.⁴³ Online witness, though, is not merely constructed by one individual; instead, it is shaped by all believers in the church community. As Pope Francis stated on Instagram, “the #MostHolyTrinity teaches us that a person can never be without the other. We are not islands, we are in the world to live in God’s image: open, in need of others and in need of helping others.”⁴⁴ People of other faiths may not judge an individual who puts offensive comments online, but they may be concerned with online Christian groups who do or do not do certain things.

Indeed, when Hauerwas published his monograph *A Community of Character* in 1981, social media apps did not exist. In fact, even desktop computers were not widely used in the 1980s. However, his perspective on alternative community can still be relevant in the 2020s, when the social media world is full of adversity—false accusations, fake news, etc. Digital media may have evolved from print materials, but the division in the world is still evident, online and offline. His proposal is a reminder of how Christian communities can be faithful witnesses in light of these phenomena online. For him,

the ability of the church to interpret and provide alternatives to the narrow loyalties of the world results from the story—a particular story, to be sure—that teaches us the significance of lives different from our own, within and without our community. Indeed we only learn what that story entails as it is lived and lives through the lives of others. If we are to trust in the truthfulness of the stories of God, we must also trust that the other’s life, as threatening as it may first appear, is necessary for our own.⁴⁵

⁴² Stanley Hauerwas, *Hannah’s Child: A Theologian’s Memoir* (London: SCM Press, 2010).

⁴³ For dialogue specifically for healthy communications online, see Calida Chu, “Effective Communication on Social Media: A Christian Response to Toxic Conversations Online,” *Faith and Thought* 73 (October 2022): 2-19.

⁴⁴ Pope Francis, *Instagram*, June 12, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CetQXkbs49g/?igshid=YmMyMTA2M2Y=>

⁴⁵ For dialogue specifically for healthy communications online, see Calida Chu, “Effective Communication on Social Media,” 2-19.

It is the stories of God in the scripture that encourage Jesus' followers to create their own stories imitating Christ. In some ways, this echoes Campbell and Garner's comments in terms of how evangelization developed by Christian individuals, in both online and offline networks, should point to Christ, the ultimate example of his followers.

Likewise, in the digital world, it is one's narratives that invite non-Christians to be curious about Christian belief. Although Hauerwas's prose was published almost 40 years ago, people's urge to narrate their daily experiences has not lessened. Scrolling through social media apps like Facebook and Instagram one can see how people are longing to express their opinions and to record their highlights with the Stories function.⁴⁶ Not only can one find testimonies online from a wide range of believers, but one may also see how Christians form an alternative community in the digital world.

The Youth Boiling Point (YBP) 沸點, a new media platform established in 2016 by the Hong Kong Diocesan Audio-Visual Centre 香港教區視聽中心 and the Hong Kong Diocesan Youth Commission 香港教區青年牧民委員會, can be an example to illustrate how Hong Kong Catholics can create digital communities and can hold each other accountable. On its Facebook page, the Youth Boiling Point shares its vision "to share faith, creativity, formation and evangelization."⁴⁷ Not only has the YBP posted music and videos to allow young Hong Kong Catholics to share their testimony, but it has also created WhatsApp and Signal stickers with Christian themes, such as those related to Easter (Figure 3) and the examinations of the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education (HKDSE; Figure 4), to show how digital media can be connected to the daily lives and struggles of young people. With a more political perspective, the Yellow Umbrella Christian Base Community 黃傘街頭基督徒基層團體 (literally translated as 'Yellow Umbrella Grassroots Christian Organization on the Street') is also instrumental in creating pro-democratic Catholic voices on social media, although its Facebook group stopped operating in May 2022.⁴⁸ Indeed, social media platforms can be used to announce news through official channels as a substitute for printed newspapers. One such platform is the Catholic Way 公教頻道,⁴⁹ which provides updates about online

⁴⁶ Pope Francis, *Instagram*, June 12, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CetQXkbs49g/?igshid=YmMyMTA2M2Y=>

⁴⁷ The Youth Boiling Point, *Facebook*, accessed June 1, 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/YouthBoilingPoint/>

⁴⁸ The Yellow Umbrella Grassroots Christian Community 黃傘街頭基督徒基層團體, "The Yellow Umbrella Jesus's Organization Seems to Be under Scrutiny" 黃傘耶穌團體似乎要遭受審查, *Facebook*, May 28, 2022, <https://bit.ly/3O5Rigb>

⁴⁹ Catholic Way, accessed June 1, 2022, <http://www.catholicway.hk/>

worldview. Although someone may choose to look at contrasting views if he or she is willing to spend time listening to alternative opinions, this should not be assumed to be the norm. If one chooses to follow non-Christian social media accounts, it is understandable that one would not have seen Christian testimonies online because of the algorithms—this does not undermine the plentiful testimonies available online. Understanding the constraint of the digital world also helps one to accept that one need not carry the burden to transform the whole digital world.⁵² Instead, evangelization can start from small things, such as sharing Bible quotes, posting fact-checked news, and joining online groups for a good cause. These are all testimonies online. Sometimes simply being there already testifies to God.

Although I highlight the communality of Christian groups online, I am hesitant to define such online groups as “a social institution,” using John P. Ferré’s (b. 1956) typology of media as a conduit, a mode of knowing, and a social institution.⁵³ This is because it implies that these groups are closed—not welcoming members who are exploring the Christian faith. The advantage of evangelization online is its fluidity, which allows seekers to be in and out of certain groups without the fear of entering a church building as newcomers. Moreover, defining online Christian communities beyond social institutions overcomes the misunderstanding that evangelization online is another type of colonization that may exploit others simply because they do not belong to particular social institutions. Christians should handle this with caution to prevent recolonization, whether intended or not.⁵⁴

Conclusion: Come, Follow Me

As another pioneer of world Christianity Lamin Sanneh (1942–2019) states,

standard theological models of Christianity have presented [Bible translation] as a closed-circuit organism whose main pathways of communication have been laid in cognitive, normative channels. Faced with this imposing, immobile system, the

⁵² Tim Shorey, “Christian, You Don’t Have to Change the World,” *The Gospel Coalition*, May 10, 2021, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/dont-have-change-world/>.

⁵³ John P. Ferré, “The Media of Popular Piety,” in *Mediating Religion: Conversation in Media, Religion, and Culture*, ed. Jolyon Mitchell and Sophia Marriage (London: T&T Clark, 2003), 83-92.

⁵⁴ Calida Chu, “Decolonisation/Recolonisation?: Digital Theology in the Post-COVID-19 World,” GoNeDigital Conference, Online, Global Network for Digital Theology, July 14-16, 2021; Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Politics and Theology: Unraveling Empire for a Global World* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2022), 19-38.

task of the theologian was seen as codifying the religion, mapping the contours of its form and the lineaments of its function, predicting and prescribing for changes in behavior, preventing foreign matter from entering it, repairing deviations and aberrations, fixing the qualities that alone define—and do not define—the religion, and generalizing about how God works in the world.⁵⁵

Likewise, stressing a particular medium for evangelization equally minimizes God’s work in the world, whether it is digital or not. Highlighting one type of medium as the most effective for evangelization seems to me a denial of God’s creative work and encounter with human beings due to God’s omnipotent and omnipresent nature. God can and will reveal Godself in whatever medium God pleases.

Note that I have been writing about online evangelization for most of this paper, but I should stress that relationship is not formed solely online. Evangelization requires both online and offline communications to nurture relationships with those we want to reach. Online and offline testimony are both important.⁵⁶ As Methodist digital theologian Pete Phillips suggests, the church has to be hybrid—it has to nurture both online and offline communities in the future. For him, “God’s mission is confined neither to online nor offline church—indeed that distinction is increasingly redundant. Though the mission of the Church is part of the mission of God, God’s mission is not limited to our mission.”⁵⁷ Let this be a reminder when we encourage our online followers to come to Christ, the first influencer of the Christian faith.

⁵⁵ Sanneh, *Translating the Message*, 249.

⁵⁶ Hollinghurst, “Finding Jesus Online,” 84.

⁵⁷ Peter M. Phillips, *Hybrid Church: Blending Online and Offline Community* (Cambridge: Grove Books, 2020), 6.

【摘要】在過去四個世紀裡，福傳的媒介一直在不斷發展。從口述、印刷到數碼媒體，福音的傳播隨著科技的發展而進步。本文概述過去幾個世紀的轉變，強調了數碼媒體作為福傳工具，其日益重要的意義，並探討福音在不同媒介中的可翻譯性。本文採用數碼神學的方法論，即數碼媒體以何種方式改變或轉化神學，來檢視社交媒體與基督宗教之間的連繫。更具體地說，本文將從三個方面評估數碼媒體如何促進或阻礙福音傳播：(一) 物質性；(二) 權威；(III) 傳播。考慮到網絡上關於實質性方面的爭論，特別是與聖體聖事有關的爭論，本文調查了基督徒團體對此問題的不同反應。本文也借鑑數碼神學家的研究成果，討論教會權威如何因各方（無論是牧靈領袖還是平信徒）的平等參與而轉變，並在此基礎上探究基督徒之間在教會內外不同形式的溝通，這可能會影響福音傳播的動力。最後，本文採用了美國衛理公會教徒史丹利·侯活士（Stanley Hauerwas）的神學，他的神學深受天主教教會學影響，來論證基督徒網上見證的重要性，並反思數碼領域中教會和世界的概念。