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Social Media and Faith Formation

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Social Media and Faith Formation

Editor's Introduction

Communication has long served religious purposes—in oral discourse, written texts (especially the Bible), religious art, sacred music, and even film and television—but more recently it also challenges religion and religious identity. A number of researchers (see Lynch, 2005, for helpful summaries) suggest that communication media can serve similar functions to those of religion; and that overlap weakens the functional role of religion in Western societies at least. And, perhaps more tellingly, contemporary media offer their own narratives of encountering the holy and substitute media products for religious reflection. Religious professionals, particularly those charged with educating young people, wrestle with the challenge of how to communicate religious teachings and shape believers' ideas in the face of counter teachings presented by various media sources.

Religious educators must then draw on both pedagogical theory as well as on theology to inform their work. Communication also has a role to play in this, as the various essays in this issue of *COMMUNICATION RESEARCH TRENDS* indicate.

This journal has long featured topics dealing with media and religion. This issue of *COMMUNICATION RESEARCH TRENDS* takes up a theme that traces its origins to the foundation of the journal: religious practices and communication. The early issues of *TRENDS* published supplements to each of the communication topics it featured to explore "Religious Communication Trends" (examples of these issues appear on the website at csc.scu.edu/trends). More recently, we have published an occasional issue devoted to some aspect of media and religion.

The impulse behind this issue has a history. The Centre for the Study of Communication and Culture, a Jesuit-sponsored communication research center and the original publisher of *COMMUNICATION RESEARCH TRENDS*, began a series of conferences in the late 1980s to explore how communication practices and studies influence, assist, and change theology and church practice (see, for example, Granfield, 1994; Rossi & Soukup, 1994; May, 1997). These conferences continued until the late 1990s. *COMMUNICATION RESEARCH*

TRENDS, in association with the Pontifical Council for Social Communication, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America, the Catholic Communication Collaboration, and Santa Clara University, reestablished these as annual conferences in 2012 in order to invite theological scholars and communication researchers to explore common themes, particularly in terms of how social media reshape church understanding, membership, and practices. The work of these meetings forms a small subset of a much larger area of communication scholarship addressing media and religion. (For summaries over time, see, for example, Stout & Buddenbaum, 1996, 2001; Mitchell & Marriage, 2003; Forbes & Mahan, 2005; Meyer & Moors, 2006; Morgan, 2008; Lynch, Mitchell, & Strhan, 2012; Stout, 2012; Campbell & Garner, 2016).

In this issue of *COMMUNICATION RESEARCH TRENDS*, we publish some of the papers from the most recent conference, which addressed social media and faith formation, that is, how the current communication world has affected the ways in which people enter more deeply into faith communities and religious practices. Christian faith communities have long-established methods to incorporate new members and to teach "the faith" to existing members; however, as Lynch (2005) noted, the changing communication environment has clouded the waters for such preparation. Conference presentations examined the differences between biblical and digital cultures (Joseph Scaria Palakeel), appreciating the roles of the Holy Spirit in digital culture (Daniella Zsupan-Jerome), finding ways to teach religious habits in the media world (Brett Robinson), teaching from *Evangelii Gaudium* (Daniel Arasa), and exploring faith formation in the presence of the Other (Matthias Scharer). Others presented case studies (Nadia Delicata and Kyle Oliver). Oliver roots his work in a detailed ethnography of faith formation in the work of a "faith-adjacent" nonprofit network and, as such, offers a very different perspective on what kinds of communication can shape faith formation work. His more fully developed model appears in a presentation to the Religious Education Association (Oliver, 2019).

(For the full schedule and summaries of all the presentations from the theology and communication conference, see the conference website: cscs.scu.edu/theocom19.)

We present three papers here that provide a look at the state of the question and at some proposed answers, moving from an overview of the general situation of coming to faith through the media world to the more specific characteristics of social media in the lives of young people and the response of educators. We end with a yet more specific set of examples by turning to a discipleship model of faith formation suited both to young people and to long-time believers.

Drawing on past research that focused on the role of television in the lives of teens, Paul Soukup, S.J., argues that teens and young people experience a general formation in those ideas commonly held by their cultures—including beliefs, theological information, and religious attitudes—through their media consumption. These cultural beliefs may or may not align with those of particular churches or faith communities; in multi-ethnic and multi-religious places like the United States, the cultural belief system may well simultaneously draw from many religions as it seeks to appeal to as many citizens as possible. Religious teachers, then, must take the communication culture into account even before they begin teaching; further, they must seek to integrate the pre-existing beliefs of young people into a faith formation curriculum through a dialogue that helps students understand their own faith.

Based on a careful analysis of the current digital culture, Aline Amaro da Silva argues for a fundamental change in approach to faith formation. Such a formation will rely less on a “transmission model” of teaching and more on the culture of sharing fostered by social networks. Her work fits nicely with the general communication studies’ appreciation of audiences and shaping messages to the characteristics of the audience. Sadly, much faith formation still relies on an image of students formed decades ago. Amara da Silva presents “some anthropological factors that should be considered when thinking of a new catechetical pedagogy, to suggest clues for a formative path for the Christian faith in the digital age. . . . taking an interdisciplinary approach,” following the work of Manuel Castells, Michel Serres, Antonio Spadaro, and Matthias Scharer and Bernd J. Hilberath. She concludes, “we should not try to be experts in technology, but in the human beings that produce, use, and inhabit the digital. Thinking about a new pedagogy for

the age of connectivity is not about designing online or application activities, rather it is realizing that cultivating relationships has become more essential than storing content.” She asks that contemporary educators take into account the humanizing pedagogies that seek to form people through interactive communication and participatory culture.

Starting with the world of digital theology, Stephen Garner argues that the most appropriate kinds of faith formation come through practices of discipleship. After a careful review of the role and place of discipleship in faith and theology, he introduces several key methods ranging from the Forgiveness Project to photography as a spiritual practice (described by Eileen Crowley, 2013, in *COMMUNICATION RESEARCH TRENDS*) to different kinds of Bible engagement to gaming, and to explorations of worship that include digital media. He offers specific examples of worship by exploring the “liturgy of cell phones” and “the Beatitudes and social media.”

These essays, then, suggest some approaches to faith formation in an era dominated by social media. One involves taking that media world seriously and using it as a starting point for faith formation through a kind of dialogue. Another invites religious education practitioners to draw on participatory communication and participatory pedagogy as a way to lead people to reflect on their faith. The third focuses on “discipleship” through the use of different social media in every aspect of religious practice.

* * *

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Cybertheology, seeking to develop a Christology for the digital age. She works in the theological and communication formation of catechists and evangelizers producing courses to various regions of Brazil. She is also working mainly in the evangelization of youth. Recently, she was a guest researcher in the Catholic Theology Faculty at Ruhr Universität Bochum (RUB), Germany. Website: alineamarodasilva.com.

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Catechesis in the Digital Age: From Transmission to Sharing

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Introduction

New technologies modify the communication and relational dimensions of each human being. These new forms of communication resulting from the digital revolution give rise to a world completely different from the previous one, and from this new environment a new generation is born. Nowadays, almost the entire audience of Christian formation consists of digital natives, from the child being baptized to the parents and godparents. This means that the Church can no longer regard catechumens as passive recipients, and it needs to reformulate the methodology used in catechesis in order to adequately match the language, communication, relationship, and learning characteristics of this new generation. Thus, it is also necessary to develop a new theology, a new way of being Church, and a new pedagogy so that these digital natives can understand and live the faith.

The interest in reflecting on catechesis in the digital age did not arise spontaneously, but through the demand of Brazilian catechists, themselves aware of the new challenges and the need for training on this topic. Thus, in 2015, they began formative work through lectures, intensive study, and workshops in many regions of Brazil. For this reason, the study summarized in this article focuses on the formation of catechists in order to diagnose what attitudes, knowledge, and methods are necessary to better enable catechists in their evangelizing mission and commitment to educate in faith to those who have chosen to know and be part of the Christian community. Financing for this research came in part from the Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior – Brasil (CAPES). It is also important to note that part of the reflection on catechesis in the digital age is an application in catechetical practice of the results of the master's research of the author: "Cybergrace: Faith, evangelization, and communion in the times of the network" (Silva, 2015).

Catechesis in the digital age regards catechetical formation as a path of initiation into the Christian life, not a mere transmission of doctrine or only a preparation for the sacraments. To think about it, we will walk along a path of reflection in four steps. First, we need a "digital metanoia," that is, an awareness of the anthropological changes, especially in the field of communication, caused by digital culture and an awareness of that change in our way of being and living the faith. The second stage identifies the protagonists of catechesis today, the digital natives, to understand how to relate better to them. In the third step we present the theological field responsible for studying in theory and practice the effects of cyberculture on faith, as well as the influence of faith in digital culture, thus, in charge of thinking about catechesis in the cybernetics age. The last part refers to the pedagogical and theological forms that could contribute to the formulation of a new catechetical pedagogy for digital times—a pedagogy based on the dynamics of the network.

A. Digital metanoia: What changes and what we need to change in the digital era

People create technology to facilitate or supply some need of human life. Technological innovations have always brought about great changes in the habits, customs, and structures of society. But why do digital technologies now seem to have a greater impact on human culture than previous ones? Previously, innovations occurred in other sectors such as transportation, industry, and commerce, which are undoubtedly important sectors of society. However, digital technology touches the human essence: its ability to communicate, relate, and know. By affecting the constituent aspects of the human being, contemporary technological innovations have caused a digital revolution. Some scholars believe that this leads to a qualitative change in the human being, as for example the French philosopher Michel Serres who wrote that we are experiencing one

of the greatest ruptures in history, since the transformations of Neolithic time (2013, p. 13). Therefore, new fields of study are emerging such as the anthropology of digitalization, an interdisciplinary approach on the effects of cyberculture and cybernetics in all dimensions of human life. (For example, the Faculty of Catholic Theology of the University of Bochum and other German universities have recently created a new chair called Anthropology of Digitization. Addressed as a frontier issue, this foundation conducts a series of lectures with specialists from the various areas of knowledge: neurosciences, psychology, automation, philosophy, theology and ethics.) In the theological field new currents also appear that study these effects (Campbell & Garner, 2016; Spadaro, 2012).

In this way, the digital age can also be called the era of hypercommunication or hyperconnectivity. People created the new information and communication technologies to provide more opportunities for communication, relationship, and the exchange of information and knowledge. However, paradoxically, we see some contradictory phenomena occur, such as disinformation, fake news, generational conflict, growing intolerance, and even indifference.

These transformations have brought new challenges for society in general, especially for education: how to relate, how to communicate effectively, how to understand each other? To think of catechesis in the digital age is precisely to strive to create more possibilities of encounter and more fruitful relationships between the catechumen, the catechist, and the community of faith, considering the characteristics of the human being, culture, and world of today.

Each epoch of history and each generation have a preponderant communicative model that delineates the forms of language as well as the behavior and mentality of the people who share the same context (Silva, 2018, p. 63). Santaella (2004) classifies human history into six cultural periods, each characterized by a distinct communication model: oral culture, written culture, print culture, mass culture, media culture, and digital culture (p. 43). However, we can summarize three main models of communication: dialogic (or interpersonal), mass, and network. Our current society follows the dynamics of network communication; for this reason Castells (2005) calls it the Network Society.

We termed the anthropological turn in our communication paradigm “digital metanoia,” that is, the process of becoming aware of the transformations going on around us: in the environment, in communi-

cation, in culture, and even in the human being. Understanding the network and how it modifies our life in fundamental aspects forms the first step in accomplishing a digital metanoia. For this, people must understand the network not as a tool, but as an environment of relationships and how this changes our relationships with catechumens, for example. Digital metanoia is defined not only by an opening stance and positive vision of technology and digital culture, but by the formation of a critical sense about this reality, realizing its potentialities, risks, limits and challenges.

To enable people to live this metanoia, we must make clear what we mean by network and digital culture. The network that we believe transforms all spheres of society is not the global computer network, but the global network of people interconnected through the new technologies. Therefore, we must focus on the person, not the technique. Secondly, what do we mean by culture? Culture is not an abstract entity; culture is us, as Santaella (2004) wrote:

Cyberculture as much as any other kind of culture, is a human creation. There is no separation between a form of culture and the human being. We are these cultures. (p. 55)

Thus, we demonstrate our anthropological approach to the question and the relevance of perceiving which aspects of that culture have changed in human life, especially in its communicative character, through the study of digital generations.

For one, the Internet contributes a greater democratization of the right to communication, that is, to move from one-to-many communication, as it happens in the mass media, to many-to-many, as in social networks. In addition, cyberculture helps us to better understand what we call real in the sense that digital reality helps us to abolish false dualisms that we have accepted, such as between real and virtual or real and spiritual. Thus, we understand that even in the relationship between educator and student, the network experience also shows that “we are members of one another” (Ephesians 4:25): We influence and learn from each other. The network experience also ended the separation between private and public life, among the different functions we carry out in society, as a mother, student, professional, or catechist. Network culture has made it clearer that who we are and how we feel is totally connected with what we do and the way we do it. Therefore, we now turn to some aspects, especially the relational and pedagogical characteristics, of the

new protagonists of ecclesial and social transformation, the digital natives.

B Digital natives: The new protagonists of catechesis and learning

A fundamental question to think about in the formation of the Christian faith involves knowing the person whom I wish to form. For several years catechetical pedagogical training has considered the developmental psychology or the age of the candidate. What we propose here adds one more factor that plays an extremely important role in the current reality: the study of the generations. We focus on understanding the mind and the world of the digital natives who constitute the target audience of all the catechetical work: children of Baptism and First Eucharist, young people of Confirmation Catechesis, their parents, godparents, and even catechists, since the digital generation has already reached adulthood.

The French sociologist Michel Serres (2013) points out the contextual, cognitive, and behavioral differences present in the digital generations he termed “Thumbelina” to demonstrate the ability of the net generation to command their smartphones with their thumbs and to signal the prominence that the girls of that generation have reached in all fields of society. Some of their characteristics include: They inhabit predominantly urban spaces, a much more populated environment than their ancestors knew and where multiculturalism is the standard of society; they have greater sensitivity to the environmental and sustainability issues of the planet; they have a high life expectancy, although the physiology of their body is more fragile and sedentary due to the comforts and pleasures of contemporary life. In the Western world, they did not experience the horrors of war, although they witnessed the migratory phenomenon coming from the East. In short, they live in another notion of time, another world, and another story (pp. 14–17).

The Thumbelina generation also no longer has the same head; its cognitive and learning functions have also changed by their interaction with the media and by inhabiting the digital realm. Serres states that the previous generation transformed the society of the spectacle into a pedagogical society, that is, they let the media assume the role of teaching the digital generations (pp. 18–19). Because they were extremely exposed to and encouraged by picture frames, digital natives developed a degree of anxiety and attention deficit. Living everything at a fast pace characterized by real-time

responses, they no longer know how to “do nothing,” wait, listen, contemplate, or tolerate silence. Thus, they multitask, and manifest an ability to manage various sources of information and activities at the same time; this can seem not a quality but a difficulty in concentrating and completing a task.

Serres also presents data that network experience activates neurons and brain zones different from traditional teaching-learning activities such as reading a physical book and writing in a notebook or on a chalk board. Another brain alteration indicates that digital natives have more difficulty storing information—the so-called Google effect, in which the brain does not store as much information because it knows that it can reach it with a click (Dashevsky, 2013). For Serres, these cognitive changes of the digital natives are not a negative thing; on the contrary, he believes that the brain of the Thumbelina generation is better constituted rather than full. Having no more energy to store data, this “empty space” gives vent to creativity and true intelligence, inventive intelligence, so Thumbelina can concentrate its forces in producing original ideas (Serres, 2013, pp. 38–39). In addition, that generation has another spatiotemporal experience and has developed its own language: “By cell phone, they have access to all people; by GPS, to all places; through the Internet, to all knowledge: They circulate, then, through a topological space of approximations, while we lived in a metric space, referred by distances” (p. 19).

Their way of relating has also changed. They have a much greater number of contacts and social interactions over the Internet, which does not mean an improvement in the quality of relationships. “Individuals no longer know how to live as a couple and divorce; they do not know how to keep themselves in the classroom and they move and talk; they no longer pray in the Church. . . . Everywhere people refer to the end of ideologies, but it is the affiliations that created them that were discarded” (p. 23). With more individualistic characteristics, the human being in the digital age has more ephemeral, flexible, fragile, less lasting relationships. This phenomenon Zygmunt Bauman calls Liquid Love (2004).

This fragility of the interpersonal bonds also challenges the faith and the experience of Christian love. Pope Francis demonstrates his concern about the culture of the disposable and the provisional: “Here I think, for example, of the speed with which people move from one affective relationship to another. They

believe, along the lines of social networks, that love can be connected or disconnected at the whim of the consumer, and the relationship quickly “blocked” (2016, no. 39). However, this rupture can be an opportunity, because the digital generation is in search of new and authentic social ties. We see evidence for this in the multiplicity of emerging digital communities, as well as in the engagement of these young people in them, not only in sharing personal interests and tastes, but also in forming part of global social movements through online organizations such as Avaaz.org. This helps to explain why Castells finds this generation the most socially engaged in history: The more they interact in the network, the more they mobilize on social issues and more face-to-face encounters happen (2005, pp. 18–23).

One challenge that the present times have brought is that never in human history have so many generations lived with one another. Today, six generations divide social space and influence—*Belle Époque* (1920–1940), *Baby Boomers* (1940–1960), X (1960–1980), Y (1980–2000), Z (2000–2010) and Alpha (2010–)—we can call the first three digital immigrants and the last three digital natives. Each generation has distinct and fundamental characteristics in relation to context, experiences, behavior, culture, and worldview. For this reason, generational conflicts can occur in diverse environments, including in catechesis. The conflict of generations occurs both for new reasons, for different aspects and generational mentalities, and for the traditional divergences regarding the stage of life and maturity. Even today marketing groups subdivide Generation Y, since the consumption habits of adults of those 30 to 40 years of age differ significantly from the young adults of 20 to 30 years (Meyer, 2019).

One of the issues that may cause misunderstandings results from the relationship and understanding of obedience and authority, whether of parents, teachers, or superiors at work. The digital generation is not accustomed to hierarchical relationships, because its natural attitude leads its members to build multilinear and horizontal relationships as it happens in the network. In addition, it does not see authority as awarded by a title or function, but rather earned through closeness and authenticity. When a digital native disagrees with some resolution or suggests new ideas for a project or activity, people should not understand this as disrespect or disdain for authority but rather as interest and a desire to collaborate, to feel part and co-responsible.

The net generations do not know how to be passive bystanders; they have become accustomed to being always in charge of their devices like the steering wheel of a car that leads to the road and digital environment they choose. Anyone proposing a task that one wishes to accomplish with the digital natives must consider some aspects like these: the task must be something interactive, collaborative, and dynamic that awakens engagement, co-responsibility, and belonging; it must clearly indicate the meaning of the activity, because if they do not understand the reason, they will not participate—the digital natives do not feel motivated to spend their energy on something apparently without great utility, and yet they are more faithful to their own conscience and will than to any other person. One must show appreciation and recognition of their commitment and ideas; one can easily perceive through the success of social networks the great need for recognition that digital natives possess. The proposed task should still be something playful that awakens the creative and inventive intelligence of the net generation, because even those who reached adulthood continue to play online games or even board games—that is, they overvalue pleasure and fun.

The teacher or trainer must not only know and use the potential of the net generation, but the trainer must also know how to diagnose their deficits and help them develop important skills that are not natural pre-dispositions. For example, in this context of dispersion and excessive information and multiple online offers, teachers must help them to sharpen their attention and focus on those things essential in their lives, even to build a balance in relationships and time dedicated to certain activities such as duties and leisure.

In the field of spirituality, teachers can present silence not as passive, static, and boring, but as an opening for an interactive and communicative inner encounter with God and with oneself. It is not by chance that the search for meditation has grown, whether in Eastern or Western religions; today’s youth is capable of God and thirsts for the transcendent. The study of the faith of digital natives needs its own approach. One of the new theological proposals for this purpose emerges from Cybertheology.

C. Cybertheology: Thinking and living the Faith in the middle of digital revolution

“Cybertheology” describes the new field of theological reflection formed from the impact of cyberculture, with the two objectives of reflecting on the faith

in the reality of contemporary daily life in the light of the logic of the network, and of the phenomenon of digital culture from the point of view of the Christian faith (Silva, 2015, pp. 45–46). Created in 2012 by the Italian Jesuit Antonio Spadaro, Cybertheology follows this reasoning: Cyberculture modifies human thinking, as it has developed a language and way of communicating in new ways that affect all human beings in their communicative essence. If we understand theology as *Intellectus Fidei* (thinking faith), has not the Internet changed the way we think faith today, that is, how do we do theology? Spadaro then conceptualizes Cybertheology as the effort to think the Christian faith in times of the Internet (2012, pp. 41–50).

No one can reflect and form opinions on what they do not know. For this reason, Cybertheology has two fundamental premises that demonstrate its interdisciplinary nature. First, in order to do a cybertheological study, one must have the experience of faith and the network. This premise approximates Hoover and Echchaibi's (2014) claim about Digital Religion: "the phenomenon of digital religion is rooted in two dimensions—the religious' and 'the digital—that have coevolved temporally" (p. 4). After this double experience, the next steps of the cybertheological method involve reflection, action, and evaluation. This methodology that unites theory and practice resembles the "See, judge, and act" method widely used in Latin American theology.

Cybertheology takes the Internet as its *locus theologicus* from which its different view of society derives, detecting the important aspects in order to develop its reflection. Applying the theology of the Second Vatican Council, we can consider the network a theological place of the "signs of the times," because it forms a great phenomenon that marks contemporary history. Also, in Melchor Cano's classical conception of theological places, we can classify the network among the alien places, the fruit of reason and human history, that contribute to the construction of theological knowledge, but do not appear as proper places or essential sources of theological wisdom.

To try to define Cybertheology, we must say what it is not. Cybertheology does not fit into the category of contextual theology, since digital culture defines the contemporary global culture present in all the nations of the planet. Nor should we consider it a theology of communication (although it has the same roots in the theology of Trinitarian communion), for it does not study communication itself, but the hypercommunica-

tive life of women and men of today, especially of digital natives. In this way, Cybertheology has a wide range of approaches, ranging from re-reading of the classical concepts of systematic theology to analyzing the various pastoral practices to creating new evangelization projects. The reflection on catechesis in the digital age presents a fine example of a cybertheological study applied in the practice of faith, and this ongoing research demonstrates the need for the urgent adaptation of catechetical pedagogy to the dynamics of network society.

D. Network pedagogy:

Thinking catechesis in times of the Internet

Catechetical pastoral care focuses on offering an initiation that leads to a real participation in the Christian community. "This new life, this participation in the divine nature constitutes the nucleus and heart of the Christian initiation" (CNBB, 2009, no. 66). Catechesis of initiation into the Christian life seeks to become an encounter that transforms life and gives the person a new existence. For this to happen, first of all, we have to understand the catechesis as a living communication and relation process mediated by the Church through its members. "Unlike other knowledge or practices, one does not have access to the mystery through theoretical instruction or the acquisition of certain skills. In order to have access to the divine mysteries one must, in one way or another, be initiated into these marvelous realities through experiences that deeply mark it" (no. 40).

In addition to the catechumenal inspiration, to mark the path of initiation with rites that put the catechist in personal contact with the paschal mystery of Christ, catechesis in digital times needs not only to formulate a new pedagogy, but also requires a new attitude on the part of its protagonists. The network society challenges catechetical pedagogy to think:

1. How to integrate the new technologies in catechesis.
2. Which content is appropriate for catechesis in this new culture and language.
3. How to develop the critical awareness of catechists and catechumens about the impact of digital culture on human life and faith, in order to recognize what aspects of this culture facilitate good or bad actions in digital environments (Media Competence).
4. How to adapt catechetical pedagogy to the new communication and teaching-learning characteris-

tics that the networked communication model has brought to society (Media Pedagogy or Network Pedagogy)

To develop a new catechetical pedagogy for the challenge of the digital culture doesn't refer to only using digital devices in the catechetical meeting, "but knowing the characteristics and contexts in which the Net generation is inserted and realizing which experiences, activities, and methods will be more enriching" (Silva, 2019, p. 37). With the intention of accomplishing this task, we bring the example of pedagogies that have already developed some of these qualities.

Another important premise is to understand catechesis as education, in the terms of Ruth Cohn, as "Living Learning": "Learning is not something imposed from above, but rather it is something to be grasped in a living way with body, soul, intellect, and spirit" (Cohen & Farau, 2008, p. 327). This means that learning happens only in an environment where a fruitful relationship of mutual trust, reciprocity, and fraternal charity develops. As Pope Francis (2019b) teaches: "Only what you love can be saved. Only what is embraced can be transformed" (no. 120). This affirmation recalls the image of the merciful father of the Gospel who runs to meet the son and embraces him; it is through the love and forgiveness of the father that the son regains his human dignity. In this way, it is shown that being a catechist is not only a task, but also a vocation that requires an inner pre-disposition to empathy, walking along with the catechumens, that is, the personal accompaniment of the young person. "The experience of discontinuity, uprootedness, and the collapse of fundamental certainties, fostered by today's media culture, creates a deep sense of orphanhood to which we must respond by creating an attractive and fraternal environment where others can live with a sense of purpose" (no. 216).

Living the "encounter culture," active listening, attentive gaze, and a relationship full of tenderness mark key attitudes in the relationship between catechists and catechumens that have the capacity to transform life around us and prepare the land for God to germinate the seed of faith. Clearly before seeking to form faith-theological trust in God, we must arouse faith-trust in life, in the human being (Hurtado, 2013). For this, catechesis should be thought of as a network of relationships, which nourishes the bonds between catechists and catechumens, but also among catechumens, family, and community. This means thinking about catechesis not only as what happens during the

meeting, but as the whole period of formation to live the faith in the family, community, and society. "Youth ministry needs to become more flexible: inviting young people to events or occasions that provide an opportunity not only for learning, but also for conversing, celebrating, singing, listening to real stories and experiencing a shared encounter with the living God (Francis, 2019b, no. 204).

Therefore, catechesis should not be understood as mere instruction or transmission of content, but as a sharing of the experience of living a life in God in any environment, online or offline. For this reason, the catechist's personal witness and his good coexistence with the catechumens have now become much more important than his high theological-doctrinal knowledge.

Given some of the main characteristics and changes in the human person and in the world around us, the urgency of a new attitude and posture becomes evident, not only in the pedagogical form, but also in the personal attitude of the teachers and their communicative, relational, ecclesial, and theological qualities, thus reinforcing the need for digital metanoia.

We cannot separate the medium from the message and, in the case of catechesis, the medium is the catechists themselves, so the formator faces the challenge not only to change their methods, but—most difficult and important—to change themselves. In digital times it became more pronounced that all communication is an act of self-communication, every message goes through the personal filter. With the weakening of institutions, the culture of the influencers emerged, well exemplified by the rise of the youtubers. This means that the authority of the catechists and the credibility of the Christian message no longer rests on roles given by the Church institution but on the witness of faith which they share and which finds confirmation in attitudes towards the catechumens.

As for the method, catechists must develop their media competence. More importantly, however, they should consider in the pedagogical process the characteristics of the digital generations, both cognitive and learning, as well as those of the communicational and relational culture from which a great part of their behaviors and visions come. Of course, we cannot box all the children and young people in the same profile. Therefore, if you prefer to speak of youth, in the plural, realize that these young people are not all the same. Common factors that we must know and study do exist, but each person possesses factors of their own, and different combinations of factors, with dif-

ferent results, according to each person's life history, as well as their context.

We cannot create a new pedagogical method in an unprecedented way, without previous references. In this way, we bring some methodologies that can help in the construction of a new catechetical approach in these network times. Among them, we highlight the Communicative Theology of Bernd J. Hilberath and Mathias Scharer, based on the Theme Centered Interaction (TCI) of the psychotherapist Ruth Cohn. In short, they describe the TCI method "a comprehensive, holistic action concept that has the goal of shaping situations in which humans interact, work, live, and learn together such that they consciously experience each other as humane and humanizing" (Spielmann, 2017, p. 14). [See also Scharer, 2013, in *COMMUNICATION RESEARCH TRENDS*, Volume 32, number 3.]

In its dynamic and interactive way, taking into account the complexity of each factor (I—each member individually, We—the group, It—the task and content, and Globe—the place and context) present in the process, TCI provides the experience of joint knowledge building through sharing experiences, information, and moderate opinions in dynamic balance. We can apply this communicative process of work and group learning to several areas, purposes, and activities, especially linked to the concept of participatory leadership. Brought to the educational reality of faith, the TCI places the leader (catechist) as an active participant in the group, who accepts and moderates the participation of other members (catechumens) in this construction of knowledge. Not only that, but the four dimensions of TCI serve too as a tool for a good discernment process in any activity and decision of work or life.

For this, we must build a new relationship between the subjects of catechesis who, even in their different roles, we should not separate between emitters and receivers; both act as interlocutors who share and build knowledge together. "It is much more a question of taking into account the fact that teachers are also learners and that learners provide the teachers with something to teach," observe Scharer and Hilberath (2008, p. 12).

In this sense, communicative theology can help in the reflection and construction of a formation of the Christian faith for our times, since it understands that the relation between trainer and trainee must be reciprocal, although the different functions in the process of formation involve respect and understanding as a

process of sharing knowledge and experiences. This way of forming and producing reflection combines with the characteristics of the current culture of the network—characterized by interaction, collaboration, personalization, and sharing. In the society of communication, we must rediscover the face of the communicative God and to perceive the history of salvation as a process of living and dynamic communication whose apex is the Christ event. Moreover, we should not forget that principles that aim at human development and acquire "the freedom to decide (autonomy), the ability to grow (optimism), and the necessity to assume responsibility (ethics)" govern the TCI method (Vogel, 2017, p. 57).

Another pedagogical form that can inspire the renewal of catechetical practice comes from the humanist and emancipatory pedagogy of Paulo Freire. The pedagogy of Paulo Freire fits the demands and challenges generated by the digital culture for education, in the case, catechetics. Its dialogic and emancipatory character of the critical being, by fostering the communion between educator and student leads to partnership in which they build knowledge unveiling reality, from their own shared personal and community experiences. Freire's problematizing and dialogical pedagogy unveils reality, develops critical sense and creativity, liberates awareness of ready concepts, stimulates reflection and action of the human being on reality, and generates personal and social transformation (Freire, 1987, p. 41). In this critical and dialogical relationship with the world, Freirean pedagogy can contribute to catechetical pedagogy in the world impacted by digital culture, not only because it shows a correspondence with the communicational and pedagogical characteristics of this culture, but also because it stimulates the critical reflection about this new world in which we live our faith.

While the digital age provides more channels for communication and the socialization of knowledge, it also results in too much information that, in turn develops some anesthesia and comfort. We need to challenge youth to get out of the oppressive paralysis, to engage and act. For this reason, Freire's pedagogy serves very well the need to question the way society works, to release people's creative and critical capacities so that they become aware and transform reality (1987, p. 40). Spadaro comments that people have unlearned asking questions, because to receive infinite answers we only have to enter keywords in the search tool (2017, p. 16). These times of information overload challenge people

to develop the critical act of questioning; in our ecclesial practice, we must lose the habit of giving ready answers and acquire the practice of questioning more, as Freire's pedagogy and Spadaro's reflection suggest.

Communicative Theology itself uses the concept of generating themes to reflect on a certain subject, in order to transform the reality addressed. Behind these pedagogies lies the idea that education does not consist of a transmission from someone who knows to someone who does not know, but something that happens when we meet and share information, experiences, stories, perspectives, and emotions. The practice of "active listening" skills can also contribute to the production of a true and transforming formative process, because it emphasizes the importance of the educator who not only wants to be heard, but also to be open and available to the student's attentive listening.

The human being in this era of the superabundance of information, sensations, pleasures, a certain technological determinism, and an obligation to always maintain an online presence needs to "rediscover the mystique of living together" (Francis, 2013, no. 87), needs to rediscover how to live well, in a healthy and balanced way, so that it can grow, mature, and transcend. Therefore, the task of initiation or formation in the Christian life is to communicate, not to convey any content related to faith as norms and doctrines, as putting heavy burdens on people's backs, difficult to live without the grace of God. The mission of the formation of the Christian faith is to communicate Life and life in abundance, in continuity with the mission manifested by Jesus (John 10:10). For this reason, the ecclesial community, especially in its formative-catechetical path, must develop a more open attitude towards participation and contribution of all, as Francis points out:

opening the way for dialogue, for encounter, for "smiles" and expressions of tenderness . . . This is the network we want, a network created not to entrap, but to liberate, to protect a communion of people who are free. The Church herself is a network woven together by Eucharistic communion, where unity is based not on "likes," but on the truth, on the "Amen," by which each one clings to the Body of Christ, and welcomes others. (2019a)

As an extension of the life of Christ and as the educators of the new generations, we have the task of continuing Jesus' work of teaching, dialoguing, forming awareness, touching, and transforming people's lives. The pedagogies discussed here did not begin

exclusively during and for the digital era. What they have in common is their character of empowerment, interpersonal interaction, and multilinear, horizontal, and dialogic communication in which all the interlocutors, even in different roles, become protagonists of action and relationship. These pedagogical cultures have a vision and humanistic and humanizing values that enable the human being to develop critical thinking, discern, correct, modify, and learn. Thus, the pedagogical processes cited here help in the elaboration of a Network Pedagogy that catechesis in the digital era should promote and cultivate.

E. Conclusion

This path of reflection on catechesis in times of digital culture, divided into four stages—(1) we experienced digital metanoia; (2) we learned more about the digital natives, the main audience of catechesis today; (3) we obtained more information on the theological field that helps us in this diagnosis, Cybertheology; and finally, (4) we have selected some of the key elements for the development of a new catechetical pedagogy, a pedagogy of the network, enriched and inspired by previous humanizing pedagogies—led to a realization that this important and urgent task has just begun and needs the commitment of all involved in catechetical theory and practice. This requires reinventing, renewing, and rescuing certain values and characteristics of the Christian faith from the earliest times, such as living the network of fraternal communion through encounter, sharing, listening, and dialogue; seeking authenticity; and of witnessing to life, of engaging and caring for one another, of being connected to one another, and of placing one's individual gifts and capacities at the service of all, so that we may form one body, the mystical body of Christ.

To form does not mean to transmit information, it means to give shape; and how can we shape if we do not interact with the subject we wish to form in a way that we not only mold the forming, but the forming also transforms us. The figure of the clay pot and the potter in the Old Testament (Isaiah 29:16; 64:8; Jeremiah 18:1–9) is not by chance. Both clay and potter are touched and transformed in this interaction: They can no longer remain isolated, but in this encounter become a set. Something remains of the clay in the hands of the potter and something of the potter remains in the form of the clay; and in this communion they generate a new work, the new vessel. In the same way, the interaction, sharing, and experience

together in the catechetical encounter must lead to the growth of the faith of the catechist and of the catechumens. Therefore, the importance clearly emerges of the care and observation of the communicative process in a group through appropriate methods that optimize this experience in catechesis.

We demonstrated that before the digital revolution more participatory, collaborative, problematizing, dialogical and social pedagogies already existed, like Paulo Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed with the idea of themes that generate personal and social change, and the Communicative Theology of Matthias Scharer and Bernd Jochen Hilberath that bring Ruth Cohn's concept of Living Learning to reflection and pastoral practice. We need to reemphasize these pedagogical forms because they correspond to certain fundamental characteristics of the digital generation, especially in their proper way of communicating, relating, and learning.

All this describes a process of awareness of these sociocultural transformations, the search to know these new human beings we wish to evangelize and thus the desire to create the ground to approach and face the challenge of connecting with them, not only through the transmission of ideas and concepts, but through active listening, attentive gaze, and sincere sharing of knowledge embodied in the experience of daily faith and living an authentic culture of encounter. We should not restrict the process of Christian initiation into the digital age to just one weekly meeting. With the help of social networks, we can carry out a continuous process of daily catechesis, sharing drops of content, interacting in small conversations, cultivating the relationship between community, catechists, and catechumens. Formation in times of the network rests on sharing personal and communitarian experiences. Therefore, the credibility of the message and the formation in times of fake news must find its base on the personal testimony, image, and attitudes of the educator. For that, we must pass from a one-to-many communication to a many-to-many style, that is, moving from the logic of transmission to the logic of sharing.

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