

## THE NEW AGORA

### SOCIAL MEDIA, THE CHURCH, AND EVANGELIZATION

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**H**esitancies and concerns notwithstanding, the Church—like it or not—has taken up widespread efforts to integrate herself into our digital age. We have only to look at World Youth Day 2013 for an example of the importance of social media in the life of the Church. The Office of the Apostolic Penitentiary decreed indulgences could be granted, provided the normal requisite conditions were met, for participation in World Youth Day 2013 through “the new means of social communication,” a.k.a. social media. This decision, worthy of a theological reflection of its own, implicitly acknowledges the growing role of social media as a crossroads of communication. Social media—a place for the exchange of ideas—provides an opportunity for encountering not only Christian perspectives, which contribute in an essential way to the development of cultures and societies, but also Christ Himself. This essay, which examines principally the conciliar decree *Inter Mirifica*, seeks to draw out of the document perennial principles which will inspire further theological reflection on the use of social media as we now know it, particularly within a three-fold schematic, namely, formation, participation and evangelization.

### CHALLENGES AND CONCERNS

**R**esponsible consideration of the developments in social communication must adequately investigate the legitimate concerns posed by many, and indeed—to an extent—anticipated by the Council Fathers themselves. Firstly, some might be concerned about the very idea of members of the Church’s hierarchy teaching how to best actualize media. Wary of a fiasco on par with Senator Stevens’s 2006 speech about the internet (wherein he famously

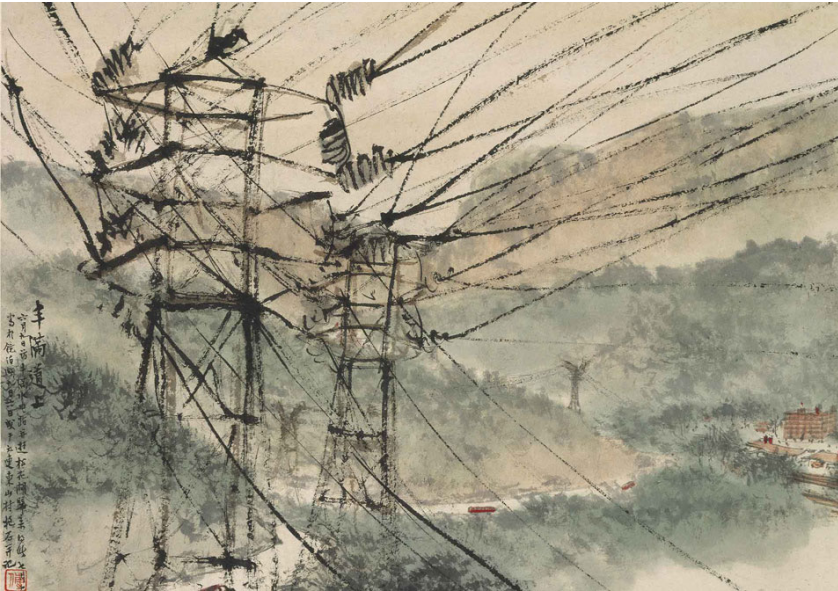
likened the internet to “a series of tubes,” thereby allowing detractors to effortlessly decry his position as “obsolete” and “out of touch”), some claim our bishops and cardinals should leave well enough alone and allow other experts to address current issues pertaining to internet-based social media platforms. This position is often quoted in tandem with the accusation that the Catholic Church is out of touch with the times.

Pope Paul VI promulgated *Inter Mirifica* on 4 December 1963 making the document one of the very first two texts propagated by the Council. Opposition had been raised amongst the fathers themselves by a voiced apprehension that the document might fail to meet the expectations of media experts. If critics found the document wanting, the whole authority of the Council might have been called into question. On November 25th the proposed draft had received a resounding 503 “no” votes, the most of the Council for a final draft. During the conciliar editorial process, much of the document had been heavily redacted, making its final form only twenty-four paragraphs long. Ultimately its authority was reduced from its inception as a constitution to its promulgated form: a decree.

Many voice a second major concern about social media in general, namely, that it diminishes a healthy sense of reality. Experts continue to debate the effects social communications have on culture, but suffice it to say that it seems a generally held consensus that social media contributes to a growing sense of anonymity. Under such a guise, people perceive a greater liberty to express themselves without civility, engage more freely in immoral behavior, and engage in more transient or superficial relationships. Many psychological theories of new communications media challenge the social or interpersonal aspect of these media.

Thirdly, since the time of *Inter Mirifica*, the realm of social communications has changed radically. Once a highly professionalized field limited to those with specialized skills

requiring an advanced training, now significant means of communication are available to anyone with some basic computer training at the touch of a mouse. The democratization of communication allows many to use social platforms like Twitter, share a status update on Facebook, or run a blog. Whereas once social communication required high investment, considerable instruction and, oftentimes, the support of an institution, now



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social communications can be employed from an iPad at the neighborhood coffee shop. Tracing religious authorities and the official weight of theological pronouncements can be more difficult, and peddling Christianity among other worldviews in this new web-based marketplace risks undermining the uniqueness of Christianity and reducing its claims to truth.

## PERRENIAL PRINCIPLES

The details of twenty-first-century cyber communication were not imagined by the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council, who—surprisingly enough—employed the term social communications in conciliar decrees and constitutions. During the Council (1962–1965), social communications referred to the mass-media available in those days, i.e., newspapers, radio, television and cinema. But many may be surprised to learn that the Second Vatican Council was remarkable in the way it addressed these new developments in communication which would come to define the social revolution leading up to our own day. In addition to listing newspapers, radio, television, and cinema, the Council Fathers also included the phrase “and others of a like nature.” By drawing on the term “nature,” widely utilized by the Christian philosophical and theological tradition, the Council broadened the horizon of the document and directed further conversation by means of philosophical and theological application.

What then is the nature of the means of social communications? One principle culled from a close reading of *Inter Mirifica* underlines that the Church philosophically treats media as instruments. In fact, the word *instrumentum* is used for the word media in the Latin text of the document. Since an instrument is a means for an end, it is beneficial to recall that an instrument does not of itself have a moral quality. Instruments require movers to direct them, and thus they can be used for good or for ill depending on the circumstances in which they are used or the goal to which they are directed. Accordingly *Inter Mirifica* allows that although the means of social communications may be misused, they also provide the chance to bring about much good.

*Inter Mirifica* advocates for a world of social communications filled by good and respectable amusements as well as the honest and objective communication of news. A Church which actively engages social media does not mean all social media outlets necessarily become virtual monasteries. Social media will still be

used for advertisements, communications of a familial or personal nature or simply for entertainment. Instead, what *Inter Mirifica* insists upon is that pastors of souls instruct and lead the faithful in the ways of employing these media for the “salvation and perfection of all mankind.” The laity then are tasked with animating social media with both the “Christian” and truly “human” spirit. Not only then may social media be used for the betterment of society broadly speaking, but Christians themselves have a duty to engage in the building up of the best of Christian culture in the new media.

**T**he Fathers of the Council uphold that the civil authorities likewise have a duty to “ensure that public morality and social progress are not gravely endangered through the use of these media” and that public officials should “foster religious, cultural and artistic values.” Furthermore, “the news itself that is communicated should always be true and complete [...] In addition, the manner in which the news is communicated should be proper and decent.” These three principles for society at large do not limit the freedom of persons or groups since such vigilance safeguards or even encourages freedom for excellence. Rather than suffocating natural inclinations, these principles establish a framework for true freedom. This freedom for excellence springs forth from its natural root in men through the perceptions of truth, goodness, knowledge, and happiness. Under such terms and conditions, the full actualization and even perfection of man occur.

#### THEOLOGY AND SOCIAL MEDIA

**S**ince Paul VI the roman pontiffs have spoken often about social communication, and indeed, directly on the subject of internet-hosted social media. An annual communiqué (delivered on World Communication Day, itself instituted as a practical recommendation of *Inter Mirifica*) promulgated by the Holy Father forms the backbone of this continued attention. Additionally the Pontifical Council for Social Communication—

whose roots antedate the Council—has contributed at length to the discussion surrounding “ethics for the internet.” What could greatly contribute to the present state of the discussion is a more comprehensive, primarily theological, schematization drawing from the wellspring of *Inter Mirifica*. The following attempts the beginning of what such an outline might include.

#### FORMATION

**M**indful of the lasting effects of original sin, *Inter Mirifica* accentuates the need for true moral formation. In order for users of both traditional and the new social media to not neglect the moral life, they must be well-informed regarding both the quality of the content they imbibe, but they also must be up-to-date regarding current moral issues. Therefore, all who utilize means of social communication must have consciences particularly attuned to the challenges to the Christian moral life which these media will repeatedly put before them. Users must also be able to rely on virtues like prudence (to induce right reason to action) or temperance, which includes humility (particularly valuable in discourse) and chastity. True moral formation will allow the perilous waters of the media (especially the new social media) to be negotiated with facility. Echoing *Inter Mirifica*, it must be repeated that parents have the particular task to protect their children from morally harmful media as well as to educate their children to use these media responsibly.

#### PARTICIPATION

**B**l. Pope John Paul II writes in *Redemptoris Missio*, “Since the very evangelization of modern culture depends to a great extent on the influence of the media, it is not enough to use the media simply to spread the Christian message and the Church’s authentic teaching. It is also necessary to integrate that message into the ‘new culture’ created by modern communications.” The new languages,

techniques and psychologies of the web demand a unique form of integration, rather than the establishment of parallel ecclesial systems and structures. Here, under the aspect of participation, one might address the need for internet fluency, artistic integrity, and technical merit. Efforts made by the Church or on her behalf that fail in these respects seem more likely to hinder rather than bolster Christian culture. Moreover, many of those who are less familiar with social media platforms on the web often succumb to the illusion that by simply launching an initiative they have managed to “speak to the masses.” Like traditional media, web-based projects must be promoted if they are to succeed.

There is much room for growth here! For example, a 2012 CARA survey reveals that of the sixty-eight percent of adult Catholics who report using YouTube (among millennials, born 1982 or later, eighty-four percent) only six percent report having watched religious content. Perhaps even more startling is the statistic reporting that only five percent of American Catholics (i.e., only 2.9 million persons) have read a blog about “the Catholic Church, faith or spirituality.” Among those who do not visit Catholic websites, forty-three percent describe their reason for not using them as “not interested,” while only six percent report “disagreement with Church teaching.” Investing both money and energy in endeavors of high artistic caliber and technical excellence remains the most important piece of participation in the culture of the internet age.

**A**ppreciation of social media cannot be reserved to the youth of a rising generation or those persons with technical expertise. The new media must reflect the entire Church community: the experiences of men and women in their daily lives in certain places and circumstances. These media must, in a particular way, be put to use to disseminate the truths of Church teaching. Those charged with teaching offices in the Church, then, ought to respond by drawing on their authority as teachers to shape media content so as to accurately reflect Church teaching. By their participation, they impose a much needed digital *imprimatur*, based on the content

they share. Additionally, the recent acquisition by the Pontifical Council of Social Communications of the .catholic domain name—reserved for the exclusive use of entities with formal canonical recognition, e.g. dioceses, parishes, religious orders and Catholic institutions—will promote a more organized, cohesive and official internet presence of the Church. The pastors of the Church, entrusted with the sacred duty of endeavoring to permeate all of society with the Gospel message, can have a significant impact by the institution of appropriate projects and the dedication of resources to further participation.

#### EVANGELIZATION

**I**n our age, when many believe that the time of certainties is forever lost to former days, the Gospel remains desperately needed by society. Simultaneously, however, undertaking efforts of evangelization may appear thwarted by virtually insurmountable obstacles. Many of the advances in recent technology may be used to great benefit for intra-ecclesial communication and organization. However, social media by its design lends itself to facile adaptation for the work of evangelization. The framework of building relationships (acquiring friends and followers) and the ability to easily share information by passing on links to webpages, quotes or video provide a simple way for laypersons and clerics alike to offer an invitation to encounter Christ to an acquaintance or coworker.

That being said, many Catholic efforts could extend their reach by being more wholly directed to this work of evangelization. Broadly speaking, websites and social media outlets need to be oriented toward evangelization both in terms of content and design so as to be amenable to those outside of the Church. For example, many dioceses or affiliated Catholic institutions have websites more reflective of corporate or functional structures instead of favoring engaging artwork, sleek design, or accessible audio and video which are more evangelically engaging.



## CONCLUSION

The Church, as asserted by *Inter Mirifica*, has a birthright to employ communication media for the benefit of souls. The great commission, “Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations” (Mt 28:19), impels Christians to go forth to win souls for Christ. Changes in technological media pose no irresolvable ideological or theological problems for Catholics, and, as such, it will not do for Christians to ignore the “signs of the times.” To maximize Catholic Christian use of the media, we must further efforts pertaining to formation, participation and evangelization. Under formation (in terms of Christian morality) we will simultaneously protect our children and plant the seed for efforts to further the work of the Kingdom in the future. By investing in participation (in terms of preservation and dissemination of Christ’s teaching entrusted to the Church), the Church will remain a prophet in, but not of, the world. Finally, through constantly assessing our evangelical orientation, the Church will continue along the path of saving souls, which is of course the only path that matters.

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