Virtual Preaching:
The New Evangelization in the New Normal

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Abstract: The events following the Second Vatican Council have affirmed the advantages of using social communication as a means for evangelization. The Church formally recognized, although not without its dangers, that media can serve as a modern-day "Areopagus" in which the preaching of the Gospel can be amplified. Furthermore, prompted by the needs of the time, the Roman Pontiffs beginning from Paul VI up to the present have called for a "New Evangelization" that would respond to the challenges of secularization by proclaiming the Good News through new and creative means. The unprecedented worldwide disaster brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic has only cemented the use of social communications in the life and liturgy of the Church more permanently. However, this moment of tragedy can be regarded as an opportunity for grace and transformation so that the Gospel can find new life in virtual seeds. Virtual preaching, which employs social communications as its primary tool, is thus an authentic and effective way of New Evangelization in the New Normal.

Keywords: Virtual Preaching, New Normal, New Evangelization, Social Communications

Introduction

I n an age of digital technocracy, the Church is compelled to enter what we now refer to as the "virtual world." Gone were the days when solid structures and models held exclusive dominion over all facets of society. The advent of social media has largely contributed to the establishment of this virtual world, and

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while the Church has long considered the irreversible effects of this technocratic empire for better or for worse,[1] she continues to grapple with the challenges brought about by the rapid societal change it engenders.

The COVID-19 pandemic, ushering in the New Normal phase, has only oxymoronically solidified this fluid reality not only in the lives of the people, but also in the mission and ministry of the Church. The Sacraments, which are meant to be visible and tangible signs of inward and invisible grace, have now found recourse to the internet in order to get to people isolated in their homes. Although this has undoubtedly maximized the reach of parishes into the domestic church, we are still to find out the effects of "virtualizing" the already spiritual reality of the Sacraments.

This paper is divided into three parts: Part 1: "The Church and the New Evangelization," will look into the doctrinal foundation of the Church's engagement in the digital media. It will also review the Church's teachings on social communication and its call for the New Evangelization. Part II: "Virtual Preaching in the New Normal," will explore the different methods and genres of preaching available in social networking sites and platforms. Here, we shall also discuss how evangelization through media addresses the needs of preaching today, including the limitations and challenges it entails. Lastly, Part III: "A Contemplative Gaze," will evaluate the implications of these modes of preaching and how it affects the Church, particularly the youth. Without any pretense of being exhaustive, this paper only aims to provide a rough sketch and an updated theological reflection on the scheme of the New Evangelization within the New Normal.

Finally, before we begin, the title "virtual preaching" may appear ambiguous and even avant-garde to say the least, requiring preliminary explanation. In this paper, it will be used loosely in two senses: a) It may refer to traditional preaching, i.e., a sermon or message spoken verbally that is delivered online or virtually;[2] b) It may include any activity or content that aims to communicate Christ and to spread his message through whatever means (music, pictures, videos) that can be easily shared with the use of social communications.[3]

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[1] See "Inter Merifica," in Church & Social Communication, edited by Franz-Josef Eilers, SVD, (Manila: Logos, 2014), 92-98.

[2] John Paul Arceno further distinguishes this into two: Passive Virtual Preaching and Dynamic Virtual Preaching. See "Virtual Preaching: A Digital Theology," John & Paul's Reflections, Sept. 22, 2021, (accessed Aug. 10, 2022), https://johnpaularceno.com/2021/09/22/virtual-preaching-a-digital-theology/.

[3] The second sense is derived from the way virtual preachers see their online apostolate. See Lucille Sodipe and Mikhail Flores, "Catholic priests in the Philippines turn TikTok into a virtual pulpit," Philippine Star, April 23, 2021, (accessed Aug. 10, 2022), https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2021/04/23/2093267/catholic-priests-philippines-turn-tiktok-virtual-pulpit.

The Church And The New Evangelization

The New Evangelization

The term "New Evangelization" was first used by Paul VI in his 1975 apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi,* and has continued to be used by his successors.[4] It reimagines the Church preaching the same Gospel message while being "new in ardor, new in methods, and new in expressions."[5] Though generally, it is still aimed at people who have not yet encountered Jesus' message of salvation, it is largely directed to those who have already been baptized but have lost the fire of the Gospel and zeal for their faith.[6] "The New Evangelization [is] directed principally at those who, though baptized, have drifted away from the Church and live without reference to the Christian life... [It's meant] to help these people encounter the Lord, who alone fills our existence with deep meaning and peace; and to favor the rediscovery of the faith."[7]

Furthermore, the New Evangelization not only seeks to illumine the peoples with the light of faith, but other cultures and domains as well. This is where the virtual world enters. Benedict XVI understood that media "is a powerful tool for communicating ideas, stories, and influencing humanity."[8] Scott Hahn further elaborates that the arrival of social media, together with the increasing reach of alternative media, has changed the playing field of evangelizing. "Catholics now have more tools than ever before to tell our story and proclaim the Gospel – which is why both supporting and using those tools is critical."[9] He adds that by maximizing the use of social media like Facebook and Twitter, "we contribute to the New Evangelization, enabling the infinite richness of the Gospel to find forms of expression capable of reaching the minds and hearts of all."[10]

The Church on the Use of Social Media

The events following Vatican II led to many fruitful reflections on the impact of media in the lives of the faithful. The term "social communication"[11] under which

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[4] John Paul II in *Redemptoris Missio*; Benedict XVI in his motu proprio *Ubicumque et Semper,* wherein he established the new office "Pontifical Council for Promotion of the New Evangelization" in the Roman Curia; and Francis in *Lumen Fidei* and *Evangelii Gaudium*.

[5] John Paul II, *Ecclesia in America,* 6.

[6] John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, 33.

[7] Pope Benedict XVI, "Homily at opening of Synod on the New Evangelization," Oct. 7, 2012, (accessed May 24, 2021) http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/homilies/2012/documents/hf_ben-xvi_hom_20121007_apertura-sinodo.html.

[8] Scott Hahn, Evangelizing Catholics, (Indiana: Our Sunday Visitor, 2014) 113.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Ibid.

[11] A broad term first coined in the Council Decree titled "*Inter Merifica,*" it expresses not only

the digital world and social networks fall was first coined, formally recognizing the importance of technology as a means to spread the Gospel. The Council Decree "*Inter Merifica*" expresses it in its opening sentences:

> Among the wonderful technological discoveries which men of talent, especially in the present era, have made with God's help, the Church welcomes and promotes with special interest those which have a most direct relation to men's minds and which have uncovered new avenues of communicating most readily news, views, and teachings of every sort.[12]

Since its release, the decree has been backed by numerous Church documents, some giving stern warnings, though unanimously affirming the benefit of social communication in the process of evangelization.[13] In other words, it is no longer a matter of disputation whether the Church should employ such means for the propagation of Christ's message to all peoples. "Technology is becoming embedded in every facet of society"[14] and the Church needs to welcome such tools to remain an effective contender in the global village. The power of digital platforms particularly magnified by the increased virtual activities of people during this pandemic cannot be ignored.[15]

Echoing the call to give witness to the Gospel in the virtual world, the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) based in Georgetown University recognizes that "the challenge for the Church in this second decade of the twenty-first century is to reach more Catholics outside of this core which is more often populated by infrequent Mass attenders and a sizeable number of millennials who use technology and new media but who say they are not interested enough in Catholic content to seek it out."[16] In a 2012 survey, it found out that while 62 percent of adult Catholics in the United States have a Facebook account which climbs up to 82 percent among millennials,[17] 53 percent are still unaware of the significant presence of the Church online.[18]

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the technical means of translation but also the communication process involved between and among people. See *Church & Social Communication*, edited by Franz-Josef Eilers, SVD, (Manila: Logos, 2014).

[12] Ibid., 92.

[13] Some noteworthy documents which mention the use of media are as follows: *Miranda Prosus* (Sept. 8, 1957); *Communio et Progressio* (May 23, 1971); *Aetatis Novae* (Feb. 22, 1992), which emphasized the impact of media and communication in modern life while highlighting the importance of pastoral planning and formation of media personnel; Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi:* (Dec. 8, 1975); "Ethics in Internet," (Feb. 22, 2002); and "The Church and Internet," (Feb. 22, 2002).

[14] Justin Wise, *The Social Church: A Theology of Digital Communication,* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2014) 84.

[15] Justine Renus F. Galang and Willard Enrique R. Macaraan, "Digital Apostleship: Evangelization in the New Agora," in *Religions*, 12: 92, (2021) 9.

[16] Cited in Sean Salai, SJ, *Sharing Faith Online: A Guide to Digital Evangelization*, (New York: New City Press, 2022) 25.

[17] Ibid., 33.

[18] Ibid., 25.

Consequently, the Church has also long maintained that ethical principles must be upheld in engaging such ministries. "If media are to be correctly employed, it is essential that all who use them know the principles of the *moral order* and apply them faithfully in this domain."[19] Suffice to say that the Church understands media and the internet as something good, but not without its dangers and limitations.

Virtual Preaching in The New Normal

Incarnating the Word in the Virtual World

When we speak of "virtual preaching," it could mean anything from doing catechetical, biblical and even liturgical preaching specifically intended to be aired online. We may also refer to it as a method of preaching that thinks outside the box. Social media platforms like Instagram, YouTube, Twitter, Facebook and even applications like TikTok can all be utilized for the sake of evangelization. In this second sense, we use the term "virtual" as signifying something that is included within a phenomenon or experience even though it is not explicitly or verbally expressed.

Posting a picture of a beautiful sunrise or a flower in bloom or even a dance number can convey God's message of love and joy even without a single word being spoken. Although the means may be simple, passing, and even mundane, the aim is to remind the person of God's presence as he casually swipes his screen. Even for a moment, the person is taken out of his usual preoccupation and is brought into the thought, if not the presence, of God.

Social media is a powerful tool because of its appeal to the senses, primarily (but not exclusively) its visual character. Aquinas points out that "the sight is a cause like that from which a movement has its beginning, inasmuch as the beholder on seeing the lovable object receives an impression of its image, which entices him to love it and to seek its delight."[20] Likewise, Pope Benedict XVI said in his first encyclical that "contact with the *visible* manifestations of God's love can awaken within us a feeling of joy born of the experience of being loved."[21]

A team of MIT researchers in 2014 found out that "the human brain interprets visual images in only thirteen milliseconds, or eight times faster than recorded in earlier studies."[22] Moreover, the new findings of the recent study explain why visual social media (like Instagram and Pinterest) have eclipsed text-bases platforms like

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[19] *Inter Merifica,* 4.

[20] S.*Th.* I, q. 36, a. 6.

[21] *Deus Caritas Est,* No. 17, Dec. 25, 2005, (accessed Aug. 12, 2022), (emphasis mine), https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20051225_deus-caritas-est.html.

[22] Taken from Meredith Gould, *The Social Media Gospel*, 2nd Edition, (Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2013) 21.

blogging, "and why adding images to tweets and Facebook posts significantly boosts engagement."[23] Generally, the youth (Millennials and Gen-Z are both digital natives) have a particular preference for visual platforms.[24]

There are two concrete ways in which the Word becomes "incarnated" in the virtual world particularly during the pandemic.[25] The first is through charitable activities and initiatives led by different Church organizations that uses social media as a means to raise awareness regarding dire situations and give financial assistance to those who are most affected by the worldwide disaster.[26] On top of such relief efforts, the Holy Father also affirms that the digital world can be a place for genuine sharing and listening so that the Church can reach out and be present to the flock: "There is indeed much to be done to learn how to listen; and to engage and train young, digital natives who are able to revitalize parish websites."[27] If "God is love," as St. John writes (1 Jn. 4:16), then we can insist that Christ becomes truly present among those who live in charity and gather in his name (Matt. 18:19–20) even in the virtual domain.

The second and more profound way of "incarnating" the Word in the virtual world is none other than the streaming of online Masses. Although the Church is clear that "there are no sacraments on the Internet"[28] and that online participation can never replace in-person attendance of the liturgical celebration, watching or listening to online Eucharistic celebrations still has spiritual benefits.[29] Ocampo argues "that while contact with the cosmic elements of the liturgy is the ordinary route by which God communicates sacramental grace, God's action in our souls is not altogether impeded by the absence of this contact even in the sacramental context."[30] Indeed, Catholic sacramental theology can take root in this online milieu since it is hinged on the principle of God's mediated presence through visible, tangible elements of life.[31]

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[23] Ibid.

[24] Ibid.,18.

[25] It is obvious that the author does not use the term "incarnation" in the literal sense, but following Pope Benedict XVI, it connotes the "unprecedented realism" of Jesus' divine activity manifested through his work of mercy and self-sacrifice, emulated and shared by those in communion with him. See *Deus Caritas Est*, Nos. 12-14.

[26] Wendy-Ann Clarke, "Rise in digital donations a pandemic 'blessing'" The Catholic Register, January, 2022, (accessed Aug. 10, 2022), https://www.catholicregister.org/item/33925-rise-in-digital-donations-a-pandemic-blessing

[27] Benedict Mayaki, SJ, "Pope: 'Church in the Digital' offers tools for a Church also present online" Vatican News, June 20, 2022, (accessed Aug. 10, 2022), https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2022-06/pope-france-church-in-the-digital-book-fabio-bolzetta.html.

[28] *The Church and Internet*, No. 9.

[29] For a more thorough discussion on this, see Leo-Martin Angelo R. Ocampo, "Cybergrace in Cyberspace? An Argument for Online Liturgies in Light of COVID-19," in *Landas,* Vol. 32, No. 2, (2019); "Catholic Liturgical Teleparticipation Before and During the Pandemic, and Questions for the New Normal," in *Religion and Social Communication*, Vol. 19 No. 1, (2021) 35-72.

[30] Ibid., 30.

[31] Daniella Zsupan-Jerome, *Connected Toward Communion: The Church and Social Communication in the Digital Age*, (Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2014) 60.

New Ways to Preach

At present, there are numerous Christian pages and sites online that aim to spread the faith in manifold ways. In 2020, following the early months of the COVID-19 outbreak, the digital presence of the Church has only heightened, with more Masses and liturgies aired online. Although we intend to refrain from merely enumerating such ministries in this paper, it would be more worthwhile to give an explanation of the Church's increasing presence in the virtual domain. And while most examples are already available even before the pandemic, it cannot be denied that their importance has only become more apparent because of the New Normal setup.

Sunday Devotionals and Online Gospel Reflections

The most popular form of virtual preaching that existed even in the pre-pandemic era is the Sunday Devotionals such as "The Word Exposed" by Jesuit Communications, "Break Time" by the University of Santo Tomas, "Predicar" by Colegio de San Juan de Letran, and the Sunday sermons of Bishop Robert Barron. In the months following the community quarantine, many priests and bishops opted to repost their homilies extracted from online Mass recordings. This allowed the faithful to draw spiritual nourishment from the Word of God all the more since sermons and gospel reflections have become easier to find.

Online Concerts and Programs

One of the earliest and most active production at the start of the New Normal is the rise of online concerts and music videos. Examples of such programs are "Gracias: Awit ng Pasasalamat at Paghilom," organized by the Dominican Province of the Philippines, and "Mga Awit ng Paghilom" by the Jesuits. Though most of such online concerts served as fundraising events, they also became a form of prayer and preaching ministry that aimed to elicit hope during the initial outbreak of the coronavirus disease.

Podcasts and Vlogs

A proliferating mode of virtual preaching is the many vlogs and podcasts on Facebook and YouTube. Examples of such vlogs are "Sharing from the City" by Fr. Virgilio Ojoy, OP, "The Bible in a Year" by Fr. Mike Schmitz, "Pints With Aquinas" by Matt Fradd, and "Breaking in the Habit" by Fr. Casey Cole, OFM. Having a much longer duration (even lasting for an hour or so), podcasts and vlogs are online conversations tackling issues related to faith, religion and society.

Because of its lengthy character, one of the key features of vlogs and podcasts is its constancy. Social media makes "it easier for [people] to engage in the consistent, ongoing interaction generally required for full membership in a community."[32] Many people are drawn to such productions because of the continuity of the program which they can look forward to every week. Thus, such conversations create followers and subscribers, small communities that are "hooked" on the program as long as the topic remains relevant and intriguing for them. Conversely, "inactivity or sporadic activity online ultimately reduces visibility, reach, and influence."[33]

Catechetical Videos and Films

Due to the short attention span of netizens in the digital age exacerbated by the different advertisements which are all competing for attention, bite-sized catechetical videos and reflections have become in vogue. Examples of these are "Kape't Pandasal" by Jesuit Communications, "FullTank" by Bo Sanchez, "Rix the Seminarian" by Sem. Emmanuel Macrohon, and "FAQs: Father Answers Questions" by the University of Santo Tomas. Because these videos tend to be shorter, their production may be done periodically since they do not need continuity to gain a following.

Short online films and anthologies like "Tugon" and "Tres" produced by the Dominican Students' Media Center and online theatrical performances like "Sinakulo 2021: Kami'y Isugo Mo" convey faith-stories that inspire people and instill Christian values in the public sphere. The power of film provides a modern presentation of biblical narratives, making it easier for the people of today to identify themselves in such stories and accept them as their own. The Word of God is more effectively transmitted when presented in a new and contemporary light.

Many more examples fall under the second sense of virtual preaching which we cannot elaborate here. Briefly put, virtual paraliturgies like "Ang Pagdungaw ng Mahal na Ina" of Our Lady of La Naval which started on April 12, 2020, online expositions of the Blessed Sacrament, Rosary Hour, and aired deliverance prayers conducted by authorized exorcists in different parishes also fall under virtual preaching and provide spiritual support during the New Normal, spreading God's grace which cuts across all space and time.

The Virtual Church

At the beginning of the new millennium, John Paul II expressed his concern about the world becoming "increasingly diversified and demanding, in the context

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[32] Meredith Gould, *The Social Media Gospel,* 2nd Edition, (Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2013) 27.
[33] Anthony Le Duc, SVD, "Religious Engagement in the COVID-19 Pandemic," in *Religion and Social Communication*, Vol. 19 No. 1, (2021) 11.

of 'globalization' and of the consequent new and uncertain mingling of peoples and cultures."[34] One of the advantages of creating a virtually present Church is that it strengthens the community of believers, allowing them to share their beliefs in the public forum. It is a stage in which the Christian message can become a forceful voice. This "cyberchurch" is "not a different parallel ecclesiastical structure but an extension or component that is significantly contributive towards the full realization of the Church as a whole."[35] As Gould points out:

> Virtual community is real community… the process by which individuals form groups that eventually coalesce into communities is the same online and off. Social media simply shifts time-tested principles of community development to a more fluid, broader, and faster-moving environment.[36]

It must be noted that the digital world is not an ecclesial domain. The Church is only a single entity among the many parties vying for recognition to get their "product" sold. "Every activity in church, with the possible exception of the Sunday morning worship service, requires intentional, repeated, consistent marketing."[37] "Church communicators often have to maneuver around the particularities or peculiarities of church culture that block access to secular ways and means of communicating."[38] Gould asserts that going against these secular communication tactics and tools is absurd. "Church culture itself creates obstacles to communications by over-determining how to articulate faith as well as how to define stewardship and participation."[39]

However, when religious programs are developed online only for the sake of gaining more viewers and positive feedback, evangelization is reduced into a mere advertising scheme. Wise observes that "translation preferences, online campuses, programs and events, podcasts, and even church attendance are subject to personalization."[40] People have more liberty in choosing which church to go or which pastor to listen to.[41] He argues that this could usher in an era wherein "Christians simply omit the truths of Christianity they find unfavorable and oblige those they find palatable."[42] Though personalization can allow content creators to

[34] John Paul II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte,* January 6, 2001, (accessed May 27, 2021), https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/2001/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_20010106_novo-millennio-ineunte.html.

[35] Galang and Macaraan, "Digital Apostleship: Evangelization in the New Agora," 9.

[36] Meredith Gould, *The Social Media Gospel*, 30, 33.

[37] Yvon Prehn, *Ministry Marketing Made Easy: A Practical Guide to Marketing Your Church Message,* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004) 54.

[38] Meredith Gould, *The Word Made Fresh*: *Communicating Church and Faith Today,* (Morehouse Publishing, 2008) 61.

[39] Ibid.

[40] Wise, *The Social Church,* 84.

[41] Ibid.

[42] Ibid., 85.

"fully express the work of God" in their lives,[43] what is needed is "to create and curate content in the joyful hope of sharing the Gospel, ministering to others and developing community."[44] Furthermore, personality-centered ministries may neglect the fact that their apostolate is a work of the entire Church and not only for their individual promotion or gain. "For what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake," (2 Cor. 4:5).

A Contemplative Gaze

> *Prisoners of a virtual reality, we lost the taste and flavor of the truly real.*
> -Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti* 33

Content Over Creativity

Because of the ever-thinning line between the material and digital world, proper formation and guidelines must be provided for Christian content-creators so that they may be informed about the limitations and dangers of virtual preaching. Communications ministries "must be organized to include processes that (1) attract and retain qualified individuals; (2) manage human and financial resources responsibly, and (3) build faith among participants, paid as well as volunteer."[45]

Unfortunately, despite its glaring necessity, such ministries "land with volunteers at the parish level because communications is not perceived as priority."[46] In addition to this, "the virtual preacher has to contend with 'new' voices that engage the attention of the people, which quite often offer them an alternative, attractive 'gospel.'"[47] Fostering digital creativity must be done so that the preacher will have the ability to partake in the process of sharing the contents of the faith which leads to the understanding, appropriation, and reproposition of the Gospel in every generation.[48] Gould adds:

> Church materials and media relations end up being only 'good enough' when industry standards remain unknown or ignored. Today, even unsophisticated messages are delivered by sophisticated means. As a result, church audiences are less likely to forgive substandard communications efforts.[49]

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[43] Ibid.

[44] Gould, *The Social Media Gospel,* 52.

[45] Gould, *The Word Made Fresh*, 76.

[46] Ibid., 78.

[47] Gavin Rodrigues, OP & Daniel D'Souza, OP, "Living the Vision of St. Dominic," in *Dominican Ashram,* Vol. 2, No.1, (March, 2020) 27.

[48] See Danela Zsupan-Jerome, "Creative Communication: Digital Creativity and Theology in Dialogue," in *New Theology Review*, 26, No. 2, (April 2014), 80-87.

[49] Meredith Gould, *The Word Made Fresh,* 56.

Much analysis is needed on the question of how deep the Gospel message actually penetrates the hearts and minds of the audience. Because of the "one-hit-wonder" character of most social media content, it is worthwhile to ask whether Christ's message really takes root whenever it is sown in virtual seeds. Today, one must be present online to be considered as relevant or even existing. Aside from the fact that the Church cannot control what comes in and out of the digital domain, it remains a challenge to let the netizens see her other treasures that virtual reality is incapable of showing.

Reality Check

Though not denying the many advantages that virtual preaching gives us, "the new technologies are also described as 'disruptive.'"[50] Excessive exposure and engagement in social media can also induce stress because, in addition to the preparation, it also demands giving responses to the audience. "The stress that this can unconsciously cause can make it more difficult to make time for important things such as prayer."[51]

Issues on privacy and confidentiality also arise because of the commodification and absolutization of information. For religious congregations, this may also pose problems on how the sanctity and secrecy of the cloister are maintained.[52] There are elements in religious life that are not meant for public consumption, and there are also activities and practices outside that must not invade the cloister. Pope Francis lamented in his most recent encyclical:

> Today we can recognize that 'we fed ourselves on dreams of splendor and grandeur, and ended up consuming distraction, insularity, and solitude. We gorged ourselves on networking, and lost the taste of fraternity. We looked for quick and safe results, only to find ourselves overwhelmed by impatience and anxiety.[53]

He warns against the tendency, especially of the young, to resort to the virtual world in order to escape reality. This escapism also strengthens the inclination "already operating to privatize and individualize our lives."[54] Francis adds: "It worries me that they communicate and live in the virtual world… we have to make young

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[50] Vivian Boland, OP, "Challenges Facing the Order of Preachers Today," in *Dominican Ashram* (September, 2018) 33.

[51] Michel Remery, *Tweeting With God,* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2014) 414.

[52] Vivian Boland, OP, "Challenges Facing the Order of Preachers Today," 34.

[53] Francis, *Fratelli Tutti,* No. 33, Oct. 20, 2020, (accessed May 27, 2020), https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html.

[54] Vivian Boland, OP, "Challenges Facing the Order of Preachers Today," 34.

people 'land' in the real world. Touch reality. Without destroying the good things the virtual world can have."[55]

Contemplatively Virtual

Because of the virtual hijacking of digital platforms over the real world, a downside of this fact is the "artificiality" of preaching. The preacher is no longer connected to the natural world and falls victim to the traps of consumerism.[56] The oversaturation of the senses to unrealistic advertisements and sounds stultifies us and renders us unable "to restore the intellectual and emotional relationship between the given image and an ancient text, known, loved and believed."[57] Caccamo notes that technology and media are not only instruments that are used and controlled by humanity; they also possess an interior formative function which has the power to control and influence its users.[58] Canceran puts it thus: "Technology constitutes the user… [it] not only affects the user but transforms him or her in the process or in the activity."[59]

In other words, the virtual reality that is forced in each culture may distort our perception of actual reality and impede our ability to gaze contemplatively. "In the competition between websites, newspapers and TV programs, it is very tempting for journalists to opt for sensationalism."[60] The hyperactivity and obsession promoted by the technocratic world prevent people from verifying facts that also impacts our aptitude for contemplation.

Aquinas defines contemplation as "the simple act of gazing on the truth."[61] The fast-paced and swirling world of social media prevents us from paying attention to profound and lasting truths that are more essential to our lives. Stepnowski instructs that "in fostering contemplation in the digital age, the answer is neither to retreat from the world nor to cut off the electricity but to engage the world by articulating the challenges and offering an alternative mode of life and creativity."[62]

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[55] Hannah Brockhaus, *Pope Francis: Youth are lost in a 'virtual world', instead of reality,* May 14, 2018, (accessed May 27, 2021), https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/38399/pope-francis-youth-are-lost-in-a-virtual-world-instead-of-reality.

[56] Thomas More Stepnowski, OP, "Formation of the Imagination in an Age of Digital Technology: A Dominican Approach," in *Dominican Ashram,* Vol. 38, No. 2, (June 2019) 83.

[57] Timothy Vendon, "Biblical Texts and Medieval Faith: A Life-Giving Merger" *L'Osservatore Romano,* Oct 22, 2008, English ed: 12.

[58] James F. Caccamo, "What's in a Tech? Factors in Evaluating the Morality of Our Information and Communication Practices," in *Journal of Moral Theology*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (2015) 156.

[59] Delfo Cortina Canceran, OP, "Cybertechnology and Theology: An Uneasy Relationship," in *Landas,* 26:1 (2012) 42.

[60] Remery, *Tweeting With God*, 414.

[61] *S.Th.* II-II, q. 180, a. 3, ad. 1.

[62] Stepnowski, 88.

Thus, fostering a contemplative gaze that counters the artificial and technocratic imagination is imperative to virtual preaching. "Contemplation can assist the formation of the imagination by prioritizing and determining the object of the focus by enlarging the soul with a wider and deeper vision."[63] It remains of paramount importance to remember that the primary source of strength for virtual preaching (and any preaching for that matter) "is derived from our life of constant prayer, engaging study and vibrant community life lived in community of brothers having one mind and one heart."[64]

Conclusion

What does the New Evangelization mean for the citizens of the global village during the New Normal? In this paper, we have highlighted the Church's recognition of the necessity of establishing a solid ministry in the field of social communication. Although much theological reflection on the subject is still to be done, not to mention the vast impact of a virtual church in a digital world that is yet to be exposed, we could more or less recognize the Church's sincere and tangible efforts to allow the Word to take root even in the World Wide Web. Heeding the call of the Roman Pontiffs for the New Evangelization, the past Dominican General Chapters[65] presented these recurring priorities which are all considered equal in importance:

> First, evangelizing culture through philosophical and theological investigations of cultures, intellectual systems, and non-Christian religious traditions. Second, catechizing the de-Christianized world and secularized Christianity. Third, analyzing critically the origins, forms, and structures of injustice in contemporary society while initiating and supporting works of justice and peace for integral liberation of humankind. Fourth, using the *new means of social communications for preaching the word of God*.[66]

No one could have ever anticipated the tragedy of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the guidelines and preparations set by the Church and the Order in the Philippines has allowed the Church to be more flexible in the vicissitudes of our modern age. The global village is only getting more and more complex, and the need to find more and more creative ways to preach rises along with it.

Virtual preaching, whether it falls under the traditional style or through graphically creative means, must be backed by adequate formation and initiation to the ministry. "Communications should be an integral part of every pastoral plan, for it has something to contribute to virtually every other apostolate, ministry, and

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[63] Ibid., 91.
[64] Rodrigues & D'Souza, 27.
[65] Beginning in the General Chapter of 1977 in Quezon City.
[66] International Dominican Information (IDI), June 2013, Issue no. 515, 1-2. (Emphasis mine).

program,"[67] Furthermore, a life of contemplation must be promoted so that religious apostolates online would not fall from the side of the cute to the realm of the cringy.

Responding to the New Evangelization requires not only adopting new means and tools for preaching, but also a new zeal that comes from God's initiative and gratuity.[68] Most importantly, engagements in the digital ministry presuppose that preachers already foster a contemplative gaze which, aside from being in touch with nature and reality, should also be perceptive of the interior and supernatural realities of faith, seeing the presence of God in all things.[69] The power of the Spirit and the virtual preacher's life of contemplation will ensure that the seed planted in the soil of virtual reality will bear real and abundant spiritual fruits by bringing people closer to God. **PS**

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