Christianity and the Digital Age: Sustaining the Online Church

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Reading the signs of time is crucial to a changing world. From its birth on Pentecost Sunday in the year 33 to date, the Church has had her fair share of troubles. In most cases, she has had to either be conservative or progressive – her adherents who pretend to be in the middle often suffer backlash from critics. The conservative or progressive schools of thought signal change in the Church either in ecclesiology or doctrine. Apparently, one of such changes rocking the Church's boat is the world of Information and Communications Technology (ICT). Premised on these challenges, the researcher used the qualitative method to access the matter. The study discovered that given the circumstance, the Church is left with no option than to create and sustain an Online Church for reaching out to millions of Christians who are incapacitated while uniting a fragmented humanity. It was also discovered that New Media platforms are invaluable assets in breaking new grounds for evangelization. The paper discovered that pastors of souls should take advantage of the new media of communication and engage their faithful by not just creating an Online-Church but sustaining it.

Keywords: Age, church, communications, digital, online

INTRODUCTION

The conservative nature of the Christian faith is now faced with an irresistible digital culture which touches almost every aspect of human life (Zukowski, 2012). In our very eyes, "the world of dogmas" is caught up in a dynamism of scientific revolutions. In fact, a new world of questioning theological truths and submissions is unleashed upon us - no thanks to the internet. The internet has advantages as well as disadvantages. Be that as it may, the Church cannot fold her arms and watch business moguls, technocrats, captains of industries and information technology experts use this technology to their advantage. Despite its dangers, the world of Social Communications occasioned by a hype of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) offers the Church a sea of opportunities to propagate the faith. To be sure, modern media offers new opportunities for confronting people everywhere with

the message of the Gospel (Communio et Progressio, No. 128). Since the world of information technologies offers various opportunities, the Church can cash in on these avenues for greater pastoral exploits. This involves new strategies in line with the changing world.

This conceptual paper hopes to identify the potency of the new media as a catalyst for new evangelization not minding the danger it possesses to society. It makes a case for an Online Church in a digital age. Accordingly, the Church's interest in the media stems from her interest in the media of Social Communication (Pontifical Council for Social Communications, No. 1). It was Pope Paul VI who said, the Church "would feel guilty before the Lord" if it failed to use the media for evangelization (Apostolic Exhortation Evangelii Nuntiandi, No. 45).

The paper makes a case for an Online Church in the contemporary society given the dynamics of digital-technological explosion. This is why it behooves pastors of souls to take advantage of the new media of communication to engage their faithful. This does not just involve creating an Online-Church but sustaining it. As a matter of urgency, this crucial task must matter for all Christians.

There is an apparent crisis between faith and culture today. The culture of the Church is confronted by various cultures on the one hand and a digital culture on the other. This rift is gradually pulling the faithful from the reality of their faith and existence into mundane affairs which have little or no regard for God or the Church. That is not all - there is an unfolding of a new brand of Christianity which is kept in the pews while the flock feeds on the green pasture provided by new technologies and opportunities in a fast developing world.

Zukowski (2012) raises an alarm concerning young people who are caught up in the web of digitalization. She fears that more often, every aspect of their lives is affected by a cacophony of images, sounds, music as well as words which capture their imagination than the Church's own attempt to communicate the faith. When a pastor prolongs the service beyond an hour and thirty minutes, many people would complain but they can be on the internet the whole day without getting bored.

Since the digital media is seen as one of the primary sources of popular culture through films, advertisements, music, latest gadgets, and the like (Cloete, 2015), playing the ostrich as far as the digital age is concerned would be the undoing of the Church. Egere also points out the inability to accept the cyberspace as an authentic media for evangelization as one of the reasons militating against theologizing the cyberspace (2012).

This study is significant because through various means of communication today, the message of the gospel is able to not only reach vast numbers of people, but is able to pierce the conscience of each individual, implanting itself in his or her heart as though he or she were the only person being addressed, with all the person's most individual and personal qualities, which evokes an entirely personal adherence and commitment (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, No.45). It is a given that with the right attitude and usage, the means of communication are able to facilitate evangelisation processes towards a better appreciation of the Christian faith. This study seeks to enlighten Church leaders on the need for diversification in evangelisation strategies. It also hopes to enlighten the laity about the benefits of engaging in online-evangelisation.

Being a Christian or a custodian of the faith in the last three decades was easier than now. If we backdate this statement to the year 33 when the Church started (Ushistory.org, 2017), the result is likely going to be the same. Today, however, lay people take to the theological sciences up to doctorate level thus demystifying an erstwhile believe that only clerics can penetrate the deeps of theological truths. Similarly, everyone can access the internet who has a mobile connection and data powered by a smart phone or computer, to browse doctrinal issues. This means why we have to contend with a complex digital culture in its pastoral context.

The diverse theological interpretations on the internet today, ranging from the good, to the bad, causes confusion to less literate faithful. Most times, they are caught in-between the devil and the deep blue sea. It is not surprising to see believers who are supposed to be Christians arguing for abortion, euthanasia and other Anti-Christian teachings on the internet. What is more, it is common to find some members of the flock openly attacking Church policies or doctrines on the media.

The refusal of the people of God in the Catholic diocese of Ahiara, in Nigeria to accept Most Rev. Peter Peter Okpaleke as their bishop appointed by the Pope is a case in point. It is becoming increasingly worrisome to see pastors and priests openly attacking the Church's hierarchy based on either hierarchical or doctrinal issues. The three-year leadership tussle of the Assemblies of God Church in which the Supreme Court recently upheld the sack of the Church's General Overseer for violating Church rules is another scandal which was reported in the dailies (Eze, 2017). It is common place to find confidential ecclesiastical matters in national dailies or their online equivalent. No doubt, it is the internet which provides the leeway for such brazenness.

The advent of the internet with its attendant good of information-sharing, fostering relationships, enhancing commerce and scholarship as well as advancement in medical sciences has come with a force capable of either making or marring theological submissions. The earlier the Church understands that, the better.

The Church must, therefore, reflect on what Hjarvard (cited in Cloete, 2015) calls the implication of religion in a digital age namely:

- The media has become an important, if not primary source on religious issues.
- Religious experience and information are moulded according to the demands of popular genres.
- Media takes over many of the functions of institutionalized religion by giving spiritual guidance and moral orientation. (Hjarvard, cited in Cloete, 2015).

It is high time the Church responded to Hjarvard's submission for exploiting more avenues of engaging the media space with Christian values. This can be achieved

with a better understanding and appreciation of digital culture and its implication for the Church. We must realise that an Online-Church is a Church on virtual space which involves the use of the media of social communications Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Yahoo, Gmail, WhatsApp, Snapchat and the like to engage in propagation of the faith. This could be through the creation of Christian spirituality blogs, church-based Facebook pages, twitter handles, WhatsApp group chats and parish-bulk Short Message Services (SMSs) and Multimedia Messaging Services (MMS) to reach out to Christians who are incapacitated or those whose work would not permit them to join the Sunday worship.

This study hopes to enlighten Church leaders about the need for diversification of strategies for evangelisation. As it were, this diversification entails accessing Social Media as a veritable tool for reaching out to those who cannot be reached physically. It intends to also meet the youth in their comfort zone namely, in a terrain they are familiar with.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Understanding Digital Culture

In this study, Digital Culture is understood as the contemporary explosion of Information and Communication Technologies and how they affect the gathering and processing of information as well as human interactions, worldviews, beliefs and opinions. By placing *Inter Mirifica* (Decree on Mass Media) on the front burner at the first session of the Second Vatican Council, the Council Fathers set the Church in motion for embracing the digital culture (Sanders, 2015). This move was because of cultural shift which involves digital communication and the way it reshapes how we interact with another, form and maintain relationships and also gain knowledge and understanding (Jerome, 2014). The digital age offers the opportunity for a wider range of voices to contribute to conversations (Lewis, 2014). Describing this age of digital culture in an interview with *Relevant Magazine,* Kinnaman discloses that younger Christians today are living in what he describes as "Digital Babylon" which is in many ways similar to the kind of head-snapping change that Daniel and his peers experienced in Babylon namely – exposure to a broader world, immersion in a whole set of worldviews and beliefs and ideas about spirituality, relating on a regular basis with people who hold different views and perspectives about God, human meaning and flourishing (2015).

According to Lewis, the Church is now seeking to engage with digital culture – a space many spend a considerable amount of time daily (2014). Through ICT, digital culture is unleashing upon us new dimensions of interaction and social relationships. The concept of business and commerce has also changed because of the internet and smartphone technology. In a digital culture, a sea of opportunities is opened thanks to *multimediality* (the use of various media) and its tools. In the face of these advancements, if the Church still prefers analogue communication, she will no doubt be missing out.

Implications of an Online-Church

1. Decline in Church Attendance: There are fears that creating an Online Church would bring about decline in Church attendance. In countries like the United States of America, a study discovered that fewer people were going to Church because the rest are busy logging into internet (Fitzgerald, 2014). There is the tendency for some Christian faithful especially young to lazy about by not going to Church under the pretext that they can access the Church Service or prayers on mobile applications. The apparent media-mania, in which many people are often online almost twenty hours a day, seven days a week, creates a false sense of being comfortable with the "cyber-church" than the real Ecclesial Assembly of God's people.

2. Individual replaces Community: Social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Yahoo, Gmail, WhatsApp, Snapchat just to mention a few are privately-oriented. Aside from the false sense of community it creates through information sharing and communication with people we may not know or have seen, it appears that creating a "church" on cyberspace would further entrench individuality. The implication is, the individual replaces community (Tillich, 1958). In this case, the sense of a community is submerged in an individual's whims and caprices.

3. Gadgets without Human Interaction: Human communication through interpersonal and group communication is crucial to human existence. As it were, advocating for a sacred space on the internet seems to threaten basic human communication and interaction (Nilles, 2012). Since social media communication is often a private affair, the sense of real face to face communication appears endangered.

4. Subjectivity and Relativism: The advent of the internet has further advanced modern ideologies such as subjectivity and relativism (Garza, 2010). A person cannot operate the internet without a gadget, be it a Personal Computer (PC), mobile phone or other such appliances. The implication is that, the usage of these gadgets is subject to the user. For instance, it is up to a person to switch on their PC and phone or not. This implies that given the chance to thrive, it is likely that "parishioners" of the "cyber-church" may choose to be part of it or not at any given time.

5. Challenge of Internet Connection: Any human endeavour is subject to limitation. The interruption of

internet services could militate against a potentially vibrant Online Church (Egere, 2012). It is even more worrisome in Rural Africa where internet signals could disappear for days and weeks. What then becomes of the "faithful" who are looking forward to access the Word of God online?

Repackaging, Need for an Online-Church: Towards the Romance between Faith and Culture

No doubt the world is changing – as such, the Church cannot remain stagnant. As Timothy Cardinal Dolan of New York Archdiocese in the United States of America once said in an interview with the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) journalist, Christiane Amanpour, the Church cannot change the deposit of faith but she can change its packaging. He notes that the mission statement is to conserve, in the best sense of the word but that that does not mean we might not change the way it is presented (Krever, 2013). Interestingly, Holmes insists that as Christians, we don't have to water down our message in order to be effective in the digital culture (Holmes, 2015).

Communication experts understand the power of packaging in advertisement – the potency of a product lies in its finishing and packaging no matter how good the product is. As such, just as various pontiffs have noted in their World Communication Day Messages, the Church must take advantage of what the new media is offering. Interestingly, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI surprised the world in 2012 when he joined Twitter with the twitter handle @Pontifex. The *Pontifical Council for Social Communications* guided the Holy Father to the new and exciting platform of communication.

It is worth noting that Pope Francis has been very active in both broadcast and social media in his pontificate. The pope, who has given several media interviews, is known to speak in "sound bite" style phrases. He has 7.2 million Twitter followers. The exciting photos of young people taking selfies with Pope Francis tells the story more. Little wonder, he calls the internet, a "gift from God" (Lapowsky, 2015). According to a survey which was conducted in United States of America in 2015, 90% of pastors were said to be using a computer at Church while 39% agreed to using the same device to access the internet. The study noted that pastors confessed to using digital communication tools such as creating graphics, slides and presentations. It surmised that they are working hard to keep pace with the screen-driven era of communication (Barna Group, 2015).

Writing on *Digital Communication, the Church and Mission,* some scholars drew lessons from Hebrews 1: 11 to make the point that: "In the past God spoke to our ancestors through papyrus and paper in many different and various ways, but in these last days, his Word is shown through the digital realm" (Phillips, Lewis & Bruce, 2013, p.3).

These scholars disclosed that God is all about communication which is why John's Gospel opens with the Word being present with God and communicating with God. They insist that, that Word is associated with light and life and creativity which are "the very hallmarks of the digital age, and is transmitted to the world, enfleshed amongst us and we have seen his glory. That communicated Word, that enfleshed Word, makes known God, exegetes God to all of us. A communicative God incarnates himself within a specific culture and within a specific cultural mode of communication" (Phillips, Lewis & Bruce, 2013, p.3).

This resonates with the submission of the Pastoral Instruction on the Means of Social Communication, (*Communio Et Progressio*, (CP) No.11) that while He was on earth, Christ revealed Himself as the Perfect Communicator through His 'incarnation,' by totally identifying Himself with those who are expected to receive His communication. He gave His message in words and by the whole manner of His life by preaching the divine message out of the press of His people without fear or compromise and so, adjusted to His people's way of life. Since the interplay between faith and culture are indispensable to the faith, it behooves the *Pontifical Council for Culture* to live up to its mandate of "reading the signs of the time." This means not only coming face to face with modern realities which influences the faith but taking up serious reflections on the rapidly evolving culture and the linguistic developments that are changing and affecting the way people communicate today with the resulting influences on their very existence (Pontifical Council for Culture, 2017).

Key among these steps is a practical approach to promoting the Church's Online-presence and stimulating the effective use of the means of communication especially the new media. The journal, *Cultures and Faith* published by the *Pontifical Council for Culture* is a veritable tool for ensuring that the Church gate-keeps her faith while accepting new cultures.

With the *Pontifical Mission for Social Communications,* the agency that provides the behind the scenes guidance for Church leadership in the use of the new medium of communication, the *Pontifical Council for Culture* can form a synergy so that the two organs of the Church would encourage the people of God to ensure that the Church makes an impact on virtual space.

Besides, the Church can learn from the CODEC, *Research Centre for Digital Theology* which is aimed at transforming theological conversations concerning digital culture into pedagogy. CODEC's (a research initiative based in St.

John's College in Durham) focus on theology in a Digital Age is worth noting here:

- **Theology in a Digital Age -** Biblical literacy; the impact of digital transformation on society, culture and communication; theological issues related to religious identity online…
- **Preaching and Communication in a Digital Age –** Homiletics; communication of ideas; theology of entertainment; and the place of imagination in the life of growth and discipleship within religious communities and their use of social media; being human in a digital age.
- **Digital Resources –** Providing first class examples of digital artifacts for use in teaching, training and discipleship through the Common Awards process and for wider distributions within theological training establishments… (CODEC, 2017).

Both the *Pontifical Council for Culture* and the *Pontifical Mission for Social Communications* can borrow a leaf from CODEC to ensure that the faith is lived in the digital culture through research, reflection and the use of modern technologies. Once again, Lewis opines that many people who have access to the internet will go online to engage with the Church through their friends rather than formal Christian organisations (2014).

The need for an On-line Church cuts across Catholic, Protestant/Evangelical and Pentecostal persuasions. As such, the clamour for the Church to embrace digital communication is a call for Christendom as a whole. This also means that the need for an Online Church favours both orthodox and unorthodox theologies.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Embracing New Media: The Church cannot engage the new media for good if she remains a passive spectator. On the contrary, she must take to the various platforms of social media such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, WhatsApp, Instagram, 2go, Pinterest, Snapchat, Skype, Facetime and blogs to mention just a few. Christians must not make the usual excuse that these media have been polluted – if they are so polluted, who would purify them? Will their shying away from using them make the faithful especially young people use them less?

2. Targeting the Youth: The Church must not hesitate in passing on the sacred patrimony it received from the Lord to the young people of our age. She can meet young people where they are and entice them with the message of Christ as well as the teachings of the Church through a new way of delivery. This is because one of the great drivers of the growth of the new media has been their use by young people, in particular, as a means of personal communication. The phenomenal growth of social networking sites gives testimony to the desire of young people for friendship and human relationships (Tighe, 2012).

3. Engaging lapse Christians: Indeed, the internet offers the Church one of such opportunities to showcase the gospel of love, justice, peace, forgiveness and reconciliation through the use of Customized-Christian messages, caller tunes, icons and images especially to those who are ill and cannot come to Church or lapse Christians.

4. Hierarchy Showing the Way: The hierarchy of the Church around the world should take the lead in the effective use of Social Media for the purpose of evangelisation. For instance, Church leaders can replicate what the Vatican press does in transmitting quotable quotes of the Holy Father by sharing the homilies of their bishops and priests on social media fora. Having more Christian applications for bible and prayers as well as computer and other devices will further boast the faith of the people of God. In the area of proclamation, teaching catechesis, Sunday school or further deepening of the faith, the Church cannot do without the means of communication as already emphasized (Evangelii Nuntiandi, No. 45).

5. Debuting E-Catechesis: Parishes and local stations can use bulk messages for information-sharing. Another veritable way of using the internet is opening group messages for kids, youths or catechumens in the parish. This will enhance interaction and faith-sharing. Lapse Christians can also be reached if they are part of Church social media platforms – If they suddenly become quite or out of reach, the Church can employ the interpersonal approach by visiting them.

6. Creating An Online-Church: Also, the Church can cash in on the numerical strength of the youth using Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp to create what the researcher refers to as an Online Church – This entails a forum where the message of the gospel is transmitted either in English, French or vernacular through short messaging systems, Sunday and weekday reflections, rich Christian photo-enhanced messages, caller tunes, hymns and videos on YouTube, to mention just a few. With this, the "Church" on virtual space would appeal to many. If this is sustained, the boundless effects of the message of the gospel would be felt more.

7. Developing Tolerance: Dealing with people of divergent interests, views, ideologies and religions present a challenge for virtual-space evangelisation. The Church must, however, be aware that the Online Church being referred to has all kinds of "parishioners" – atheists, traditionalists, Catholics, Protestants, Pentecostals, Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, Hindus and a host of others.

In this kind of "Church," you will have to contend with the cynic and the critic, the truth-seeker and the doom sayer, the gullible and the skeptic, the irritable and the encourager, the angel and the demon. For example, the researcher has received assaults as well as accolades from both fans and foe particularly on Facebook regarding various Church teachings posted on his wall.

With such testimonial certitude, it is important to note that anyone going into online-evangelisation must have a large heart – being tolerant and focused remains the key to success in sustaining this "Church without borders" as I call it.

8. Safeguards/Feedback Mechanism: Good as the prospects of an Online Church are, believers ought to avoid internet-related-pitfalls such as radicalization, pornography and fraud. This means that the Church needs guidelines for her members to check excesses especially the possibility of those who are likely to be converted through it. A prayer before and after accessing the internet could also be helpful. As such, operating the Online Church without guidelines would be a risky venture. These guidelines should equally provide space for feedback mechanisms regarding the use of various media platforms.

CONCLUSION

Since this study is mindful of the fact that "our century is characterized by the mass media or means of social communication..." (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, (EN) Apostolic Exhortation, Paul VI, 1975, No. 45) it is left for Christians all over the world to safeguard the Church from what Pope Francis calls, "mental pollution" which harms our relationships and shields us from real pain and the joy that comes from interaction as well as living in community (Lapowsky, 2015). Turning a blind eye to what the digital culture offers is shutting up on herself since she appears submerged by an irresistible culture.

No doubt the digital culture calls for opening up and connecting with people where they live – in the real world and on virtual space. Instead of waiting for the distracted and wondering youth, the Church should meet them in the terrain they are familiar with.

The onus lies on pastors of souls to take advantage of the new media of communication to engage their faithful. If the Church lives the internet for the devil to lure her precious and energetic young people to the mischievous sprites of pornography, fraud and defamation of character, the Lord will ask her – it is crucial to note that He created everything and everything He created was good. It is not just enough to create an Online Church - sustaining it is what matters and this is a task for all Christians.

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