

Catholic Church Communication in the Post-Truth Era: Intra-Religious and Inter-Religious Dimensions

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Abstract

The digital era has presented the world with many things, among them fake news and a post-truth mindset. The tendency to disregard truth and the uncontrolled propagation of fake news about religion hold serious ramifications for the Catholic Church and the Church's relationship with other religions. This essay explores the nature of the post-truth mindset and the negative impact that fake news present to the Church and interreligious relationship. It proposes that the way for the Church to respond to the present social milieu is by taking a proactive approach in its communication strategies. On the ad intra front, the Church needs to counter the post-truth mindset by upholding the authoritative and trustworthy position of the Church through the proclamation of Jesus Christ as the Way, the Truth, and the Life. More than proclaiming with words, however, the Church must also reflect Jesus in these regards in the day-to-day life and activities of the Church. On the ad extra front, the Church must redouble its effort at interreligious dialogue, which in view of the modern context, must be seen as the way of being Church. Without this two-pronged communication approach, the Church risks having its voice being drowned out by the great plethora of voices both inside and outside of the Church, many of which aim to disrupt unity within the Church as well as with other religions.

Keyword: *Post-truth, fake news, Catholic Church, interreligious dialogue*

It is an irony that while the digital age affords the world channels and means of communication and information exchange in ways that are unprecedented, the intellectual tendencies of humanity seem to be heading more towards untruths and subjective feelings than towards truths and objective facts. The current intellectual mindset has been given a name—post-truth. The term “post-truth” was designated “word of the year” in 2016 by Oxford Dictionaries after the organization saw a dramatic increase in its usage in 2015—an astounding 2,000 percent.¹ Post-truth is defined as “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.” This definition suggests that although truth has not gone out of existence, its relevance to and import on people’s thinking and deliberations have been severely compromised. Rather, people are urged to come to conclusions about matters not primarily based on facts but on how they feel or should feel.

A manifestation of post-truth dynamics is the plethora of fake news about all kinds of matters from politics to religion—all aiming to drive public opinion in directions that results in political, social and religious polarization and conflict at local and global levels. Needless to say, the post-truth tendency holds significant implications for the unity of the Catholic Church and the Church’s ecumenical and interreligious relationships. This essay attempts to address the issue of the Catholic Church’s response to post-truth mindset, emphasizing that a two-pronged approach of *intra-religious* and *inter-religious* communication must be intentionally implemented by the Church in order to counteract the negative impact of such dynamics. Without proactive measures by the Church, post-truth mentality might not only

¹ Lee McIntyre, *Post-Truth* (Boston: MIT Press, 2018): Kindle

affect the Church from without, but also be a source of division and conflict for the Church from within its ranks. Therefore, communication by the church must be both *ad-intra* and *ad-extra* in order to fully respond to the needs of the present milieu.

Fake News in the Post-Truth Era

One of the outstanding characteristics of the post-truth era is the abundance of fake news in the media, especially in online platforms. In July 2016, in the midst of the presidential campaign in the United States where Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton were vying for the top position in the US government, an article that appeared like a news item was widely disseminated on social media stating that Pope Francis had shocked the world by declaring his endorsement of Trump, the candidate of the Republican Party. The article further explicated that Pope Francis felt that it was imperative for him to take this position because of a sense of duty as the head of the Holy See. In actuality, the so-called news article originated from the web site *WTOE 5 News*, one of innumerable fake news outlets that churn out materials for public consumption and confusion.² Although simple fact-checking could easily determine that the article was a fake news story about an important religious leader, it managed countless shares which ensured that at least some people believed that the head of the Roman Catholic Church would actually take sides in a political campaign in some country.

Religion and religious leaders and adherents being the subject of fake news is far from uncommon, and usually relates to some controversial matter that either pits religion against the secular society or one religion against another. For example, on 7 September 2016 an article appeared on the web site *Associated Media Coverage* reporting that Facebook had instated a new policy banning the posting of Christian-themed content while imposing no such content restriction about other religions.³ Another article published by the web site *The Last Line of Defense* reported that a Muslim waitress in a Michigan restaurant refused to seat a Christian church group as an exercise of her “religious freedom.”⁴ These articles, of course, were shared innumerable times by people who were appalled with the action of Facebook and the Muslim waitress, none of which was true.

The propagation of fake news articles such as those mentioned above has the potential to cause serious misunderstanding among people of faith as well as no faith. Christians who believe in the Facebook story not only feel offended by the social media company’s policy but also resent other religions for supposedly receiving favorable treatment. People of no religion will look to the story about the Muslim waitress as further proof of the danger of religious bigotry and fanaticism. Muslims might see this story as one more instance of misrepresentation of followers of Islam by Western media. Whether these stories are meant to be satire, humor, or simply ways of making money based on number of clicks, the effect is that they can potentially create ill-will and conflict among religions and peoples. Religion remains a great target because there are few things that can stir up emotions better than matters concerning one’s religious and spiritual convictions.

The dissemination of fake news has been greatly facilitated by the development of Internet technology with its multiple applications, especially social media. The ability of fake news distributors to masquerade fake news as credible news coupled with the lack of awareness of the part of the public results in much confusion. In 2016, Stanford Graduate

² <https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/pope-francis-donald-trump-endorsement/>

³ <https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/facebook-bans-christian-content/>

⁴ <https://www.business2community.com/us-news/muslim-waitress-refusing-seat-27-person-church-group-religious-freedom-fake-news-01985943>

School of Education conducted a study of middle to university level students on their ability to point out credible and unreliable news items. The results as described by the research team revealed that the situation was “bleak.” In their summary, the researchers wrote:

Our “digital natives” may be able to flit between Facebook and Twitter while simultaneously uploading a selfie to Instagram and texting to a friend. But when it comes to evaluating information that flows through social media channels, they are easily duped. We did not design our exercises to shake out a grade or make hairsplitting distinctions between a “good” and a “better” answer. Rather, we sought to establish a reasonable bar, a level of performance we hoped was within reach of most middle school, high school, and college students...But in every case and at every level, we were taken aback by the students’ lack of preparation.⁵

The ability of people to make accurate judgments about the authenticity of certain information is also further compromised by the sheer volume of information generated each moment. In 2016 alone, humanity produced the amount of information equaling all of human history up to the year 2015. For the next decade, it is said that information will double every two years.⁶ Just Facebook alone is responsible for 510,000 comments, 293,000 statuses, and 136,000 photos per minute.⁷ If this exponential rate of increase in knowledge presents a huge challenge for even the most advanced countries to control and evaluate information, it is the more difficult for the less developed countries of the world to respond to the issue. The World Economic Forum warns that our hyperconnected world can suffer from “digital wildfires” due to “massive digital misinformation.”⁸ Just as American radio listeners jammed the police station telephone line in 1938 due to the radio broadcast of H.G. Wells novel *The War of the Worlds*, thinking that earth was being attacked by Martians, episodes of panic could take place in societies where the Internet is a relatively new medium and users lack adequate digital literacy to make informed judgments on content.

Despite the fact that news found in great abundance online may be fake, its impact on important world issues is certainly real. This was seen conspicuously in the Brexit affairs in Great Britain where false information was fed to the public on a daily basis in order to influence the final outcome of the referendum.⁹ The phenomenon of tailoring reality to fit one’s opinion rather than vice-versa seems to be the trend throughout the world where the information presented is selective, skewed, exaggerated or even falsified in order to promote a particular version of the truth. Not just in the West, fake news online has inflamed interreligious and inter-ethnic conflicts in other parts of the world as well. In 2016, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, a Chinese-Indonesian Christian, was running for re-election as governor of Jakarta, Indonesia’s capital city. Prospect of success was high for the candidate until he decided to remind a small audience not to be fooled by those who cite the Qur’an that Muslims should not vote for a non-Muslim to be their leader. Purnama’s opponents seized the opportunity to attack him, uploading various doctored versions of excerpts of his speech onto social media, and called for charges to be brought against him. The social media campaign to

⁵ “Evaluating Information: The Cornerstone of Civic Online Reasoning,” Stanford History Education Group, <https://stacks.stanford.edu/file/druid:fv751yt5934/SHEG%20Evaluating%20Information%20Online.pdf> (November 22, 2016).

⁶ “Data is expected to double every two years for the next decade,” Quartz, <https://qz.com/472292/data-is-expected-to-double-every-two-years-for-the-next-decade/> (August 5, 2015).

⁷ <https://zephoria.com/top-15-valuable-facebook-statistics/>

⁸ <http://reports.weforum.org/global-risks-2013/risk-case-1/digital-wildfires-in-a-hyperconnected-world/>

⁹ <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/politics/0/eu-referendum-claims-won-brexit-fact-checked/>

denigrate Purnama was followed by organized demonstrations in which as many as 500,000 Muslim protesters, mostly men, took part.¹⁰ From a speech 6,000 seconds long, a mere 13-second clip was uploaded onto Youtube and other social media outlets; and even this out-of-context clip was hardly watched by those who felt that Purnama was guilty of blasphemy. One survey indicated that only 13 percent out of the 45 percent of respondents who thought Purnama was guilty had even seen the excerpt directly. In the end “mobocracy,” as characterized by the Indonesian political magazine *Tempo*, prevailed, and Purnama was convicted of blasphemy in May 2017. The Purnama episode was a digital wildfire that was started by Purnama’s opponents and fueled by Whatsapp, Facebook, Twitter and Youtube.

Another wildfire involving digital technology is the case of Ronhinya genocide in Myanmar. In this once closed off country, Internet penetration galloped from 1 percent in 2012 to 28 percent in 2018. This explosion of Internet usage took place thanks to political changes taking place in Myanmar and the plethora of cheap mobile phones flooding the country.¹¹ As the people increasingly take to cyberspace to engage in academic, social and political activities, militant individuals and groups also take advantage of the platform to incite ethnic and religious hatred among the people. After the ultranationalist Buddhist monk Ashin Wirathu was forbidden by Myanmar’s government to preach in public in 2016 due to inflammatory speeches that helped fuel violence against the Rohingya Muslim minority, the monk took to Facebook. Through this social media platform, Wirathu presented a narrative that aimed to portray the Rohingyas as violent and aggressive outsiders. He characterized them as troublemakers and compared them to mad dogs. The monk also posted photos and videos of decaying bodies which he claimed were victims of Ronhinya attacks.¹² Proudly calling himself a “radical Buddhist,” Wirathu declared, “You can be full of kindness and love, but you cannot sleep next to a mad dog.”¹³ Despite such hateful speech, Facebook was not censoring the monk and has been singled out for partial responsibility in the Rohingya genocide. The problem was that Facebook was prepared to deal with hate content such as swastikas by white supremacists, but was not equipped to deal with hate speech taking place in an impoverished and technologically backward country of Asia.¹⁴

Although misinformation and deception, especially that which is employed in propaganda campaigns by national governments, is hardly new in human history, the post-truth context presents some unique characteristics. In the present climate, it is not simply a matter of false information being disseminated, but rather about people’s attitudes towards these falsehoods. First, on the part of the peddlers of falsehoods, there seems to be an unwavering commitment to the information presented even when confronted with hard evidence that what has been said is blatantly untrue. President Donald Trump is notorious for spouting and refusing to recant information that has been proven untrue, including about the number of illegal ballots in the presidential election, the number of people who attended his inauguration ceremony, or statistics involving immigrants coming into the United States from south of the US-Mexican border. The second distinctive characteristic of the post-truth

¹⁰ Ross Tapsell, “Post-truth politics in Southeast Asia,” Inside Story, <http://insidestory.org.au/post-truth-politics-in-southeast-asia/> (February 7, 2017).

¹¹ Aim Sinpeng, “Southeast Asian cyberspace: politics, censorship, polarization,” New Mandala, <http://www.newmandala.org/southeast-asian-cyberspace-politics-censorship-polarisation/> (November 1, 2017).

¹² Ibid.

¹³ “Ashin Wirathu on comparing Rohingya Muslims to dogs in Myanmar,” The Berkley Center, <https://berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/quotes/ashin-wirathu-on-comparing-rohingya-muslims-to-dogs-in-myanmar> (accessed October 7, 2018).

¹⁴ Megan Specia and Paul Mozur, “A war of words puts Facebook at the center of Myanmar’s Rohingya crisis,” The New York Times, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/27/world/asia/myanmar-government-facebook-rohingya.html> (October 27, 2017).

climate relates to the attitude of the public towards the facts presented. There seems to be willful self-deception and delusion taking place because people continue to perceive a lie to be truth despite being presented with evidence to the contrary. Some very intelligent, highly educated people continue to appear on television news programs declaring that they have never heard Trump say a lie even though nonpartisan fact-checking organizations have listed untruths or half-truths spoken by Trump to be in the thousands over the last few years. Surprisingly, when leaders are found to have spoken untruth, they seem to suffer very little if any consequence for their action. In this information age, ignorance is not due to lack of facts, but due to widespread denial over very basic facts. People are urged not to come to conclusions based on credible facts, but based on how they feel or should feel. An example of this is seen in Newt Gingrich's interview on CNN in February 2017, where he insisted to the reporter Alisyn Camerota that the average American felt less safe than previously despite Camerota's presentation that FBI statistics indicated that the violent crime, murder rate was down to near-historic low. Official statistics from the national crime fighting organization, however, could not persuade Gingrich to change his mind. "What I said is equally true," he insisted. "People feel more threatened...As a political candidate, I'll go with how people feel and let you go with the theoreticians."¹⁵

The Gingrich interview is revealing about the post-truth mindset. First, Gingrich focused on supposed sentiment of the public rather than on facts. Even as a national leader, a former Speaker of the House, and a Trump surrogate, Gingrich did not give credence to statistics published by one of the most respected law enforcement organizations of the country. What was important to him was the general public sentiment of fear and insecurity, which he could exploit for political gains. Therefore, rather than using the FBI statistics to assure the public that their feelings may not be well founded on facts, he ignored them so that he could continue to play off of public emotions. Second, it is not clear based on the interview how Gingrich knew that the average American felt more unsafe than before. However, what is clear is that Gingrich felt that the existence of such sentiment would be beneficial to his political agenda. A cynical view of Gingrich would indicate that Gingrich would prefer that Americans felt unsafe and threatened if this had not already been the case. Certainly, if more Americans were persuaded to feel less safe and secure, no matter what the evidence indicates, the rhetorics that Gingrich and Trump were employing would bring about favorable results to them. In reality, it is not that enablers of post-truth climate do not have any respect for facts. It is just that they do not embrace facts that are inconsistent with the narrative that they would like to advance, and are counterproductive to their agenda. As Lee McIntyre comments, the "corruption of the process by which facts are credibly gathered and reliably used to shape one's beliefs about reality...undermines the idea that *some things are true irrespective of how we feel about them*, and that it is in our best interests (and those of our policy makers) to attempt to find them."¹⁶ Indeed, the promotion and reinforcement of certain feelings irrespective of facts which characterize the post-truth mindset can cause dire local and global consequences—irreversible environmental degradation, increase in religious extremism, and more widespread inter-ethnic conflict.

The post-truth mindset, as empirical evidence seems to indicate, has been intensified and sustained by the development of the Internet and its associated applications. Despite being a source of tremendous volume of knowledge, this technology has unfortunately served as a source of deep division in society. Inventors and developers of the Internet envisioned a more informed, tolerant, just and unified world thanks to open information exchange and dialogue facilitated by the digital technology. It was hoped that fundamental truths and values

¹⁵ <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/1607/22/nday.06.html>.

¹⁶ McIntyre, *Post-truth*, Kindle

could be agreed upon as people shared their worldviews as well as cultural and religious perspectives. In reality, the world since 1994, the year that the World Wide Web was born, so far has not turned out as was hoped. Although there has been evidence of the Internet achieving the objectives designated by its creators in specific instances, evidence to the contrary is in no lack of abundance. The problem lies in the fact that the Internet can segregate people just as effectively as it can bring people together. In cyberspace, people have every right to only meet, exchange, and support people who hold the same outlook and beliefs as themselves. Although people could indeed choose to visit forums and engage with those who hold different political, social, religious and cultural perspectives from them, most choose to associate with those whom they feel most comfortable and reaffirmed. Those who intentionally venture into forums participated by people who hold opposing views are often individuals paid by governments or organizations to defend their ideology or distract the public from certain issues. The governments of China and Vietnam have been accused of employing massive numbers of people for the task. To add to the intensity of the division, people can now, with the help of algorithms, spend their time in cyberspace bubbles, where information that do not match their preferences are automatically filtered out. One can even set up preferences on Facebook to block certain kinds of comments. In this manner, a person's online experience can be totally free of any encounter that would challenge him/her mentally or emotionally. The online experience of a Hindu fundamentalist will largely be one of reassurance and reinforcement that his worldview is a proper one. Anti-Catholic communist supporters in Vietnam will have no trouble finding an echo chamber for their perspective that Vietnamese Catholics are treasonists who should be denigrated, and their religion eliminated from the country. Such is also the case for supporters and opponents of President Donald Trump in the United States and President Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines. The result of this practice of self-segregation and the consumption of news (fake or otherwise) that only reinforce a particular perspective leads to further social polarization. As Cass Sunstein stated:

The Internet makes it exceedingly easy for people to...read reams of material that support their view... [and] exclude any and all material that argues the other way... A key consequence of this kind of self-sorting is what we might call enclave extremism. When people end up in enclaves of like-minded people, they usually move toward a more extreme point.¹⁷

The Christian Response in the Post-Truth Era

Despite lamentations about the general post-truth mindset permeating modern society, the term itself is revealing about what still holds as the primary reference point—truth. The fact that fake news, misinformation and outright falsehoods seem to distract and sometimes even determine the general public opinion on various important matters has not displaced the implicit understanding that truthfulness remains a criteria in evaluating information. The term post-truth, at the same time that it reflects a certain intellectual attitude present in the world, draws attention to the fundamental thinking that the state of things ought to be considered and reflected upon in light of its relation to truth. Therefore, the term is not simply evidence of intellectual cynicism and defeatism pervading human society, or a nostalgia for the sense of certainty that authoritative resources were once able to provide, but also a reminder that the value of what is deemed as truth ought not be completely eliminated from individual and collective human life. Truth itself is by no means a monolithic entity. Indeed, Julian Baggini

¹⁷ <https://www.law.uchicago.edu/news/sunstein-internet-and-political-polarization>

in the book *A Short History of Truth: Consolations for a Post-Truth World* listed 10 different types of truths: eternal truths, authoritative truths, esoteric truths, reasoned truths, empirical truths, creative truths, relative truths, powerful truths, moral truths, and holistic truths.¹⁸ One could even add to this list “mundane truths,” which is the everyday life truth that we depend on to survive, for example, there will always be 24 hours in a day, and the television broadcast schedule represents the programs that the audience will actually get to watch if they turn on their TV at the indicated times. Although truths need to be understood in their own particular domains, our intuitive grasp about the nature of truth is not far from Aristotle’s definition of truth: “To say of what is that it is not, or of what is not that it is, is false, while to say of what is that it is, and of what is not that it is not, is true.”¹⁹

My interpretation about the post-truth climate, therefore, is that not that it reflects a situation in which we no longer understand what truth means, or that truth has lost its standing in our mental deliberations. Rather the post-truth climate reflects more accurately a conundrum where people are uncertain about the legitimacy of the truth presented to them and the trustworthiness of the source of information. The problem lies in the process of establishing the truth and the people involved in that process. People’s disenchantment with truth is not that people have no need for truths or that they dislike truths, but that due to a variety of reasons the ability to distinguish between genuine truths and bogus truths have been impaired, so that anything that appeals to them emotionally gets the upper hand. As Baggini observed:

The same data that shows a century-and-a-half decline in the use of the word “truth” also points to a twenty-first-century revival in the concept. We wouldn’t even be talking about post-truth if we didn’t think truth mattered. The world is neither ready nor willing to say goodbye to truth, even in politic where it sometimes seems as though it has already taken its leave.²⁰

Indeed, for every “lie” that Donald Trump speaks or tweets, the media outlets take hours to dissect its truthfulness or lack thereof. If the primary problem is not a total disregard for truth but confusion about the reliability of truth, then religions need to proactively respond to the present state of affairs. As Christianity, indeed all religions, is concerned with the well-being of humanity in all of its dimensions, it stands to lose a great deal if what the Church has to say has as much weight as a blogger or a Youtube channel owner with high number of followers. The challenge for the Church is to deeply understand the present milieu characterized by tremendous complexity. Traditional beliefs and modern scientific knowledge for an increasing number of people seem to contradict in irreconcilable ways. Local ways of thinking and being are increasingly being brought into question due to globalization. Freer or more difficult-to-control communication channels brought about by technological advancement also expose deception at seats of power that once seemed beyond public scrutiny. Even scientific orthodoxy such as the consensus on climate change and global warming can be refuted by the few entities and individuals who have vested interest in its denial. The Church needs to humbly accept that religious orthodoxy is equally susceptible to rejection as any other type of orthodoxy on the market. With the present state of affairs, all pillars of modern society have the same opportunity for being knocked down by those who feel that they would prefer to build society upon different construction materials. In short, the

¹⁸ Julian Baggini, *A Short History of Truth: Consolations for a Post-Truth World* (London: Quecus Editions Ltd, 2017): Kindle

¹⁹ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1011b.

²⁰ Baggini, *A Short History*, Kindle.

most defining aspect of the post-truth climate is that any version of truth, even those coming from once considered unquestionable authority, can be challenged by anyone at any time—and it can be done with just a smart phone with a 4G connection.

Dimensions of Christian Communication in the Post-truth Era

In the face of the post-truth climate, the Church may choose to go with the flow, to accept this reality as part of the ongoing secularization and democratization process taking place globally, or the Church can reorganize itself and find a voice that distinguishes it from the rest of the smorgasbord. In this age of information overload, of contradictory voices, and inconsistent messages from and about Christianity, the Church must confront the situation with a clear and concise articulation about what Christianity is all about, not only within its ranks but also across denominations and religions. Religious communication in the post-truth climate is a multi-dimensional task, which includes the intra-communication as well as the inter-communication dimensions. Intra-communication takes place inside the religious tradition whereas the inter-communication is the communication that is done with other religious traditions. While religions can also implement communication with non-religious entities such as the scientific community, this essay only focuses on the *intra* and *inter* dimensions.

Intra-religious Communication

On the intra-religious communication front, the post-truth context demands religious institutions to present to adherents a more forceful and concise message about what it is that they stand for. In an age of information overload where people have to confront with innumerable points of views on any single topic, it is not helpful when leaders within the Church cannot speak with one accord. The lack of a united voice risks turning Church teachings into a set of opinions where people can choose to agree or disagree as they see fit. At the same time that the Church needs to make room for dissenting opinions and welcomes a range of perspectives, the absence of an authoritative voice serving as the measure of orthodoxy risks turning the teachings of the Church into mere opinions not unlike those of a popular social media star or comedian. The lack of a united and prominent voice also allows for extremist groups, though maybe small in number, to exert influence upon the adherents in ways that are antithetical to the Christian outlook and detrimental to the image of the entire Christian tradition. The faithful who are not well-informed may mistake the opinions of minority groups with politicized agendas for the official position of the entire Church.

What is the message that the Church needs to articulate in this new situation? In this respect, the message is perfectly encapsulated in how Jesus Christ spoke about himself and the reason for his being in the Gospel of John. When Thomas, also known as Thomas the Doubter, asked, “Lord we do not know where you are going, so how can we know the way?” Jesus answered, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life (John 14:5-6). This concise answer by Jesus assured Thomas that any uncertainty and apprehensions he might feel towards the future could be resolved when Jesus is seen and understood for exactly whom He is.

The Way. When Jesus Christ declared himself as the way that leads to God, the true source of life, he was speaking about a new way of being and doing things in the world. Although contemporary Christians neither refer to themselves nor are thought of as people of “the Way,” this indeed was the case with the early Church (Acts 9:2; 11:26; 19:9; 24:22). Paul, for example, introduced himself to the Governor in this manner: “But this I confess to you, that according to the Way, which they call a sect, I worship the God of our fathers,

believing everything laid down by the Law and written in the Prophets” (Acts 24:14). The depiction of early Christians as people of “the way” most likely originated in Jesus himself as seen in the declaration above. By referring to themselves in this way, Christians highlighted a particular lifestyle that was different from other ways of life. For Christians, it was a lifestyle that included repentance of sins, loving God and neighbor (even enemies), and proclaiming the Kingdom of God characterized by harmony, peace and justice. The way laid out by Jesus and followed by generations of Christians must continue to be the path that contemporary Christians tread upon if they wish to end up in the same place as Jesus at the end of his journey—next to the Almighty Heavenly God.

The Truth. When Jesus declared himself to be the Way, he further reinforced the disciples’ confidence in him by confirming that he was “the Truth.” In life, paths to be travelled on are numerous and one could easily be led down the wrong path due to ignorance, delusion, and deception. A wrong path could lead to suffering, imprisonment, or even eternal damnation. However, the path based on truth, said Jesus, will lead to freedom (John 8:32) and fullness of life. Jesus affirmed that he came into this world with no other purpose than “to bear witness to the truth” (John 18:37). Christianity is at its best and most relevant when it dares to confidently present what it holds to be the truth. In a world where truth is increasingly neglected and disrespected, proclaiming the truth that is Jesus ought to be a priority in the Church’s agenda.

The Life. Jesus declared, “I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full” (John 10:10). This statement by Jesus serves as Biblical support for the long held tradition of Christian humanism. Christian humanism is modeled on the incarnated person of Jesus Christ, who represents the perfect unity between God and human beings. Christians are called to be united to God through becoming united to God’s incarnated Son, Jesus Christ. It is Christ who becomes the measure of human moral, social, and spiritual development, and it is Christ who helps human beings to overcome the effects of sin, imbue the heart with fullness of justice, and make manifest the noble dimensions of human nature.²¹ *Gaudium et Spes*, one of the most important documents of the Catholic Church, declares that Christian humanism is defined by “spiritual and moral maturity of the human race” and characterized “by responsibility to his brothers and to history.”²² On the other hand, when the world is stricken by “veritable structure of sin” and a “culture of death” characterized by a lack of respect for human life in all its stages, regional conflicts, poverty, and environmental degradation, the absence of true human development are thus observed. Therefore, Christian humanism calls for an integral human development that reflects Christ in how one treats fellow human beings as well as Creation. Christian humanism insists that the destiny of being truly human, human flourishing and well-being depend directly on human actions towards self and others. Indeed, the ultimate goal of attaining eternal life directly depends on adhering to a Christian humanism with all of its noble ideals.

Jesus’ three-fold depiction of himself as “the way,” “the truth,” and “the life” embodies the Christian message that the Church must proclaim in both words and deeds. As the Body of Christ, the Church and its members are mandated to speak on behalf of Christ, and at the same time, imitate Christ in its actions. The communicative value of actions seen from Church leaders and members in addition to words heard cannot be underestimated. Indeed, if the people believe in what they hear, it is because they have observed that those words have been translated into clear, truthful, life-giving actions.

²¹ John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis* (1979), http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_04031979_redemptor-hominis.html , no.10

²² Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes*, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html, no.22.

Inter-Religious Communication

The interreligious communication dimension takes place between and among religious traditions. The reality of the post-truth climate highlights the importance of interreligious communication being part of the religious agenda. According to Vietnamese American Catholic theologian Peter C. Phan, dialogue among religions is an imperative in the modern globalized world shaped by international migration, communication technologies, and political and social events. Phan commented, “Religion cannot function authentically and truly, and cannot achieve its goals without entering into dialogue with other religions.”²³ For Phan, religious traditions being in constant communication with one another through various forms of dialogue is a natural and essential part of being religious in the contemporary world. Nonetheless, it is a world fraught with dangers of religious strife. The post-truth mindset characterized by the plethora of uncontrolled fake news requires that religions not only speak boldly to their own adherents but also to communicate openly with each other in order to create mutual understanding, resolve real or perceived conflicts, and prevent unwanted influence from fundamentalists and extremists. When it is in the interest of certain entities that there may be interreligious conflict and division, the common voice of religious traditions is necessary to achieve the noble goals that all religions lay out for their people. From the perspective of the Catholic Church, interreligious dialogue is integrally tied to the Church’s mission and its very existence. In 1964, Pope Paul VI declared in the Encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam* that “Dialogue is a new way of being Church.”²⁴ Over five decades later it is fair to say that dialogue is no longer new nor is it just a way, but in fact, it is *the* way for the Church to be church and to carry out its evangelizing mission.

The mission of the Church as has already been affirmed is to “proclaim the Kingdom of God established on earth in Jesus Christ, through his life, death and resurrection.”²⁵ This mission imitates Jesus’ own mission and ministry, which was to proclaim the kingdom of God—calling people to repentance, to enter the kingdom, and to work for the kingdom of God. As the Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* states, “The Church has but one sole purpose—that the Kingdom of God may come and salvation of the human race may be accomplished.”²⁶

What is the kingdom of God that Jesus proclaimed and that the Church continues to promote with great ardor? First, it is a place where peace reigns over conflict and violence, as the prophet Isaiah beautifully illustrated with the images of the wolf living with the lamb and a small child leading the lion and the calf (11:6). In this kingdom, people and groups which previously only experienced encounters of strife and bloodshed could now come together in friendship and harmony. Second, the kingdom of God is a place where inclusion is valued over exclusion and elitism. Jesus demonstrated this preference for inclusion in the way he carried out his ministry—sharing meals with social leaders and sinners, conversing with

²³ “Peter C. Phan – being religious as being interreligious,” Rumiform, <https://youtu.be/YrSCMZu47HM> (accessed October 1, 2018).

²⁴ Pope Paul VI, *Ecclesiam Suam* http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_06081964_ecclesiam.html, 63.

²⁵ Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, Dialogue and Proclamation, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/interelg/documents/rc_pc_interelg_doc_19051991_dialogue-and-proclamatio_en.html, 58.

²⁶ Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html, 45.

ordinary people as well as members of the political elite, and going beyond cultural and religious barriers to converse with a Sumerian woman and to touch a man with leprosy. Third, the kingdom of God is a place where preferential concern is given to the poor and the marginalized. The Sri Lankan liberation theologian Aloysius Pieris, S.J. asserts that between God and the poor there is a defense pact that helps ensure their ultimate freedom and victory.²⁷ It is because of this preferential care for the powerless that Jesus declared at the very outset of his ministry that he had been anointed and sent to proclaim the Good News of the kingdom to the poor, proclaim freedom for the prisoners, and to set the oppressed free (Luke 4:18).

Jesus' utopian vision of the kingdom of God as a place of peace, justice and compassion continues to be the vision of the Church as it seeks to plant the kingdom through interreligious dialogue. This interreligious dialogue, as the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue has affirmed, is not reserved for specialists but the work of the entire Church. "Guided by the Pope and their bishops, all local Churches, and all the members of these Churches, are called to dialogue."²⁸ Members of the Church exercise different forms of dialogue—of life, of action, of theological exchange, of religious experience—depending on their expertise, responsibility in the Church, and their state of life. Whether it is through one, the other, or a combination of the four forms of dialogue, the aim of intercultural and interreligious dialogue in the mission of the Church is not necessarily conversion of all people to Christianity, but the conversion of people to service of God's kingdom of peace, harmony and compassion. As Paul F. Knitter commented, "A Christian missionary who has no baptisms to report but who has helped Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and Christians to live together and work together lovingly and justly is a successful disciple of Christ."²⁹ At the same time, this model of conversion does not exclude the possibility of members of other religions entering Christianity when they are moved by the Holy Spirit and their free conscience to do so; however, this need not and should not be the primary agenda, hidden or otherwise, for an activity where mutual trust and openness constitute the foundation for engagement.

Dialogue is the way of being Church, specifically, to carry out the mission of the Church because, in the words of Pope John Paul II, dialogue "at its deepest level is always a *dialogue of salvation*, because it seeks to discover, clarify and understand better the signs of the age-long dialogue which God maintains with humanity."³⁰ The Church demonstrates itself to be faithful to this divine initiative when it engages in dialogue with the aim of facilitating the conversion of all peoples to the kingdom of God. Paul F. Knitter points out that dialogue is not simply listening to and learning from/about others; the other aspect of dialogue is speaking, that is, proclaiming and witnessing what we perceive to be the truth. Sharing our conviction in Jesus as the Way, the Truth, and the Life is equally an important a task as patiently listening to others speaking about their own religious conviction. As Pope Francis affirmed, "We do not impose anything, we do not employ any subtle strategies for

²⁷ Aloysius Pieris, *Fire and Water: Basic Issues in Asian Buddhism and Christianity* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993): 151.

²⁸ Dialogue and Proclamation, 43.

²⁹ Paul F. Knitter, "Mission and Dialogue," *Missiology: An International Review*, Vol. 33, no.2, April 2005: 209

³⁰ John Paul II, "Address to the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue," 13 November 1992, https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/1992/november/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19921113_dialogo-interreligioso.html, 2.

attracting believers; rather, we bear witness to what we believe and who we are with joy and simplicity.”³¹

In short, interreligious dialogue must be the staple of the Church and all of its members. It is no longer *a new way* of being Church, but is *the way* of being Church in the modern age where the mission to serve the kingdom of God is being hampered by factionalism, bigotry, religious fundamentalism and extremism—all of which is encouraged and galvanized by campaigns of mean-spirited misinformation. Our fidelity to this mission means that we continue to be committed to values of peace, justice and compassion, values which can only be realized through dialogue with people of other cultures and religions. As Pope John Paul II declared, Christians must be “committed to dialogue with the believers of all religions” and “will join hands with all men and women of good will and work together in order to bring about a more just and peaceful society in which the poor will be the first to be served.”³²

Conclusion

As the Church carries out its mission in the digital era with its multiple challenges, not the least being the spreading of misinformation that threatens to disrupt unity within the Church as well as interreligious relationships, it is incumbent upon Church leaders to be proactive in formulating communicating strategies that publicize the teachings and opinions of the Church in ways that are conducive to promoting internal unity as well as unity across religions. Communicating the Gospel message and proclaiming the Kingdom of God has always been a priority throughout the history of the Church. Technological advancement has proven to be of tremendous benefit in the mission of evangelization. However, the digital age and the present post-truth mindset also pose obstacles to the effectiveness of the work being carried out by the Church. This essay calls attention to the need for upholding and reaffirming the images of Jesus as the Way, the Truth and the Life, and how the Church in its missionary activities embody this Jesus reality to the world. This essay also strongly affirms that interreligious dialogue is essential to the life and mission of the Church in the present social milieu. In the face of social forces that are either directly or indirectly aiming to either displace religion from human life or to cause religious instability by sowing interreligious misunderstanding and strife, the Church needs to redouble its effort at interreligious dialogue at all levels, and in all places—both physical and virtual.

³¹ Pope Francis, “Address to the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue,” 28 November 2013, https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/november/documents/papa-francesco_20131128_pc-dialogo-interreligioso.html.

³² John Paul II, Message to the People of Asia, 2 March 1981, https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/1981/february/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19810221_manila-auditorium.html, 5.