

THE CHURCH'S MISSION OF DIALOGUE IN THE DIGITAL AGE

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ABSTRACT

The development of Internet Communication Technology (ICT) has led the world into a new context with social, philosophical, and theological implications. It also presents missionary challenges that demand due response from Church leaders and members. This paper explores the nature of the present context and the ramifications that this milieu holds for the Catholic Church and the Church's relationship with other religions. Close examination indicates that the digital age characterized by exponential increase in knowledge production, heightened sense of enclavism, and difficult to control disinformation about religions and religious matters places society at great risks for interreligious misunderstanding and conflict. It proposes that the way for the Church to respond to the present milieu is by taking a proactive approach in the mission of dialogue, engaging both the listening, and

proclaiming dimensions. This mission of dialogue should no longer be viewed as simply a way of being Church but rather the way of being Church in the modern context. Without a proactive approach to mission of dialogue, 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 the Church's missionary endeavors.

Keywords: *Interreligious dialogue, Digital Age, Church Mission*

Introduction

In 1964, Pope Paul VI declared in the Encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam* that “Dialogue is a new way of being Church.”¹ 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 in the contemporary age. The mission of the Church as affirmed by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue is to “proclaim the Kingdom of God established on earth in Jesus Christ, through his life, death and resurrection.”² 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

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1. Pope Paul VI, *Ecclesiam suam*, accessed August 29, 2022, https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_06081964_ecclesiam.html.
 2. Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, *Dialogue and Proclamation*, accessed August 29, 2022, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/interelg/documents/rc_pc_interelg_doc_19051991_dialogue-and-proclamatio_en.html.

– that the Kingdom of God may come and salvation of the human race may be accomplished.”³

While the mission has not changed over the years, the context in which the Church's mission is to be carried out has changed in dramatic and unprecedented ways, with the advent of the digital age and the ever-increasing permeation of digital information and communication technology (ICT) in human life. This phenomenon has deeply affected how we individually and collectively imagine and live out our relationship with God, with other groups and individuals, and with the natural environment. This paper considers some of the challenges to the work of interreligious dialogue presented by the digital milieu and suggests directions for how this task needs to be re-affirmed and recontextualized for the contemporary age.

Challenges to Interreligious Harmony

(1) Infodemic

Recently, the term ‘infodemic’ has become widely used to refer to situations in which the overwhelming rate of information production—a great amount of which is false or misleading, and have not been checked and verified—causes confusion and mistrust in the general public and serves to obfuscate efforts at achieving effective solutions to social problems. This was especially prevalent during the coronavirus crisis in which the pandemic was exacerbated by an equally heinous infodemic. According to the WHO, an infodemic “causes confusion and risk-taking behaviors that can harm health. It also leads to mistrust in health authorities and undermines the public health response. An infodemic can intensify or lengthen outbreaks when people are unsure about what they need to do to protect their health and the health of

3. Vatican II, *Gaudium et spes*, accessed August 29, 2022, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html.

people around them.”⁴ The international health body also notes that infodemics are fueled by digital technology. “With growing digitization—an expansion of social media and internet use—information can spread more rapidly. This can help to more quickly fill information voids but can also amplify harmful messages.”⁵

While the WHO is concerned with the propagation of false or misleading information on finding effective resolutions to local or global health crises, infodemics can be equally harmful to other concerns facing humanity, such as the ecological crisis, interracial or interethnic tensions, and interreligious conflicts. Every day, people are producing ‘news’ about other religious groups that often confirm prejudices, incite negative feelings, and instigate hatred towards other religious groups. For example, commentators and researchers point to fake news and misinformation campaigns as one of the primary factors contributing to ethno-religious division taking place in Nigeria. In this country, a fault line has been drawn between the predominantly Muslim north and Christian south, and the two are depicted in a bitter struggle for political, social, and religious power. Researchers say that such false depictions not only impact the outcome of political matters such as national elections, but also threaten to sideline credible media that have traditionally been relied upon as sources of information.⁶

Another well-known example is the genocide of the Rohingyas in Myanmar. As the people in Myanmar increasingly took to cyberspace when the country began to open up in the last decade, militant individuals and groups also took advantage of social media to incite ethnic and religious hatred among the people. Among them was the ultranationalist Buddhist monk Ashin Wirathu who took to Facebook to inflame violence against the

4. World Health Organization, *Infodemic*, accessed August 29, 2022, <https://www.who.int/health-topics/infodemic#tab=tab>.

5. Ibid.

6. AFP, “Fake News’ Driving Ethno-religious Crisis in Nigeria” *France 24 News* April 14, 2019, accessed August 29, 2022. <https://www.france24.com/en/20190414-nigeria-buhari-fake-news-azikwe-islam-muslim-christianity>.

Rohingya Muslim minority. Through this social media platform, Wirathu presented a narrative that aimed to portray the Rohingyas as violent and aggressive outsiders, even characterizing them as troublemakers and comparing them to mad dogs. The monk also posted photos and videos of decaying bodies which he claimed were victims of Rohingya attacks.⁷ 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.”⁸ Despite such hateful speech, Wirathu was not censored by Facebook. The inaction by Facebook has led the technology company to be singled out for partial responsibility in the Rohingya genocide. The problem was that Facebook was prepared to deal with hate content in English and in more well-known languages on the internet, but was not equipped to deal with hate speech taking place in an impoverished and technologically backward country of Asia.⁹

During the Covid-19 pandemic, many religious groups became victims of infodemics. Among them was the Shincheonji Church of Jesus (SCJ), a new religious movement in South Korea. When a SCJ gathering was found to be responsible for the outbreak in the city of Daegu that led to at least 5,000 cases of infection, this religious movement was viciously blamed in South Korean media for the country's Covid-19 crisis. The group, which has about 250,000 members, was even sued by the city of Daegu for civil damages in the amount of 100 billion won.¹⁰ Nonetheless, a White Paper

7. Ibid.

8. The Berkeley Center, “Ashin Wirathu on Comparing Rohingya Muslims to Dogs in Myanmar,” accessed August 29, 2022, <https://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/quotes/ashin-wirathu-on-comparing-rohingya-muslims-to-dogs-in-myanmar>.

9. Megan Specia and Paul Mozur, “A War of Words puts Facebook at the Center of Myanmar's Rohingya Crisis,” *The New York Times* October 27, 2017, accessed August 29, 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/27/world/asia/myanmar-government-facebook-rohingya.html>.

10. Rosie Perper, “A South Korean Domsday Church Linked to Thousands of Coronavirus Cases is Being Sued for \$82 Million in D,” *Insider* June 25, 2020, accessed August 29, 2022, <https://www.insider.com/south-korea-domsday-church-shincheonji-sued-daegu-coronavirus-damages-2020-6>.

entitled “Shincheonji and Coronavirus in South Korea: Sorting Fact from Fiction” published by a group of authors reveals that there were numerous biases and misinformation being spread in the media about this movement. In the introduction, the authors, who identify themselves as “scholars, human rights activists, reporters, and lawyers, all with a substantial experience in the field of new religious movements,” and none of whom are members of the SCJ, write:

We are concerned with the vast amount of inaccurate information circulating about Shincheonji and its involvement in the coronavirus crisis in South Korea. We have interviewed members of Shincheonji and Korean scholars, and examined documents from both the South Korean government and Shincheonji. We have prepared this white paper to help international organizations, the media and other concerned parties to better understand the situation.¹¹

The authors claim that the widespread misinformation about SCJ is an attempt to scapegoat an unpopular religious minority, not unlike what happened to Jews during the Black Death in 14th century Europe. Likewise, during the 16th and 17th century, Protestants in Catholic countries and Catholics in Protestant countries were often blamed for spreading the plague and were executed. In the document, the authors attempt to clarify, without making theological judgments, about what members of SCJ believe. According to them, it is misinformation to claim that SCJ members believe that they are immune from sickness and do not seek medical help even when fallen ill. Also, accusations that SCJ leaders and Covid-19 patients were uncooperative are not supported by evidence. However, the chairman of SCJ,

11. Massimo Introvigne et al. *Shincheonji and Coronavirus in South Korea: Sorting Fact from Fiction*, March 17, 2020, accessed August 29, 2022, <https://freedomofbelief.net/activities/shincheonji-and-coronavirus-in-south-korea-sorting-fact-from-fiction>.

Lee Man Hee did admit that there were mistakes made in the process of cooperation with the authorities and expressed his apologies in a press conference. According to the authors, what did happen because of widespread misinformation about SCJ in the media was that thousands of SCJ members faced discrimination. The authors also conclude that the campaign to delegitimize SCJ was not carried out by people who had the interest of the country in mind, but by Christian fundamentalist opponents who wanted to see a new religious movement which they labeled as a “cult” be vanquished.¹²

Infodemics are part of the phenomenon of exponential increase in information production which can be witnessed in the following areas:

1. *Internet of things*. With as many as 50 billion devices being interconnected, information generated by these machines can be as much or more than information produced by real people.
2. *Big data*. Information about everyone and everything is being gathered and analyzed by modern data analytics, with the aim that there will be important insights to help with decision-making on all kinds of issues related to humanity and the world.
3. *Advancement of science and invention*. The blistering pace of scientific discoveries and inventions have also contributed greatly to the increased rate of information production.
4. *Collaborative, knowledge-sharing society*. The collaborative nature of how individuals and groups work lead to much more information sharing and production.¹³

It should be noted that while there is an explosion of information, experts have also pointed to a corresponding decrease in the half-life of knowledge, which has been defined as “the amount of time that has to elapse before half of the knowledge or facts in a particular area is superseded or

12. *Ibid.*

13. Marc Rosenberg, “The Knowledge Explosion,” *Learning Solutions*, October 10, 2017, accessed August 29, 2022, <https://learningsolutionsmag.com/articles/2468/marc-my-words-the-coming-knowledge-tsunami>.

shown to be untrue.”¹⁴ In the book entitled *The Half-Life of Facts: Why Everything We Know Has an Expiration Date*, Samuel Arbesman observes:

Facts, when viewed as a large body of knowledge, are just as predictable [as radioactive material]. Facts, in the aggregate, have half-lives: We can measure the amount of time for half of a subject’s knowledge to be overturned. There is science that explores the rates at which new facts are created, new technologies developed, and even how facts spread. How knowledge changes can be understood scientifically.¹⁵

Facts, when considered in their particular fields, have different half-lives. For example, mathematical facts would sustain a longer half-life than medical facts, and facts in the field of the social sciences tend to have a much faster rate of decay than that of physical sciences.¹⁶ Some facts such as the number of continents on the earth remain unchanged over millions of years while other facts, such as the total population of cities and countries are in constant flux. When all is considered, however, it is undeniable that knowledge has an expiration date. In the face of unimaginable growth of information, some of which is blatantly false, and some of which can be considered fact at one moment and untruth the next; it is not difficult to perceive great risks to social and religious harmony presented by such reality. The challenge is compounded by the fact that most of this information is propagated online, and could be done at anyone’s whim – with a smartphone connected to the internet.

14. Wikipedia, “Half-Life of Knowledge,” September 21, 2019, accessed August 29, 2022. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Half-life_of_knowledge.

15. Samuel Arbesman, *The Half-Life of Facts: Why Everything We Know Has an Expiration Date* (New York: Penguin Group, 2013), Kindle.

16. R. D. A. “The Half-Life of Facts: Q&A with Samuel Arbesman,” *The Economist*, November 28, 2012, accessed August 29, 2022, <https://www.economist.com/babbage/2012/11/28/the-half-life-of-facts>.

(2) Increased Social Polarization

In this age, individuals can be both consumers as well as producers of news and entertainment. Anyone can distribute information to the public in seconds without having to go through any system of checks for value and credibility. A lot of the checking that takes place is after the information has already been publicized and has already made it to millions of individuals. And there is no guarantee that those checks ever reach the people who have already been exposed to and believed in the fake news. With the unimaginable rate of information production taking place nowadays, it is impossible to control fake news and disinformation, which not only concerns cultures and religions but seemingly every aspect of life. Fake news and disinformation about religions is damaging because it not only propagates false perceptions of other religions, but it also reinforces already deep-seated prejudices about other cultures and peoples. Research has shown that people's points of view (both positive and negative) about a particular issue tend to be hardened and intensified after they have been exposed to other people with similar perspectives. Many people might not have any direct experience about other cultures in their everyday life, but they have perceptions about them through what they read online or through news clips. That is why it is extremely damaging when prominent political or religious leaders make disparaging remarks about a particular group of people. This negative sentiment would be propagated around the world in matters of minutes and seconds. Negative information about groups serve to divide people into different polarities and contribute to the mentality of "us versus them" or "if you are not with me, then you are against me."

Social scientists have observed that social and religious polarization has been exacerbated by the development and widespread use of computer algorithms that help to deliver personalized content to users of the internet, especially social media applications. The goal of personalized content is that everyone gets access to information and materials that are of interest to them. The intention on the surface is an honorable one. After all, there is so much

information and content out there, and one does not want to waste time sorting through all sorts of trash before finding something that one is interested in. Technology companies develop algorithms to help to deliver the content that we are interested in a more expedient manner. If watching clips of cute animals and babies is your hobby, the algorithm knows that and gives you more of what you like. Amazon's algorithm follows your shopping habit and suggests products that it thinks you would like to have. Kindle suggests books that you might want to read based on what you have bought in the past. Netflix does the same thing with the movies you watch on its service.

On a personal level, these algorithms are extremely convenient. However, from the perspective of interreligious harmony, algorithms are dangerous. Unless one actively searches for diverse content concerning cultures and religions, your internet experience will basically revolve around things of interest to you, which may or may not expose you to various perspectives. On the other hand, if you show an interest in matters that lean towards anti-culture, anti-religion, etc., the computer algorithms will take note of these interests and deliver to you more of what you like. You might go from a slight bigot to a hard-core bigot by consuming more and more of the same sort of information that reinforces a certain perspective. Researchers have also shown that people are more likely to share social media posts that incite in them a negative feeling towards an individual or group.¹⁷ Thus, the tendency to expose oneself to only one particular type of information in addition to the sharing of negative posts can easily lead to social and religious enclavism and polarization. On a systemic level, this negative inclination which is further aided by computer algorithms is extremely detrimental to interreligious relations.

17. Saman Javed, Negative Social Media Posts Get Twice as Much Engagement than Positive Ones, Study Finds, *Independent*, June 22, 2021, accessed August 29, 2022, <https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/social-media-facebook-twitter-politics-b1870628.html>.

(3) Post-Truth Climate

It is ironic that while the digital age affords the world channels and means of communication and information exchange in unprecedented ways, the intellectual tendencies of humanity seem to be heading more towards untruths, alternative facts, and subjective feelings than towards truths and objective facts. The current intellectual mindset, which is reflected in the phenomena of 'infodemics' and social polarization described above, 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.¹⁸ 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."¹⁹ This definition suggests that although truth has not ceased to exist, 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—some aiming to drive public opinion in directions that suit a particular group or individual's agenda, while others are simply clickbait posted by people setting out to make some bucks. 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.

Some scholars have traced the origin for the post-truth mindset and politics to an intellectual movement called postmodernism, which developed in the mid to late 20th century in the fields of philosophy, arts, literature criticism, sociology, and so on. Without going into the details of the movement, what resulted from the various developments in thought was that,

18. Lee McIntyre, *Post-Truth* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2018), 1.

19. Oxford Languages, *Word of the Year 2016*, accessed August 29, 2021, <https://languages.oup.com/word-of-the-year/2016/>.

all aspects of life were filled with meaning that may or may not be understood by those involved. When interpreting a situation, each person not only considers the particular political, social, historical, and cultural assumptions of the characters being deconstructed, but these same categories belonging to the person doing the deconstructing are also brought in to play. Because the factors involved change from one interpretive act to the next, conclusions derived from the process would also be affected, and may not come out the same. According to Lee McIntyre, “The postmodernist approach is one in which everything is questioned, and little is taken at face value. There is no right answer, only narrative.”²⁰

Postmodernism represents a marked departure from the modernist thinking since the Enlightenment, that science and reasoning can provide the foundation for knowledge and objective universal truths that all people and cultures can embrace. In this intellectual climate, science becomes only one among a variety of narratives, which may or may not take empirical facts as a starting point, and all can be seen as valid. Thus, scientific certainty when it comes to such things as climate change can be denied or explained based on other types of reasoning rather than proven scientific evidence. The same can be said for any other issue in human life because assessment of reality is no longer contingent on proven and accepted facts. Thus, what began seemingly as an “intellectual fad,” in the words of the philosopher Daniel Dennett, came to have extremely grave consequences towards humanity, not in the least the undermining—and even rejection—of the notion of truth. Dennet states:

Sometimes, views can have terrifying consequences that might actually come true. I think what the postmodernists did was truly evil. They are responsible for the intellectual fad that made it respectable to be cynical about truth and facts. You’d

20. McIntyre, *Post-Truth*, 125.

have people going around say: “Well, you’re part of that crowd who still believe in facts.”²¹

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 false. Many political leaders around the world are notorious for spouting and refusing to recant information that has been proven untrue. Even when definitive evidence is presented to them, they continue to ignore the truth or simply find ways to justify the accuracy of their claims. The second distinctive characteristic of the post-truth 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, as well as spreading it to other people, despite being presented with evidence to the contrary. This is the more mind boggling considering that the present era has been called the “information age.” According to Chris Ategeka, “The spread of selective truths, untruths, falsehoods, and misinformation has created a new world disorder. Our willingness to knowingly or unknowingly share content without thinking critically about it has been exploited by the powers that be and has trapped us in a vortex.”²² Surprisingly, when leaders are found to have spoken untruth, they seem to suffer very little—if any—consequence for their action. In this information

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21. Carole Cadwalladr. “Daniel Dennett: ‘I Begrudge Every Hour I have to Spend Worrying about Politics,’” *Guardian*, February 12, 2017, accessed August 29, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2017/feb/12/daniel-dennett-politics-bacteria-bach-back-dawkins-trump-interview>.
 22. Christ Ategeka, *The Unintended Consequences of Technology: Solutions, Breakthroughs, and the Restart We Need* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley and Sons, Inc. 2022), 161.

age, ignorance is not due to lack of facts, but due to seemingly willful ignorance and 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. 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.”²³ 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 incredible volume of knowledge, this technology has unfortunately been used to create 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 digital technology. It was hoped that fundamental truths and values could be agreed upon as people shared their worldviews as well as cultural and religious perspectives. In reality, the world since 1990, the year that the World Wide Web was born, has so far 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,

23. McIntyre, *Post-truth*, 11.

religious and cultural perspectives from them, most choose to associate only those with whom they feel most comfortable and reaffirmed. People who intentionally venture into forums participated by those 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 Russia, China and the Philippines 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 does not match their preferences are automatically filtered out. The result of this practice of self-segregation and the consumption of information (true or otherwise) that only reinforces a particular perspective leads to further religious, social and political polarization. As Cass Sunstein stated:

If your Twitter feed consists of people who think as you do, or if your Facebook friends share your convictions, the argument pool will be sharply limited. Indeed, shifts should occur with individuals not engaged in discussion but instead consulting only ideas—on radio, television, or the Internet—to which they are predisposed. The tendency of such consultations will be to entrench and reinforce preexisting positions—often resulting in extremism.²⁴

The Mission of Interreligious Dialogue

(1) Re-Affirming the Work of Interreligious Dialogue

In the face of obstacles to interreligious and ecumenical relations presented by the digital milieu, the Church may choose to go with the flow, to accept this reality as part of the ongoing secularization and democratization process as well as the strengthening of the technocratic

24. Cass R. Sunstein, *#Republic: Divided Democracy in the Age of Social Media* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2017), Kindle edition.

paradigm taking place globally, or the Church can reorganize itself and find the 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 religion and people of faith, the Church must confront the situation by deeply committing itself to a mission agenda of dialogue across denominations and religious traditions. 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.”²⁵ 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 individuals and groups 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.

Fortunately for the Catholic Church, interreligious dialogue is not a newfangled idea. There has long been an awareness within the Church that interreligious dialogue is integrally tied to the Church’s mission and its very existence. Since Vatican II, whether through official documents of the Church or through various practical efforts, the Church at all levels has actively engaged in interreligious dialogue in order to proclaim the kingdom

25. Peter C. Phan, “Being Religious as being Interreligious,” *Rumiforum*, July 2, 2011, accessed October 1, 2018, <https://youtu.be/YrSCMZu47HM>.

of God – the same kingdom that was proclaimed by Jesus Christ in his earthly mission. 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 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, SJ asserts that between God and the poor there is a defense pact that helps ensure their ultimate freedom and victory.²⁶ 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 proclaim 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."²⁷ Members of the Church exercise different

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

27. Dialogue and Proclamation, 43.

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 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.”²⁸ 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 principle of engagement.

(2) Re-Contextualizing Interreligious Dialogue

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.”²⁹ 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. While the fundamental forms of dialogue may not change, the applications certainly have to be adapted to the digital context. Dialogue can no longer be

28. Paul F. Knitter, “Mission and Dialogue,” *Missiology: An International Review* 33, no.2 (April 2005): 209

29. John Paul II, “Address to the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue,” November 13, 1992, (accessed August 29, 2011, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/1992/november/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19921113_dialogo-interreligioso.html), 2.

restricted to physical space. Much of what is informing people's ideas and opinions, and how they are expressing them take place in the non-physical environment of cyberspace. Cyberspace is where religious fundamentalism is propagated, where extremist manifestos are published, where potential terrorists are recruited, and where instructions for how to make bombs to carry out violent campaigns are posted. The Internet is not just a traditional mass media platform like newspapers and books. It is a space with anthropological meaning and significance, where people are interconnected, and thus allows for interactions. Therefore, dialogue must intentionally be implemented in this space. As Pope Benedict XVI asserted in the Message for the 47th Communication Day, "These spaces, when engaged in a wise and balanced way, help to foster forms of dialogue and debate which, if conducted respectfully and with concern for privacy, responsibility and truthfulness, can reinforce the bonds of unity between individuals and effectively promote the harmony of the human family."³⁰ If the Church once tried to enter mosques and synagogues in order to carry out dialogue and build relations, the same must done in regards to the online platforms where people of various religious traditions and ideologies congregate. In many ways the cyberspace environment is much more challenging because unlike the physical spaces, the entities within this environment are innumerable. Although opportunities for dialogue are limitless, the sheer task of it is simply daunting.

Dialogue in the digital era therefore requires a new consciousness about what "everyday life" means. Everyday life is no longer just about meeting people at the market or relating to a fellow worker at the office. Everyday life also includes all the encounters on social media, the "friends" on Facebook, "the followers" on Instagram and Twitter, and the peers on discussion forums. The term "expert" is no longer just about people with degrees in

30. Benedict XVI, Message for the 47th Communication Day, May 12, 2013, accessed August 29, 2022, http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/messages/communications/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20130124_47th-world-communications-day.html .

theology, scriptures, spirituality and the like engaging in seminars and discussions in nicely arranged and air-conditioned rooms at churches, academic institutions and even hotel convention halls. The expert also includes those who are able to penetrate the various platforms on the Internet and engage in dialogue with other “experts” in that online environment. Therefore, as Pope Benedict XVI affirms, the new context requires the “commitment of all who are conscious of the value of dialogue, reasoned debate and logical argumentation; of people who strive to cultivate forms of discourse and expression which appeal to the noblest aspirations of those engaged in the communication process.”³¹ The mission of dialogue for the Church now requires a whole new outlook for what constitutes the various forms of dialogue that has traditionally been promulgated by the Church, understood by scholars, and implemented by the people.

(3) Promoting Serendipitous Encounters

Some of the most rewarding experiences in life come as unplanned events – a birthday surprise, an unexpected call from an old friend, a sudden proposal for collaboration from a colleague, a chance encounter with a person, an animal or a natural scenery. While serendipitous encounters are countless in our lives, and most may not affect our lives in any consequential way, others can be outright life changing. All of us can perhaps recall at least a few such events in our lives. Although by definition, serendipity is supposed to be ‘serendipitous,’ meaning whatever happens is ‘unplanned,’ ‘unanticipated,’ ‘accidental;’ nevertheless, serendipity can only happen when we live our lives in such a way that facilitates greater opportunities for serendipitous encounters. One who spends all his time in the house, not willing to leave except to get groceries will likely decrease his odds for experiencing serendipitous encounters. One who only engages with a certain kind of content online will definitely decrease the chance for exposure to

31. Ibid.

other views and perspectives. Therefore, in order to create opportunities for more unexpected, but potentially rewarding and life-changing encounters in our life, even in digital spaces, we must be willing to take the conscientious steps into unfamiliar spaces, to read and listen to new voices, to be open to different experiences, to click on a content that we might not normally access, and to be willing to share our own stories with others. Richard H. Thaler and Cass R. Sunstein says that “surprise and serendipity can be fun for people, and good for them too, and it may not be entirely wonderful if our primary source of information is about what people like us like. Sometimes, it’s good to learn what people unlike us like – and to see whether we might even like that.”³²

(4) Promoting Digital Literacy and Wisdom

As ICT has an important role in interreligious dialogue, the informed and prudent use of ICT is essential to promoting this mission task. Digital literacy is needed in order to:

Distinguish authentic news and information from fake news, misinformation and disinformation. Fake news has been around as long as there has been human society, so this is not an invention of the digital age. However, what is unique to the digital age is the quantity of fake news, misinformation and disinformation that is produced every second around the world. With the aid of ICT, this type of information can be produced, disseminated and shared in an extremely fast manner. Moreover, with the aid of ICT, this kind of information can be packaged and presented in such a way that can get people to believe that what is being said is true, believable and should be shared. Technology is helping to make “deep fake” videos of famous people speaking look so real that an average person unequipped with technological training would not be able to tell the difference. Thus, in order to stay away from buying into fake news, misinformation and disinformation

32. Richard H. Thaler and Cass R Sunstein, *Nudge: Improving Decisions about Health, Wealth, and Happiness* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 97.

that instigate intercultural and interreligious conflict, there must be some digital education to assist individuals in making distinctions between what is authentic information and what is divisive and destructive. When people are able to distinguish between valuable information and untrue and destructive information, they are less likely to share and disseminate content that is detrimental to social and religious peace and harmony.

Make critical evaluations of religious and cultural perspectives found on various websites. The internet is filled with perspectives on all kinds of matters from the most trivial and mundane to the most profound issues in human life. In the present context where everyone and anyone can be producers and curators of information, all have the potential to be influencers by presenting their personal views on politics, religion, culture, and so on. Unfortunately, people with cursory knowledge of a particular issue often end up presenting very strong views to persuade others. Through the ability to make an interesting video, their fame, their look, or their skillful use of language and technological techniques, some people can attract massive followings and exert great influence on their audience despite not being deeply informed on the subject matter which they are addressing. Therefore, it is important that each person, when listening to a particular cultural or religious perspective, raises the necessary critical questions to evaluate whether what is being said is credible and beneficial towards interreligious harmony. While the internet is a forum where anyone can express themselves, it is the responsibility of the consumer of content to make informed judgments about what to view and how to react to what he or she sees. Digital literacy and wisdom are necessary in order to help individuals know how to navigate the digital spaces and thereby enrich their online experience and diversify the kind of encounters that they can have in cyberspace.

Overcome being led into polarization and extremism. It is indeed convenient to have computer algorithms help to 'personalize' the online content for each individual user. Algorithms attempt to save the consumer time by eliminating all the things that they think the user would not be

interested in. While this has some advantages, especially when a bald man does not have to repeatedly see advertisements for shampoo, over-dependence on algorithms greatly increases the risk for social and political polarization and extremism. If a person who has some latent prejudices towards Islam accesses content that affirms these prejudices, he will then get continually served with more such content because computer algorithms see that this is what he likes. So what was initially inconsequential prejudices may turn into full-fledged Islamophobia exhibited in hate speech and other anti-Muslim actions. As people enjoy accessing content that affirms their own prejudices and interests, algorithms indeed support prurient, banal and self-centered tendencies within us. Thus, digital education needs to aim at helping individuals understand the working of computer algorithms and other means pulling individuals down the path of fundamentalism, extremism and polarization. Without knowledge of the workings of ICT, informed use of ICT, and self-awareness, we set ourselves up for going down extreme paths that are counterproductive to dialogue, mutual cooperation, fraternity and interculturality.

Resistance to the technocratic paradigm. In the encyclical *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis critiques what he calls the 'technocratic paradigm' being widely employed for social and economic development with great negative consequences to human and natural ecology. Pope Francis characterizes the technocratic paradigm as an "undifferentiated and one-dimensional paradigm" that aims for "indefinite or infinite growth" by mastering, possessing, controlling, manipulating and transforming others.³³ "It is based on the lie that there is an infinite supply of the earth's goods, and this leads to the planet being squeezed dry beyond every limit."³⁴ Unfortunately, technology has become so ingrained in human life that "the idea of promoting a different cultural paradigm and employing technology as a mere instrument is nowadays inconceivable. The technological paradigm has

33. *Laudato Si*, no. 108

34. *Ibid.*

become so dominant that it would be difficult to do without its resources and even more difficult to utilize them without being dominated by their internal logic.”³⁵ Nevertheless, Pope Francis insists that there must be a new outlook, a new approach towards life, education, and policy making, and new spirituality in order to counter the increasing domination of technology in our lives. Only through digital education can we acquire the necessary knowledge of the benefits and pitfalls of technology so that we retain to the role of controller of technology rather than being controlled by it.

(5) Training a New Generation of Faith Communicators

In 2020, amid the Covid-19 pandemic, the Dicastery of Communication of the Vatican launched an initiative called “Faith Communication in the Digital World” in which selected young communicators “through a program of online and in-presence meetings and workshop experiences – will acquire in-depth skills on digital communication in the perspective of spiritual formation.”³⁶ In its announcement, the Dicastery also wrote, “The Catholic Church is living in a digital age and considers it necessary to improve its communication and to offer spiritual education through online platforms, especially social media and mobile applications. The recent Covid-19 crisis has led to an increased sense of urgency to address the question on how the Church can and should be present online in order to respond adequately to people’s spiritual needs. The Church considers it necessary to learn effective communication methods, ensuring a social media presence that bears witness to the ‘style’ of the Gospel.”³⁷ As part of the Steering Committee for this initiative, I have had a chance to be informed on the various activities and projects of the first cohort of 16 young, vibrant and creative communicators from around the world. In

35. Ibid.

36. Dicastery of Communication, accessed August 29, 2022, <https://www.comunicazione.va/en/eventi/2020/faith-communication-in-the-digital-world-iniziativa-di-formazione.html>.

37. Ibid.

December 2021, the Dicastery also selected the second cohort of 16 more young communicators to participate in this year-long program.

This initiative by the Dicastery of Communication is praiseworthy and should be imitated at all levels of the Church. If governments and political parties have their “trolls” in the millions on the internet to spread propaganda and defend themselves, the Church also needs to have its “army” of brilliant faith communicators who have the technological skills and wisdom to access various internet platforms in order to communicate with others with the goal of promoting mutual collaboration, understanding, empathy and good will. If the Church is not pro-active in populating cyberspace with its own contingent of faith communicators, it risks becoming a victim of infodemics waged by fundamentalists, extremists and anti-religious fanatics.

Conclusion

As the Church carries out its mission in the digital era with its multiple challenges, not the least being the post-truth mentality that threatens to disrupt unity within the Church as well as interreligious relationships, it is incumbent upon Church leaders to be proactive in its mission of dialogue in order to promote internal unity as well as harmony across religions. 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 and disinformation. 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.”³⁸ 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 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 spatial contexts— analog and digital.

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38. John Paul II, Message to the People of Asia, March 2, 1988, https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/1981/february/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19810221_manila-auditorium.html, 5.