

**Vo Huong Nam. *Digital Media and Youth Discipleship: Pitfalls and Promise*. UK: Langham Monographs, 2023, 271 pp. ISBN 9781839738821 (pdf).**

The number of people who are not affiliated with any religion and yet describe themselves as spiritual continues to grow. This phenomenon occurs not just in Western societies but throughout the world. Vo Huong Nam, the author of *Digital Media and Youth Discipleship: Pitfalls and Promise*, attests to this rise in his native country and the difficulties retaining youth in the Evangelical Church of Vietnam. He attributes the growth of the spiritual but not religious category to the power and influence of digital media coinciding with the church's failure in providing spiritual formation for its more youthful members. For Vo, a bright and shiny object has garnered their shortened attention spans. In this book he sets out to help Christian leadership bolster their spiritual formation efforts.

After an extensive introduction, Vo organizes his argument in five chapters. Chapter One reviews the current state of the digital culture and various Christian responses. Chapter Two explores the impact of digital media more broadly, concentrating on its profound influence on the younger generation. Chapter Three introduces various spiritual formation approaches. Desiring to obtain an ecumenical variety, Vo focuses on the spiritual formation processes of John Calvin, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Henri Nouwen, intermixed with other current approaches. Chapter Four describes a "theology of discipleship to youth" based on Bonhoeffer's experience and writings related to youth ministry. Chapter Five aims to integrate Vo's preceding chapters by providing a pastoral practice for youth ministry, especially in Vietnam.

One must applaud Vo Huong Nam for identifying the lack of spiritual formation in our churches – and not just for the youth or young adults! Many of our faith formation programs focus on teaching the core beliefs of the Christian faith, with the objective that participants understand these beliefs. We intend to increase *what you know* about the Christian faith.

However, this is only one leg of the formation tripod as defined by Augustine, who insisted that Christian formation was essentially an

effort in cultivating what God has given to each of us: Faith, Hope (spiritual formation) and Charity. Knowing the Faith is important, but a Christian must also grow in Hope, which Augustine identified as prayer and this reviewer as spiritual formation. It's not what you know but *who you know*. Its aim is to assist the Christian in their relationship with God. It helps them find the spiritual practice that works best for their personality. It's a customization effort, which honors the dignity of each human being and helps them respond to God. This may partly explain why churches often struggle in delivering this formation endeavor.

However, for Vo to endorse spiritual formation, he attempts to address the age-old dilemma between works and faith. That is, what is the role of human effort and what is God's role in this formation. In some traditions this is not even a question to ask, as they understand nature and grace to work together. But even for his tradition, Vo devotes an inordinate amount of discussion, weaving in and out of the nature versus grace theological debate through a variety of sources, resulting in a book which is more theological and abstract than practical pastoral application. In the end, he struggles to describe the human role or responsibility in spiritual formation except to say that it must be intentional. Likewise, Vo fails to stress the beauty of God's respect for human agency.

One will not find in this book a direct connection between digital media and spiritual formation. While Vo rightly encourages parents and the church to understand new dialogic methods of learning and the need to teach media literacy, he does not venture into the realm of digital media as a form of mediation with the divine – something akin to the role of more familiar forms of media, such as prayer books, paintings, icons, or statues. Perhaps this is a bridge too far. Instead, Vo endorses a more important and conventional approach – the development of silence, reflection and prayer unencumbered by digital media.

Although the number of sources referenced in this work is impressive, too many are employed. For example, even when stating he is providing three approaches to Christian spiritual formation by referencing Calvin, Bonhoeffer, and Nouwen, Vo includes additional positions.

The same could be said for his discussion on media and his synopsis of a theology of youth ministry. This book aims to help “pastors, church leaders, Sunday school teachers, youth workers, youth’s parents, and those who are interested in mentoring the youth of the digital age” (p. 3). One wonders how confused they might be with the barrage of interpretations alongside abstract theological reasoning. One may not see the forest for the trees – and there are many trees.

Returning to Vo’s introduction, he claims youth are leaving the church because the church “missed the importance of digital media or does not know what to do about it.” One wonders, as with all human behavior, if there might be more complex reasons for their leaving.

Perhaps the most important contribution of this book is how it helps us to think about (or to rethink) youth formation in a digital age. Vo states he desires to help church leadership *disciple* young people in our digital culture. Many may not be familiar with the concept of discipling – or the use of the word disciple as a verb. Does it mean “to teach?” Is it equivalent to the Catholic or Orthodox “to catechize?” To be a disciple is to be a student – to have the discipline to listen, learn or practice. It is to follow the master. It’s more passive than active. Vo’s book will prompt new questions, such as, might we use digital media to listen to our young people – to give them a voice – so that this part of the Body of Christ can be heard?

**John Osman**

Catholic University of America, Washington, DC, USA  
Loyola Institute of Ministry, New Orleans, LA, USA