

DIGITAL COMMUNICATIONS AND THE RELIGIOUS LIFE



It has been about 40 years since the so-called Digital Age began, but if one looks at the countless changes that have taken place in all sectors of society, it seems as if centuries have gone by! This makes us realize that we are not dealing with just a “change of era” historically comparable to that of the Industrial Revolution, but above all with an era/age marked by profound anthropological and cultural changes that are making an enormous impact on society as a whole. It is clear that the digital world is not simply a mirror or reproduction of the real world. Instead, it is a different way of existing, of relating to one another, and perhaps we can also say of “inculturating” ourselves.

The religious life too has gone through continual development over the years precisely because it walks a parallel path with the story of humanity and of the Church, seeking to remain, in every situation and time, faithful to the Lord. Historical events led the Church to Vatican Council II, which took a fresh look at things beginning internally, that is: with her own situation. On the ecclesial level, it was precisely Vatican II that showed great sensitivity to the instruments of social communication by means of its first decree, *Inter Mirifica*, which not only evaluated the world’s technological development

but also clearly stated that technology is a gift and must be used with discernment.

BETWEEN OBLIGATIONS AND FREEDOM

It cannot be denied that a great number of religious are online today. But the problem is not being online; the problem is how religious *present themselves* online. Therefore it is urgent that they become aware of their call to be faithful testimonies of Christ in the digital world. Like testimony in any other environment, religious testimony is an obligation freely taken on through the public profession of the evangelical counsels.

So the digital world is also a field of mission, of apostolate, of testimony. Everyone knows that this world is riddled with risks and traps that need to be identified, fought and steered clear of so as to avoid falling into a kind of ingenuousness. But at the same time these risks are a reminder of the need for increased discernment. And here we are speaking about true spiritual discernment—an undeniably powerful treasure of the religious tradition. No religious can be faithful to his/her consecration without the discernment that enables a person to make free choices.

Speaking about freedom, I want to underscore that the obligations of the consecrated life, freely-assumed through public profession of the evangelical counsels, become an important testimony online, where a false freedom is propagated—a “freedom” that is synonymous with the abolition of all constraints rather than with the offer of a possibility of choices. For this reason, there is a pressing need for genuine spiritual discernment so as to be able to make the right



choices, that is, those in harmony with one's style of life. A consecrated person's fruitful presence online cannot be improvised!

CONNECTION AND COMMUNION

At first glance, these two words don't seem to have anything in common but I think that they have an extremely important point of contact. We already know that a person has to be connected in order to be online. We also know that this connection involves a wide array of link-ups that put us in touch with the whole world. So where does communion fit into the picture?

A consecrated person shouldn't think that he/she should be online just because everyone else is. Instead, a religious should focus on *why* he/she is there and the *way* in which he/she should be there. Without this, we remain on the technical level, perhaps thinking that we should be able to competently use the Internet because we have to preach the Word. To be an apostle is not the same as to "preach." Consecrated persons don't need a lot of words; they don't need to spread a lot of beautiful religious messages. This is not genuine evangelization. What they must do is witness to the fact that we are servants of communion because this is what the Lord did! And many times this testimony calls for silence.

Let us recall what Benedict XVI said in his message for the 46th Day of World Communications: "When word and silence become mutually exclusive, communication breaks down [...]; when they complement one another, however, communication acquires value and meaning."

Silence as a space for mutual listening is a true challenge in a universe in which words seem to predominate more and more. Speaking without listening is only chatter and is not beneficial to anyone...all those words are lost in a void. Silence that allows the other the first word is a fruitful dwelling place, capable of creating genuine and solid



relationships in our so-called "liquid" world. This is the genuine communication-communion offered to us as model by the Gospel. And let it be clear that a welcoming silence is not muteness. In fact, a person can talk at length and say nothing, falling into a kind of "speaking mutism." If a religious who is online does not always have a ready reply but is able to listen to the problems and worries of another person and point to the Lord as a suitable "search engine" for finding the right answer, then we can say that that religious is an apostle, a true promoter of communion. Our risen Lord himself gave us an example of this on his journey to Emmaus in the company of two disciples (cf. Lk. 24: 13-35).

We know that digital communications is a subject open to the future, to reflection. It is dynamic because its premise is the human capacity for development.

What remains firm for us is precisely the essence of the religious life as the *following of Christ*: we are called to live our consecration to the full, including in the digital world. May the Lord teach us every day how to be faithful to him in the concrete situations of daily life!

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