COMMUNICATION AND COMMUNION IN RELIGIOUS LIFE

Challenges and Prospects of Religious Life in an Era of Communication Revolution

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Abstract: The world of communications has travelled a long distance from Chavara's rudimentary press at Mannanam to the app of the liturgical calendar on your smartphone. The author explores communication and communion in religious life and reflects on the challenges and prospects of religious life in an era of communication revolution. A good religious is a good communicator. However, the 'media-religious' encounter and experience modern phenomenon. Cultured communication technologies are at the service of the community and since it is a powerful tool for evangelization, the Church calls for an active engagement of the media through spiritual network and worship-space. However, the encounter is full of challenges such as culture of instant gratification, culture of graphics, culture of uncentered pluralism, culture of individualism and culture of virtual reality. The study also explores some special issues for deeper reflection such as the old mind-set and new technologies of communication, the loss and gain of enclosures and the vows in the light of the cultured communication technologies. The study concludes with a call to pause, look, reflect, act and to address the existential challenges of life and mission, now!

Keywords: Religious, mission, communication, community, revolution, technology, formation, monastery, internet, computer, relationships, machines, information, productivity, virtualization, smartphones, tablets, Church, religious, globalization, Pope, media, culture, apostolate, modernity, women, television, entertainment, monastery, manuscripts, monks, scriptoria, tradition, medieval, Bible, apostolate, abbeys, cloister, internet, monasticism, culture, cyberspace, Dharmaram, Facebook, formation, intimacy, abstinence, mortification, fidelity, renunciation, postmodernism, graphics, postmodernism, sensuality, multi-tasking, interiority, YouTube, individualism, compassion, connectedness, tenderness, enclosures, vows.

1. Introduction

A good religious is a good communicator. His/her call and mission are rooted in the four relational communications – with God, self, community and the environment (John Paul II, 1985). Indeed, we live in a privileged age of communication revolution, wherein communication-technologies shape and re-shape the way we live, move and have our being. Today, communication technologies are also defining the quality of religious life. These technologies, which are still evolving, challenge the meaning of the religious call and effect the life-style within the formation houses, monasteries, communities and outside.

The world is utterly and irreversibly changing right now thanks to the exponential growth of the Internet, a new global communications tool linking humans together in real time as never before. This sort of massive computer networking changes human relationships with time and space in a fundamental way. It is not an exaggeration to remark that much of the world is experiencing an important shift in the way in which it works. This shift is being experienced also in the religious life. Today, the natural world is being transformed not only by using matter and energy, but also by information, leading to a new explosion of productivity. In one way, virtualization is the increased substitution of matter by information. This substitution has profound consequences for the relations of humankind to nature, between humans and other humans, and between humans and machines. This new layer of information is becoming increasingly prominent as virtualization intensifies. This study attempts to explore the changing communication landscape and culture as it affects and impacts the communication, communion and community experiences of religious life. Our focus mainly is on the technology-mediated communication and its impact on religious experiences, expressions and lifestyle.

2. Media-Religious Encounters and Experiences

Of people in the young age group (18 to 24 year olds), those whom religious communities recruit, smart phone use is almost 70 percent, internet use is 55 percent. While for those who are between 40 and 50 years of age, mobile phones, smart-phones, tablets and internet are machines/technologies that have come up into the market, slowly as fads of the rich and powerful, for the younger ones of our communities, and for the children of our families who are born into the digital culture, these are but essential elements of life. They

communicate, play with, and make sense of their daily experiences, in and through the digital machines. These marvellous mini machines such as smart phones are convenient and practical, combining thousands of functions from a flashlight or calculator to a car starter or heart rate monitor. They promise ease and efficiency, and are modifying or replacing every aspect of life, including matters of faith. Indeed, we cannot live without communication. It is equally true that we cannot communicate properly with the digital generation kids without the language and technologies of communication.

Whether you articulate it or not, you probably already have ideas about media and culture that affect your opinions about smartphones and the Church. This study does not argue about opinions, but seeks to uncover an interrelationship – to explore where and how, or if at all, the dots connect – between the new media technologies and consecrated life. While the digital technologies do not change religious life, they do change the way it is perceived. Changes in the media communication in the world have had ripple effects in religious communities and congregations.

Today we are living in a world that is growing ever 'smaller' and where, as a result, it would seem to be easier for all of us to be neighbours. Developments in travel and communications technology are bringing us closer together and making us more connected, even as globalization makes us increasingly interdependent. Nonetheless, divisions, which are sometimes quite deep, continue to exist within our human family (Pope Francis, 2014).

In a world like this, media can help us feel closer to one another, creating a sense of unity of the human family, which can in turn inspire solidarity and serious efforts to ensure a more dignified life for all. Good communication helps us grow closer, to know one another better, and ultimately, to grow in unity. The walls which divide us can be broken down only if we are prepared to listen to and learn from one another.

A culture of encounter demands that we be ready not only to give, but also to receive. Media can help us greatly in this, especially nowadays, when the networks of human communication have made unprecedented advances. The internet, in particular, offers immense possibilities for encounter and solidarity. This is something truly good, a gift from God.

3. Religious Attitude towards Communication Technologies

The choices of religious users about technology are negotiated through different ways than those within other social groups. Among the religious congregations and groups, there exists, yet different ways in which they encounter, engage and negotiate with new media technologies. Such attitudes vary from the extreme pessimistic to the extreme optimistic ones. This is because choices within religious groups are guided not just by needs and desires, but occur within the framework of a distinct worldview laden with spiritual meanings and values. This structure guides how they interpret the world. Traditional religious groups often see the world as composed of that which is sacred and that which is profane or secular. Their desire is to engage and interact with the sacred and shun, or at least distance themselves from the secular. Progressive religious orders, on the other hand, view the world as a sacred place and consider technology as "neutral medium" which could be engaged in and made use of for spiritual uplift and to strengthen community experiences of their members even as to aid their apostolate of reaching out to the people of God with the Good News that is Jesus Christ.

For many conservative religious groups religious practice and lifestyle are shaped by a rejection of modernity, which is seen as secular. For others, modernity and post modernity are God-given opportunities for the positive encounter of the Divine Spirit with the given human realities.

For the Church in general, and the consecrated men and women in particular, technology becomes a problematic area, as it is often equated with modernity and post modernity. If technology is not rejected outright for this reason, it must undergo negotiation within the community so it can become acceptable for use or shaped in ways that allow it to be included within the sacred part of life. The process of this negotiation depends on the traditions and narratives of the religious community. It can include conducting certain rituals to 'sanctify' or set-apart the technology for religious use, or issuing official statements that present the technology in acceptable ways to the group. For groups that in general consider the use of technology as less problematic or compatible with a religious lifestyle, this negotiation may simply result in members modelling appropriate use within the community and leaders praising certain forms of practice while discouraging other uses.

Technology is often seen as a symbol of modernity and secular values, which they consciously distance themselves from. Thus use of technology is a point of great debate and law making within the community. Discussions on the use of technology are often framed in terms of possibilities and dangers, from discussing the boundaries of how the Church may engage in media ministry, to forbidding televisions, Internet and mobile phones in formation houses as the epitome of secular values and entertainment. If the use of television in religious houses was a point of debate up until few years ago, now the use of mobile phones among the members have come up as an issue of contention in religious community gatherings to chapters among most of the religious congregations. Many of them have drafted laws regulating and restricting its use among the members. Others are still negotiating it. In many of such avenues, a digital divide is visibly seen, in as much as a generational-cultural gap. Wherever such discussions arise, it would be proper to keep this in mind that the digital technology belongs to the younger generation of our time. As they are born into it, the youngsters have come to live on with such technological environment – the new media revolution – as natural as they breathe the air. As for the older generation, they carry a different mind-set, for they are children of the analogue, not of the digital sphere.

4. The Church's Call for an Active Engagement of the Media

The Church, from its part, has slowly opened up herself to the new media technologies. This openness is vividly seen from time of the ground-breaking ecclesial document *Inter Mirifica* in 1963. From that time on, every Pope spoke clearly on the necessity and manner of the Church's engagement with the media of social communication. Pope Francis, in his message on the 2014 World Day of Communications made this ardent call:

> Let us boldly become citizens of the digital world. The Church needs to be concerned for, and present in, the world of communication, in order to dialogue with people today and to help them encounter Christ. She needs to be a Church at the side of others, capable of accompanying everyone along the way… The revolution taking place in communications media and in information technologies represents a great and thrilling challenge; may we respond to that challenge with fresh energy and imagination as we seek to share with others the beauty of God (Pope Francis, 2014).

5. Religious' Historic Take on Communication Technologies

Religious communities, especially the monastic tradition has contributed much to the development of communication technology. In ancient times the monasteries undertook cave painting and copying of the scripture and other manuscripts. When the Benedictine monk, at the monastery of Christ in the Desert, created a website, they claimed to be reviving a tradition that began when monastic scribes created the first illuminated manuscripts. One of the monks told a reporter for The New York Times that their work "goes back to the ancient tradition of the scribes, taking information and making it beautiful, into art." But, as Edward Mendelson (1996) has shown, the relation between modern Web sites and medieval scriptoria, or writing rooms, is even closer than these monks may have guessed. The technology that connects all the millions of pages on the World Wide Web derives ultimately from techniques invented by the scribes and scholars who copied out the Bible more than a thousand years ago.

Such historical connection between communication technologies and monastic life would explain why there is a growing awareness and initiative from many religious congregations to enter into the arena of communication media as an apostolate and part of adaption to the signs of the times. In recent times, most of the monasteries, abbeys, cloistered convents and religious houses have registered themselves on the cyber-space. The global Catholic media network, Eternal Word Television Network (EWTN), that operates in 68 countries was founded and is run by Mother Angelica, a cloistered nun, initially at the garage of her convent in Alabama. The Alabama nuns are a familiar sight on the programmes of EWTN.

6. Whither Communication Technologies within the Cloister?

Recently, there was news that a cloistered abbey known for its orthodoxy and traditional practices, located in a remote village in Israel has opened its doors to the web and internet, placed its life and mission on the cyber-sphere. When one of the monks was asked how the traditional monastery feels when it received the internet, he said, "the net belongs to consecrated persons. By this medium now we can reach out to the people where they really are, for prayer and spiritual support." When the reporter asked another monk, who was not as enthusiastic as others to have the internet in the cloister if it is not wonderful that they could save a lot of time and energy by the help of these new medium of communication, he said, "Indeed, it is good to

save time. But, on the final judgment the Lord God will ask, "what did you do with the time you saved making use of these expensive technology"!

Two different attitudes and ways of thought are given above. Both characterize the dynamism of a religious' engagement and adoption of the new communication technologies. The ultimate question is, "should the monastic traditions and spirit be changed when adapting to the culture and benefits of the new media technologies, or should the new media technologies be transformed to suit the monastic traditions and practices? My humble opinion is to take a middle path.

The traditional and age-old practices and values of monasticism and religious lifestyle have lasting significance. They represent a distinct culture. When the religious engage in and make use of the communication technologies, it should be for the benefit of the world, and for their own growth and the advancement of the works of the Church. The glory of God should be the ultimate aim. If the specific engagement of a monk on the net would further the glory of God and the good of the Church, then so be it. If it is just for the conformity with the world, then let him abstain from it. The new generation children, youth and the people at large speak a new language – that of the new media. The monk cannot afford to be ignorant of this language. Let him communicate His spirituality and mission with the world, in a language that they understand. Here there is the need of framing the public use and satisfying cognitive dissonance within many members about the danger of this technology. Language becomes a powerful tool for making a technology that is considered secular, acceptable within certain boundaries (Heidi Campbell, 2005).

7. Cultured Technology at the Service of the Community

Barzilai's and Barzilai-Nahon's idea of "cultured technology" proves helpful in moving towards a religious-communication-media approach. It recognizes that technology is shaped as it is domesticated to fit into users daily lives, and that use and design processes can be shaped by the values of the community. A religious community's recognition of their ability to 'culture' the Internet allows them to more easily incorporate it into the life of the group. This points to the fact that adoption of a technology by a user group, especially a religious one, can enable them to construct or affirm certain cherished values. It recognizes that technology use reshapes public and private boundaries, as technology serves to perform a particular role within the community that can promote or sustain certain values.

8. Spiritualizing Communication Technology

The linguistic legitimization and pro-active culturing of communication technologies by religious groups may be termed as the "spiritualizing of technology". This involves speaking and conceiving of technology in ways that allows it to be used in religious activities and spiritual life practices. Spiritualizing technology involves creating and maintaining certain rhetoric about the technology that presents it as a space suitable for religious use and engagement. If, for instance, the technology is described as "created by God" or "part of God's world" it can be seen as part of creation which humanity is called to steward. Thus engaging with technology becomes not only permissible, but also a mandate. Spiritualizing the Internet involves making religious value judgments and presenting them in language, which is accessible and acceptable to the community. It involves endowing the Internet with a particular narrative of meaning, which contextualizes the purpose of the Internet and how it could or should serve religious users. Campbell (2005) has identified four common discourse strategies that the religious use in order to frame Internet technology. These include describing the Internet as: a spiritual medium facilitating religious experience, a sacramental space suitable for religious use, a tool promoting religion or religious practice and a technology for affirming religious life.

8.1. Spiritual Network

As a *spiritual network*, the Internet is seen as a space where the Divine resides and can be experienced. Internet use becomes simply one expression of one's pursuit of a spiritual life or experience. The Internet as a spiritual medium frames the Internet as a technology possessing, within the hardware and wires, an unseen realm where humanity can encounter the transcendent and spiritual experience. This discourse emphasizes that the Internet is a technological tool, and that how it is used is dependent on the motives and desires of its users and designers. As a tool it is seen as a neutral artefact. Thus it can be used for religious pursuits, as easily as it is used for informational or work related activities.

8.2. Worship-Space

This narrative argues the Internet is a sacramental space, a space or forum that can be shaped for conducting traditional or new religious rituals. This can begin with a ritual or act of consecration that is seen to

prepare the Internet as a space to conduct a specific religious service or practice.

As a worship space, the Internet becomes a place for worship. Many religious groups are consciously designing online worship spaces that attempt to re-create traditional religious worship experiences in a digital environment. A common example in the Christian tradition is the *cyberchurch*, which have been referred to as churches without walls.

8.3. Missionary Tool

The Internet becomes a dynamic resource for encouraging certain practices among religious followers or seeking to convert spiritual seekers to a particular religious belief or tradition. A growing use of the Internet is online proselytising, often referred to as "e-vangelism". Vatican and many religious orders such as the St Paul's and Daughters of St Paul have made "new-evangelization" a priority programme online.

Online witnessing focuses on presenting a purposeful religious presence in cyberspace through a variety of means, through websites, chat rooms and email lists. The Internet as a missionary tool encourages religious users to incorporate the Internet into their proselytising strategies.

Pope Benedict XVI, in his message on the 44th World Day of Communication has termed the web as *a temple of prayer.* Therein he urged the religious and the all the Catholic faithful to be active ministers of the Word of God in the web-temple of prayer. He said:

> With the Gospels in our hands and in our hearts, we must reaffirm the need to continue preparing ways that lead to the Word of God, while being at the same time constantly attentive to those who continue to seek; indeed, we should encourage their seeking as a first step of evangelization. A pastoral presence in the world of digital communications, precisely because it brings us into contact with the followers of other religions, non-believers and people of every culture, requires sensitivity to those who do not believe, the disheartened and those who have a deep, unarticulated desire for enduring truth and the absolute. Just as the prophet Isaiah envisioned a house of prayer for all peoples (cf. Is 56:7), can we not see the web as also offering a space – like the "Court of the Gentiles" of the Temple of Jerusalem – for those who have not yet come to know God? (Benedict XVI, 2010).

Similarly, the present Pope, Francis, also has anointed the new media technologies for their potential for mission: "Communication is a means of expressing the missionary vocation of the entire Church; today the social networks are one way to experience this call to discover the beauty of faith, the beauty of encountering Christ. In the area of communications too, we need a Church capable of bringing warmth and of stirring hearts" (Pope Francis, 2014).

9. Fostering Religious Identity

Internet as a technology that can affirm religious lifestyle, empowers users to see the Internet as a place to also affirm their religious identity. A common motivation for religious Internet use often is to connect with members of a particular religious background, tradition or theology. Here the Internet serves to affirm or build communal identity and cohesion. Having a shared religious identity means individuals subscribe to common beliefs based on a specific religious tradition lived out through public rituals. Identity comes from reinforcing a particular set of convictions or values that are transported online. Through forming a network of religious identity, users affirm these beliefs through their discussions and common practices. The Carmel Soul (www.carmelsoul.com), The Castle Mountain (www.castlemountain.com), and The Regnum Christi (www.regnumchristi.org) are some dominant religious sites that invite members to reinforce, practice and propagate the charism, spirituality and lifestyle of the specific communities. The Internet is also seen as a place that enables individuals to connect with a larger community of shared faith online. Members encourage one another in their shared convictions and support this unifying narrative through supportive discussion on their choice of religious identification.

The *i-communities* are a growing phenomenon among the religious groups as they foster online community activities among their members and associates. The email communities, social network communities such as Facebook communities (CMIconnect, Franscanfriars, Dharmaram, etc.) keep growing in great proportion. The religious identity narrative demonstrates that individuals can see their online involvement as an opportunity to be interconnected with others from a similar religious tradition. Affirming one's religious lifestyle often means surrounding oneself with like-minded people. The Internet becomes an important resource for many people who do this.

Digital Monasticism is of a recent origin. Prayerbyddy.org describes itself as "ubiquitously digital spiritual community in which daily contact and familiarity are the rule." It seeks to create the sociological resemblance of monastic community in a networked form. Prayerbuddy helps member become part of a small online community (of about 8 members) that seek to follow a simple rule of life in which they engage in classical practices (including daily prayer, *lectio divina*, spiritual journaling and spiritual direction) supported by technology. This digital monastic life also encourages new forms of interconnection such as "Perpetual, Wireless, Semantically Rich Presence to One Another" and "Semi Monthly Spiritual Conference Centred around a Meal." Those who have always desired to fulfil their monastic inner calling of live as a contemplative, but cannot live without their wireless no worries, prayerbuddy can help them marry the two!

The emerging types of monasticism meeting, praying and communicating in virtual space has the power and the potential to connect, train, form and empower Church leaders of the 21st century. Some of today's most vibrant spiritual communities affecting positive spiritual change exist solely on social media. Other temporary communities work, gather, pray and play together while volunteering with progressive stewardship efforts to save the planet earth and its people. Digital Monastics brings together a network of spiritual sojourners, continually establishing intentional, ad-hoc monastic communities.

10. Challenges of Communication Technologies on Religious Life

Although communication and media technologies in themselves are just technologies, neutral in nature, they are invented and marketed in the capitalist mindset aimed at gaining maximum profit for the market forces. These forces thrive in the post-modernist mega-culture. Postmodernism as a philosophy includes sceptical interpretation of history, culture, traditional practices and value systems (Lule Jack, 2001). Deconstruction of reality and re-orientation of life are part of post-modernist tendencies.

10.1. Culture of Instant Gratification

Speed and instant reach-out are characteristic of the digital age. On the digital super highway, data travels above sonic proportions. People get connected instantly, relationships are built up on the click of a

button and messages are conveyed impulsively. The communication revolution has changed the concepts of time and distance of space. Night and day are submerged. There is no more a demarcation of time for rest and work, worship and leisure. One can do all these at once, and even more. Along with it comes the culture of fast food, instant relationships, instant messaging. The ideology that characterizes this age is one of instant gratification that proposes "I want to have it, I want it right now, and I want it without wanting to struggle for it" (Moore, 2012). The greatest casualty herein is "patience". People do not have the patience to wait for anything. Waiting becomes intolerable and a waste of time. The mark of success is seen as gratification within the least period of time. People seek quick fixes and fall into escapism from the pain of pursuit. Indeed, in this age there is a greater demand for what is spiritual. But, what is sought is more of instant gratification in spiritual pursuits.

However, anything beautiful in this passing world happens with patient waiting. True relationships need time and patience to develop and mature. In religious life, patience and waiting are important virtues on the path to holiness and perfection. Formation in religious vocation, in particular, is a time of patient waiting. The long years in formation, spent mostly without the tag of any mundane achievement, offers the formee ample opportunities to form the attitude of Christ in his/her heart. This attitude is one of waiting with patience for the fulfilment of Divine plans and the advent of His time. Intimacy with the Lord and fraternal love in the community are never achieved instantly. A lifelong, conscious pursuit is necessary for the religious to grow in, mature and maintain the gifts of God experience and community love. (*The Consecrated Life and Its Role in the Church and in the World,* 1993).

Moreover, another virtue in religious life is that of mortification and abstinence. By mortification and abstinence, the religious strives to practice detachment from "what is sensual and self-gratifying". As against the culture of instant gratification, mortification directs the religious towards persistence and fidelity to the call of the spirit. There is nothing impulsive about the religious. The triple vows that he takes point to the eschaton. Renunciation marks his lifestyle.

The postmodern culture of instant gratification, thus, throws a great challenge to the formators and the formees as they struggle to inculcate contrary values. In an age where "mortification", "abstinence" and "self-denial" are seen as "old-fashioned" and ridiculous, the religious need to be reminded constantly of the essence

of his/her call, and re-evaluate his/her life-style (Vincenzo, 2006). What makes religious life beautiful and glowing is the self-giving of the person in response to the self-gift of God, which is experienced through patient waiting, faithful service and persistent hope (*Perfectae Caritatis*, 12).

Although religious life is the hardest, most fearsome way to live, it is also the most spiritually secure, most fruitful, and most meritorious. Saint Bernard of Clairvaux tells us that because they renounce property, family, and their own wills, religious "live more purely, they fall more rarely, they rise more speedily, they are aided more powerfully, they live more peacefully, they die more securely, and they are rewarded more abundantly" (Fraternal Life in Community, no. 7).

The religious in his engagement with the media and communication technologies does not seek primarily his own interests and gratification, but that of his fellow beings. This involves a new culture of the digital media. The Church understands this clearly well. For instance, Pope Benedict, in his document "New Media at the Service of the Word" (2010) encouraged leaders in the world of communications to promote a culture of respect for the dignity and value of the human person. This is one of the ways in which the religious are called to exercise a "*diaconia* of culture" on today's "digital continent" (Benedict XVI, 2010).

10.2. Culture of Graphics

The present age is one of colour, graphics, visuals and images. One cannot escape from the over-stimulating effects of graphics vying for attention all over the space. People today speak more through graphics than spoken word. The cyber-sphere, the television screens, laptops, tablets, smart-phones, print-media, flex-boards, billboards and sign-boards invade the private and public space. The new communication technologies have enabled all its users to become potent creators, editors and publishers of graphics. Cameras have become so common and accessible that "picture taking" is an art every child masters.

The Church sees this culture of images as something that the Church appreciates for its closeness to Christianity, which seeks to go from the visible to the invisible through the use of signs and liturgical symbols as instruments of salvation and elevates humanity through the goods of beauty and art (*Consecrated Life and Its Role in the Church and in the World*, no.19).

At the same time, this culture of images, when enters into the areas of religious life, raises several problems. Because, this culture of images is often turned into a culture of fleeting and superficial pleasure. It comes with an ideology of a doctored and edited reality. Graphics are created, edited, touched and morphed. Often, this is not a true representation of the real world, but the imagination of the creator. Real life situations are coloured and romanticized to elicit attention from the viewers. The rich, beautiful and the glamorous ones are idolized in the culture of graphics. In this culture, the slogan is, "what I see is what I want to become."

Postmodernism says that all the world is an image – it is real as long as it *looks* real. Nobody's going to question it if it looks like what we think it is supposed to look. That is why health and beauty organizations have launched campaigns against airbrushing and Photoshopping of images, so that those kinds of images will have a phrase on them like "This image has been digitally altered" so people are not confused. In a postmodern culture, the surface of appearance is all there is because it is the only thing we have to believe (Moore, 2012). "Sensuality" and sense images are the high points of such a culture. Reality is plain visuals. What you see makes sense, what is not seen does not exist. This is why advertising and marketing has become the soul mate of the media where every media consumer is tricked into believing the worth glory of the media products.

The "exteriority" of the graphic culture stands against the "interiority" of the consecrated person. The beauty of religious life lies in the "mystery" aspect of life that it celebrates in contemplation and meditation (*Vita Consecrata*, no. 9). As the *lineamenta* for the ninth synod of Bishops in Rome on *Consecrated Life and Its Role in the Church and in the World* has made it clear,

> However, those who have chosen God cannot lose the interior quality of a life which is nourished by contemplation of what cannot be seen with human eyes. Consecrated persons, in love with God, the All-Beautiful, are called to bear witness to the beauty which can save the world in celebrating the liturgy, in harmonious relationships, in promoting what is true, beautiful, good and just. In the contemplative dimension they can bear witness to and promote the paths that lead to mystery, which is the origin of everything beautiful, and to the interiority, which gives meaning to daily work (no. 9).

The religious is called to be altruistic, self-less and thinking less of oneself. The culture of graphics that celebrates the "primacy of human

body" and considers the supremacy of physical beauty runs counter to the religious spirit of "detachment" and self-denial. The media culture projects the human body as a commodity, saleable and evoking desire for market, whereas a religious considers human body as the temple of the Holy Spirit, consecrated and dedicated. By virtue of his vow of chastity, a consecrated person's body is consecrated for God's work (*Perfectae Caritatis*, no. 6). Commoditization of human body and graphitization of human life are tendencies that the religious would fight against (*Perfectae Caritatis*, no. 5). Indeed, one would keep before one's eyes always the one image, that of Christ, into which one would strive to conform his/her life (*Vita Consecrata*, no. 14). He is not a man of images but a person of vision. A good religious is a good visionary. It is the vision of God, a prophetic vision that characterizes his life. In the postmodern world, this "taking on the image and attitude of Christ" requires specific attention in the initial and ongoing formation programmes. *Vita Consecrata* makes it clear:

> If, in fact, consecrated life is in itself a progressive taking on of the attitude of Christ, it seems evident that such a path must endure for a lifetime and involve the whole person, heart, mind and strength… reshaping the person in the likeness of the Son who gives himself to the Father for the good of humanity.

> Thus understood, formation is no longer only a teaching period in preparation for vows but also represents a theological way of thinking of consecrated life which is in itself a never-ending formation, "sharing in the work of the Father who, through the Spirit, fashions in the heart the inner attitudes of the Son" (Vita Consecrata, no.15).

10.3. Culture of Uncentered Pluralism

The new media technologies offer us with too many choices in content and form. Indeed, there is an overload of information, entertainment, platforms and devices available. One is easily confused as to which one is to be chosen. Each content and platform claims to be the best, the truth, and the ultimate. Communication devices are being invented, re-invented and modified almost each day. Newer technologies and versions come up in the market every other day. Social networking groups and sites are mushrooming. People navigate from one channel to the other, from one network to the other (Orkut, Twitter, Facebook, Vimo, YouTube…). Since the technology and content are market driven, truth is fabricated. It comes with the ideology that "there is no absolute truth", truth is subjective. Hence,

what suits and fascinates you this moment is the truth and value for you. Permanency is a myth in the postmodern world. Relationships are started, nurtured and broken with the click of a button. The "like" and "unlike", "accept" and "reject" tags on the social networks rule the nature of relationships these days.

However, religious life is built on the culture of a single choice made after a long period of reflection and contemplation. The vows are taken "for life", and the religious commitment is based on the Absolute Truth, that is Jesus Christ (Jn 14:6). Against the constantly and fast changing world, the religious remains as a sign pointing to the permanency of life and love (*Perfectae Caritatis*, 13). Their life is centred – on Christ. And their eyes, minds and hearts are fixed on Him (*Vita Consecrata*, 15). A religious who is influenced by the culture of "uncentred pluralism" would easily be discouraged, disillusioned and depressed at the routine rhythm of religious life. Either he/she will find consolation in social media networks and swim on in the busy schedules of his/her apostolate, or he will remain a 'complaint box', mastering the art of criticism, blaming the members of his community for anything and everything.

'*Multi-tasking*' is a specific feature promoted by the modern communication technology. 'Convergence' of technologies and features make the digital devices exciting and engaging. The new media technologies are packed with too many features and apps that are easy to use. It is marvellous indeed, that a small digital device is capable of doing the functions of so many devices. As mentioned earlier, a smart phone, for example, can function as a radio, television, camera, computer, telephone, remote control, sound recorder, editing machine, calculator, music machine, multi-media projector, flash light, play station, and many more. The modern man surrounds himself with such machines that would let him do several tasks at the same time. Multi-tasking has become the life style of the modern man that he cannot concentrate on one thing alone. While watching television, people can read the news, play with the mobile phone, 'text' his friends, 'chat' with the social network friends, listen to the music, click a 'picture', write notes, cook his food, and do many such things! What a marvel the new technologies have brought us! You don't waste your time. You accomplish so many things at the same time!

But there is a pitfall to the "culture of multi-tasking" mediated by the digital technologies. People get easily distracted. They cannot concentrate on a thing for a long time. The quality of work suffers. Real life, interpersonal communication is deteriorated. The quality of

community experience is diminished. For a religious, meditation is his life-blood. One who is easily distracted cannot enjoy or grow in contemplation. 'Listening', an essential element of spiritual, community and apostolate experiences is a casualty of the "distracting culture of multitasking." Community life, sharing at the triple tables of "the Eucharist, dining and recreation" define the health of his vocation. Machine mediated communication cannot guarantee the vitality of person-to-person direct communication that is essential part of religious life.

10.4. The Culture of Individualism

The new media technologies do empower and enable us to dare do things that one could not even have imagined a decade ago. The children of the digital generation are privileged to travel faster than ever before, communicate and make friends with people of all races and nations, make virtual communities with people at the farthest corners of the universe, learn and earn university degrees online, do business, banking, commerce, and jobs online. Computers, tablets and smart-phones have become the new playgrounds. "Gaming" would be more exciting on the virtual sphere than in the fields. They need not go out to watch a movie, or chat with friends. Television has transformed itself into an ever-exciting device with hundreds and thousands of channels live and generic. Internet has brought the world virtually to your fingertip. To read books you don't have to walk into a library, rather, all the books and information materials rush into your living room, online.

Along with such comforts and exciting life-style, the digital technologies foster a culture of individualism. The digital environment seems to make the individual stronger and powerful, but real-life, person-to-person relationship weaker. The 2006 annual issue (December 25, 2006/January 1, 2007) of *Time* magazine said it well when it chose "You", meaning each and every human individual living on the planet earth, as the person of the year 2006, thanks to the power and liberty vested on 'the individual' by the new communication technologies. What prompted the *Time* magazine to make history in anointing 'you' as the most powerful person on earth with the proclamation "you control the media now, and the world will never be the same" was the perception of the immense potential placed in the human hand in the form of new media technologies, that can break all barriers of the human world.

The digital technology engages the individual and not so much the community. Its appeal is personal. We are witnessing a new generation of our children and the youth, who delights in the virtual world and hesitates to enter into the real world of realities. A recent study in Australia found that people between 12 and 24 years old spent an average of 4 hours and forty-eight minutes on the net (http://raisingchildren.net.au). They hang out in the social network sites such as Facebook, Flicker, engage in video/online games, and watch movies and hear music. The interaction is mediated through the net and apps. Personal, face-to-face communication does not excite them in as much as online communication does. Here, the individual is the norm and the community is the victim. Social network sites have mushroomed with many platforms of "online communities." The online communities, however, cannot substitute the real communities. Online community experiences and real community experiences vary substantially. Children who spend more time with computers and other digital devices grow up lacking 'social skills' and are prone to depression and frequent mood swings (www.raisingchildren.net.au).

10.5. The Joy of Community

Common life in a house of the institute is essential for religious life (*Fraternal Life in Community*, no. 12). In *Vita Consecrata,* no. 92, John Paul II had stressed that consecrated persons are called to be true experts of communion and to practice its spirituality in and through their community. In his address to the Plenary Session of Bishops who gathered to deliberate and reflect on the life and issues of religious life, Pope John Paul II highlighted the "primacy of community experience" in religious life. He said: "The effectiveness of religious life depends on the quality of the fraternal life in common. Even more so, the current renewal in the Church and in religious life is characterized by a search for communion and community" (John Paul II, 1994, no. 3).

Community life cannot exist without proper communication among its members. Without communication, communion of heart is not possible either. The traditions, practices, vows and personal witnessing of a religious is tested and manifested in and through the quality of communication that he/she maintains in the community (Fraternal Life in Community, no. 66). However, the new world situations, augmented by the demands of the apostolate, the dwindling number of vocations, global mission and other such thrusts, many a religious communities have chosen to be small in size with two or three members, or the members are forced to live and work

alone. Communication technologies can me made use of, for such members and "small communities" for fostering fraternity and common life. Although, it could not be considered a substitute for the real-time community experience, the new-media technology platforms and applications such as skype, social network groups, group-mail communities and the like would facilitate a virtual experience of community feelings among members who live in isolated conditions, and geographical distance. Through video conferencing they may join community meetings and prayer services. Video chat/call, instant text messaging, tweets, uploading video contents on you-tube, and being active in social network practices would build up unity, develop fellowship and belongingness to the community.

By promoting communion within the community and in the Church at large, the charismatic character of Religious Institutes points out the high road to a future of fraternal life and witness, so that holiness and mission may pass through the community.

Community is at the heart of religious life. Communication, in any form – intrapersonal, inter-personal or Divine-personal – has a reference to the community. For, the purpose of communication is communion. And since it is a communication of the consecrated person, the core of his communication is the "Good News," Jesus Christ. Hence, he cannot afford to sit in self-absorption but, the love of God impels him to reach out to the digital streets. Pope Francis has paraphrased this so well in his message for the World Day of Communications, 2014. He observed that if a choice has to be made between a bruised Church which goes out to the streets and a Church suffering from self-absorption, he would certainly prefer the first. "Those 'streets' are the world where people live and where they can be reached, both effectively and affectively. The digital highway is one of them, a street teeming with people who are often hurting, men and women looking for salvation or hope. By means of the internet, the Christian message can reach to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8) (Pope Francis, 2014).

10.6. The Culture of Virtual Reality

New communication technologies have succeeded in creating a surreal world, where fantasy and fascination meet. In the virtual world, the dreams, desires of human mind find their actualization in some way. The over-stimulating effects of graphics and media content easily distract the postmodern man. It creates a virtual reality of comfort and sensuality. The benefits of virtual realities are manifold. Simulative

programmes and applications of virtual realities are employed in fields such as entertainment, information dissemination, education, social and civil security, sexuality, war and peace efforts, health-care and spirituality. Virtual reality is imaginably more personal than electronic mail or instant messaging, or even a letter or a telephone call (Biocca and Levy, 1995). It is a great social leveller; it may find a common ground across differences in age, culture, and linguistic orientation. Communication would be both challenging and rewarding, more effective and productive, and thus more enjoyable. It offers a tremendous opportunity for every "connected" person to find his or her field and/or discipline (Cartwright, 1994). The web and the digital technology have converged to unfold virtual realities of umpteen kinds. For those who seek online friendship there are virtual communities, for those who would want to engage in sports and games without the physical strain, there are virtual games. What more, there are even spiritual avenues and virtual churches for those who seek spiritual experiences. For every experience you seek, there is a virtual reality that you can enter into on the cyber-space.

Since the virtual reality is doctored and fashioned for the satiation of human senses, devoid of the struggles and pains of the real world, the virtual is more attractive to naïve minds that do not seek permanent commitments and bother taking responsibilities. To them, the virtual seems to be more real than the real. Moreover, the easy accessibility and non-serious engagement that the virtual reality lures the postmodern man constantly to interact with and immerse in technologically defined situations and applications. The limiting factors of virtual reality have implications on the manner we view our world, relationships and experiences. It could lead one to the insensitivity to real life human experiences. An inescapable aspect of social life is the formation and maintenance of interpersonal relationships. Interaction ought not be substituted for community (Mark E. Koltko-Rivera, 2007). Virtual reality provides a communication environment in which the dangers of deception and the benefits of creativity are amplified beyond the levels that humans currently experience in their interpersonal interactions. It could lead the users to low self-esteem, feelings of worthlessness and insignificance, even self-destructive acts.

Religious life in a community exposes one to the hard and harsh realities and experiences of real life situations of common life, apostolate and spiritual pursuit. Unchecked indulgence into virtual realities may keep the members of a community off from the

fundamental experiences and practices of religious life. The culture of religious life runs counter to the culture of virtual realities. It calls the members to imitate more closely the Master who went about doing good (Acts 9:38) and who carried the cross for the salvation of all mankind (Mt 16:24).

10.7. A Culture of Compassion, Connectedness and Tenderness

The 'here and now', and the gift of 'presence' are irreplaceable elements of religious life. There is nothing virtual about spiritual experiences. It is really real. The consecrated person is concerned with real stories and human issues. Pope Francis considers the ministry of the media and communications as a "service of compassion and tenderness. He says: "The world of media also has to be concerned with humanity, it too is called to show tenderness. The digital world can be an environment rich in humanity; a network not of wires but of people" (2014). The Pope sees three essential elements that would help Christians to counter the negative sides of the culture of graphics. These elements are compassion, connectedness and tenderness. In his words, "It is not enough to be passers-by on the digital highways, simply 'connected'; connections need to grow into true encounters. We cannot live apart, closed in on ourselves. We need to love and to be loved. We need tenderness; media strategies do not ensure beauty, goodness and truth in communication" (2014).

10.8. Digital Divide and Communication Gaps

Even as the modern communication technologies have made the world a global village (McLuhan, 1964), connecting people of all races and continents, creating virtual communities world over, the fact remains that these technologies have also effected divisions and communication gaps in the community. There is now a new category of the poor and the famished added to the less privileged humanity. The new category of the poor are the "communication poor, the techno-illiterates, the digital media 'have nots'. The Church is concerned with the new situation of the digital divide as it understands that the world of communications can help us either to expand our knowledge or to lose our bearings. Pope Francis says in this regard: "The desire for digital connectivity can have the effect of isolating us from our neighbours, from those closest to us. We should not overlook the fact that those who, for whatever reason, lack access to social media run the risk of being left behind" (2014). Digital Divide

is a social situation that separates a section of the society from information and communication technologies' access, availability, and use.

11. Personal Witnessing in the Cyber-Sphere

Communication involves the message, the medium, the messenger and the audience. The new media technologies help us more than transmit some impersonal messages or chat with instant friends. The religious enter into "communication technologies" to be the light in the dark alleys of the cyber streets. In the pattern of a religious' communication, the media plays a minor role. He does not stop at the technologically mediated communication. His message of "presence" cannot be communicated through the information technologies alone. For, the impartiality of media is merely an appearance; only those who go out of themselves in their communication can become a true point of reference for others. Personal engagement is the basis of the trustworthiness of a communicator. Christian witness, thanks to the internet, can thereby reach the peripheries of human existence. Hence, the cyber-space offers an avenue and a starting point for the personal witnessing of the religious. Effective Christian witness, as Pope Benedict XVI notes, is not about bombarding people with religious messages, but about our willingness to be available to others "by patiently and respectfully engaging their questions and their doubts as they advance in their search for the truth and the meaning of human existence" (Message for the 47th World Communications Day, 2012).

12. Some Special Issues for Deeper Reflection

Even as human communication is a complex process that involves the whole person and the community, religious communication benefits much from the technology mediated communication. Similarly, the media technologies of communication too gains much from the contributions of the religious in making them spiritual and humane avenues (Pope Francis, 2014). In the concrete level, as the new-media technologies have met the religious sphere, there are some serious practical issues that have emerged that need deeper reflection. These issues include the mind-set, enclosure, detachment, community experience and the religious vows. We shall discuss each of these briefly.

12.1. The Old Mind-Set and New Technologies of Communication

There is a real situation when a newly recruited member comes into the congregation with a communication gadget and those who are responsible for the care of the candidate have no idea of what it is and how it is used.

Similarly, there is the issue of regulating and banning the "keeping and using" of mobile phones and other such gadgets of communication in the seminary and among those who are under formation, or among some members of the house. In many cases, since both the younger generation and the communication devise, are "smarter" than the law-enforcing and monitoring mechanism, such devices are kept in secret and used at will. Such rules and mechanisms, thus, make them liars, and guilty of sin.

12.2. The Loss and Gain of Enclosures

One obvious traditional practice of the monasteries and other religious houses until the recent past was that of the "enclosure", a place that was sacred, where no outsiders were let in, and "silence" was the language of communication therein. When the culture of monastic traditional practices are changing, religious houses have become more open, welcoming and "transparent." But, along with it, there is the casualty of "silence," "the mystery" aspect, and a spirit of contemplation and reflection (John Paul II, 1996). Add to it the fact that communication technologies have invaded every space in the religious house. Mobile phones have become the most essential thing that one would not dare to move out of the room without it. Even in the holy of holies, in the chapel, during meditation and prayer, personal study and reflection, meal time and bed time, the mobile phone/smart phone has become the constant and trusted companion (Thomas McMillan, 2013). In such a scenario, there is the loss of "the spirit of religious silence" and an ever increasing digital noise. In the over-stimulating culture of constant mediated communication, it would be good to re-think the return of "enclosures" back into our lives. Can we have special spaces (localities), times, and situations demarcated for the "no entry" of the modern communication devices and technologies?

12.3. Detachment, Anyone?

Devices such as mobile phones, tablets and laptops have become so personal and intimate that one feels insecure when these are not with him. To go out without carrying the mobile phone would be the worst

nightmare one would experience in this digital age. Such devices have become not only extensions of the human body (Mac Luhan, 1964), but also the most essential thing one cannot live without. For the religious "detachment" and "abstinence" are core values of his/her vocation (Regina, 2013). One's attachment to these devices and their applications might be in various degrees ranging from mere fascination to strong addiction. To get out of the addictive nature of the new media and communication technologies what practical steps would we need to take? Or, would such shades of attachment hinder the real spirit of religious renunciation and self-discipline?

12.4. Communication Yes, but Community?

The individualist culture that the new-media technologies promote might be creeping into the community experiences of the religious. In earlier times, the community used to gather together for prayer, meals and recreation (*Perfectae Caritatis*, 15). Since the community life was well organized, and the members were to follow the time-table, and their communication was limited mostly within the walls of the monastery or religious houses, the spirit of communion was clearly perceptible. The members used to sit around the table for meals and recreation. Television took the centre-stage in the recreation room. The community used to watch news and other programmes together and discoursed on the content. Community prayer used to be sacrosanct for all. However, now, due to the diverse ministries, individual apostolate of the members and the micro communities, the "coming together" of the members are events that rarely happen. Apart from this, they would not feel the "need" to communicate face-to-face with the members of the community, as they are already communicating always, with so many people, in different degrees of relationship, through the new media technologies.

Since the communication devices are their most trusted companions, they are more open towards the 'out-side' of the community, than 'in-side'. Even while they sit together, they would be communicating with those outside through 'chatting', 'texting', 'calling', 'browsing', 'commenting' or 'liking'. Added to that, they would not feel like sitting together before the television anymore, because, their laptop/tablet/smart-phone already is loaded with television streaming. They might even have a separate set of television installed in their personal room. Again, another community event was the members going together for a movie. Thanks to the new media technologies, one does not need to go to the cinema houses to watch a

movie, rather, only has to open the laptop, smart-phone or such other devices. The net result is that unless one takes special care, one would isolate oneself from the community and withdraw into the comforts of the personal room and space for the fulfilment of the needs of communication, entertainment and companionship. The comfort-zone of the modern religious would easily be the communication devices that he/she is attached with.

12.5. Vows Re-Visited

The most essential characteristic of a religious is the vows with which he/she is bound to the Lord and the community. In the traditional form of religious life, the vows are non-compromizible and non-negotiable. When new-media technologies enter into the life of a religious, they impact also the arenas of the vows. Since the communication media technologies carry the capitalist ideology of making maximum profits, the companies keep changing the features and models of the devices every other day. The expensive gadgets and software as they are, the vow of poverty does not allow the religious to keep up with the changes in the market. If the devices are not changed according to the trends of the market, the customer would feel outdated and suffer depression and lack of self-esteem (Regina, 2013).

The postmodern culture values a person with the value of the gadgets and toys he/she holds. Where will the money for the acquisition, maintenance, re-modelling, updating, and the endless cycle of buying the new gadgets, recharges and software come from? Either he/she has to beg from the community, which cannot afford to meet the demand, or find resources from other sources. The kind of relationships one might enter into, the type of audio-visual materials one might browse through and consume, the kind of commitments one might make and entertain online and offline (outside the purview of the community) have implications on the chaste-life one has professed. On the other hand, the communication media technologies would help one escape from the 'vicinity' and 'control' of the superiors and the laws of the constitution. The very word "obedience" in its traditional sense does not sit well with the digital media communication technologies and the avenues they open up. A sense of anonymity characterizes such technologies.

In the advent of the new communication technologies, and the types of practices associated with them, how do we still practice our vows meaningfully? Formation houses have a special role in helping the formees in understanding and evaluating the implications of the media

mediated communication. Communication has to be understood holistically in the personal, inter-personal, and mediated forms.

13. Conclusion

Communication is a gift of God without which human life is not meaningful (John Paul II, 1986). Communication stands in union with community and communion. The new winds of change in the larger society brought about on the wheels of "communication revolution" has placed the religious in a dialectical position of engaging the world and the technologies of communication in a proper manner for their own meaningful survival and for the service of human race. Hence, a religious cannot but communicate. He cannot afford to ignore the changes and the changing world, nor can he afford to take in all that the new culture offers in its stride.

The Church, though has been critical of new inventions in the past, in the recent times she has anointed the instruments of social communication as providential means for the accomplishment of its mission to "preach from the housetops" (Lk 12:3), "to all nations" (Mk 16:15), "to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8), the word of salvation. It has concerned itself, moreover, with educating and caring for the human person, the whole person, both as human and as Christian. The Church has, in fact, welcomed with open arms those instruments as "marvellous inventions of today which have a powerful effect on people's minds" and as "wonderful fruits of human work and ingenuity, the gift of God from whom every good comes" (John Paul II, 1996).

Cyberspace presents an important spiritual challenge. One of the fundamental aims of spiritual practice has been to extend human identities, to overcome feelings of separateness with the rest of mankind, nature, and the Cosmos. Some of the techniques of spiritual practices could be used to arrive at a more holistic view of technology. In that sense, the merging of man with technology could be seen as part of a larger mystical task within the context of the universe.

It will be always difficult to decide on the merits of pessimistic and optimistic spiritual interpretations of technology. For every new power and possibility that technology brings, it could be argued that technological progress takes away other components of humanity. For some, to survive in the stressful high-tech world, there may be a great need for the enduring legacies of spiritual practice. The new edge of technology may need the new age of reviving of spiritual practice (John Paul II, 1986). Without them, we may not be able to survive.

What social media and the internet provide are opportunities for a more mature spiritual life. The one who internalizes the meaning of "come follow Me!" is able to make decisions regarding when to be and when not to be in contact with family, to write an email, or to skype a friend. We rejoice in all the great amenities that are made possible through inventions. However, rejoicing does not mean avoiding critical reflection on the deeper ways the diverse world views we are exposed to change our world in positive and negative ways (Vincenzo, 2006). Now is the time, for the religious to take control of the situation and the challenges, lest the challenges and the resultant culture of postmodernism will overtake them. The urgent call is to root for the essential values of religious life such as life-long commitment, detachment, self-denial, mortification, silence, solitude, concentration, contemplation, enclosure, community life, simplicity, love, hope and faith. The religious is in an envious position to redefine the new media and communication technologies in terms of spirituality. It requires, as the Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata,* "a concentration on an intense spirituality in the strongest sense of the word, that is, life according to the Spirit. Consecrated life today needs a spiritual rebirth which will help to concretely bring about the spiritual and evangelical meaning of baptismal consecration and of its new and special consecration" (no. 20).

Pause, look, reflect, and act! Be a contemplative in action or be an active contemplative – it does not matter much. What matters is the ability to address the existential challenges of life and mission, now!

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