



SOCIAL NETWORKS: NEW SPACES FOR EVANGELISATION

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(Vatican Radio) Pope Benedict's message for World Communications Day 2013 was released at a press conference in the Vatican on Thursday, the feast day of St Francis de Sales, patron saint of journalists and writers. The message focuses on the importance of social networking sites as "portals of truth and faith", and "new spaces for evangelisation".

Pope Benedict, who opened his own Twitter account at the end of last year, invites people to appreciate the potential of social media sites and urges believers, in this Year of Faith, to consider how their presence on these networks can help spread the Gospel message of God's love for all people.

For a closer look at this 47th World Communications Day Message, Philippa Hitchen spoke to Mgr Paul Tighe, secretary of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications....

Listen:

"Over the last 4 to 5 years the Pope has been generating a lot of material that is reflecting on the new media as they emerge.....it's a changing reality.....and I think the Pope is attentive to that, so this year he's moving into something that is relatively recent, the social networks, which have become a distinguishing feature of how communication happens....

Is this a follow-up to the opening of his Twitter account?

I think this is offering a kind of philosophical or theological justification for why that wasn't just a one-off event, but it was a very important statementof the significance he attributes to new media.....

The Pope is asking two fundamental questionshow can new media contribute to human progress and secondly, what can we Christians do in that arena to help and support the development of social networks in a positive manner...

People often talk about 'user generated content' but I think the Pope is guiding us to a 'user generated culture'....we need to ask how can we help to promote understanding and solidarity....if these are to be social networks, there's no place for the anti-social, for harassment or bullying.....it's not enough to be the one who shouts the loudest.....respect in engaging with and treating the other person is fundamental..."

Read the full text of Pope Benedict's message for the 47th World Communications Day:

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

As the 2013 World Communications Day draws near, I would like to offer you some reflections on an increasingly important reality regarding the way in which people today communicate among themselves. I wish to consider the development of digital social networks which are helping to create a new "agora", an open public square in which people share ideas, information and opinions, and in which new relationships and forms of community can come into being.

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. The exchange of information can become true communication, links ripen into friendships, and connections facilitate communion. If the networks are called to realize this great potential, the people involved in them must make an effort to be authentic since, in these spaces, it is not only ideas and information that are shared, but ultimately our very selves.

The development of social networks calls for commitment: people are engaged in building relationships and making friends, in looking for answers to their questions and being entertained, but also in finding intellectual stimulation and sharing knowledge and know-how. The networks are increasingly becoming part of the very fabric of society, inasmuch as they bring people together on the basis of these fundamental needs. Social networks are thus nourished by aspirations rooted in the human heart.

The culture of social networks and the changes in the means and styles of communication pose demanding challenges to those who want to speak about truth and values. Often, as is also the case with other means of social communication, the significance and effectiveness of the various forms of expression appear to be determined more by their popularity than by their intrinsic importance and value. Popularity, for its part, is often linked to celebrity or to strategies of persuasion rather than to the logic of argumentation. At times the gentle voice of reason can be overwhelmed by the din of excessive information and it fails to attract attention which is given instead to those who express themselves in a more persuasive manner. The social media thus need 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. Dialogue and debate can also flourish and grow when we converse with and take seriously people whose ideas are different from our own. "Given the reality of cultural diversity, people need not only to accept the existence of the culture of others, but also to aspire to be enriched by it and to offer to it whatever they possess that is good, true and beautiful" (Address at the Meeting with the World of Culture, Bélem, Lisbon, 12 May 2010).

The challenge facing social networks is how to be truly inclusive: thus they will benefit from the full participation of believers who desire to share the message of Jesus and

the values of human dignity which his teaching promotes. Believers are increasingly aware that, unless the Good News is made known also in the digital world, it may be absent in the experience of many people for whom this existential space is important. The digital environment is not a parallel or purely virtual world, but is part of the daily experience of many people, especially the young. Social networks are the result of human interaction, but for their part they also reshape the dynamics of communication which builds relationships: a considered understanding of this environment is therefore the prerequisite for a significant presence there.

The ability to employ the new languages is required, not just to keep up with the times, but precisely in order to enable the infinite richness of the Gospel to find forms of expression capable of reaching the minds and hearts of all. In the digital environment the written word is often accompanied by images and sounds. Effective communication, as in the parables of Jesus, must involve the imagination and the affectivity of those we wish to invite to an encounter with the mystery of God's love. Besides, we know that Christian tradition has always been rich in signs and symbols: I think for example of the Cross, icons, images of the Virgin Mary, Christmas cribs, stained-glass windows and pictures in our churches. A significant part of mankind's artistic heritage has been created by artists and musicians who sought to express the truths of the faith.

In social networks, believers show their authenticity by sharing the profound source of their hope and joy: faith in the merciful and loving God revealed in Christ Jesus. This sharing consists not only in the explicit expression of their faith, but also in their witness, in the way in which they communicate "choices, preferences and judgements that are fully consistent with the Gospel, even when it is not spoken of specifically" (Message for the 2011 World Communications Day). A particularly significant way of offering such witness will be through a willingness to give oneself 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. The growing dialogue in social networks about faith and belief confirms the importance and relevance of religion in public debate and in the life of society.

For those who have accepted the gift of faith with an open heart, the most radical response to mankind's questions about love, truth and the meaning of life – questions certainly not absent from social networks – are found in the person of Jesus Christ. It is natural for those who have faith to desire to share it, respectfully and tactfully, with those they meet in the digital forum. Ultimately, however, if our efforts to share the Gospel bring forth good fruit, it is always because of the power of the word of God itself to touch hearts, prior to any of our own efforts. Trust in the power of God's work must always be greater than any confidence we place in human means. In the digital environment, too, where it is easy for heated and divisive voices to be raised and where sensationalism can at times prevail, we are called to attentive discernment. Let us recall in this regard that Elijah recognized the voice of God not in the great and strong wind, not in the earthquake or the fire, but in "a still, small voice" (1 Kg 19:11-12). We need to trust in the fact that the basic human desire to love and to be loved, and to find meaning and truth – a desire which God himself has placed in the heart of every man and woman – keeps our contemporaries ever open to what Blessed Cardinal Newman called the "kindly light" of faith.

Social networks, as well as being a means of evangelization, can also be a factor in human development. As an example, in some geographical and cultural contexts where Christians feel isolated, social networks can reinforce their sense of real unity with the worldwide community of believers. The networks facilitate the sharing of spiritual and liturgical resources, helping people to pray with a greater sense of closeness to those who share the same faith. An authentic and interactive engagement with the questions and the doubts of those who are distant from the faith should make us feel the need to nourish, by prayer and reflection, our faith in the presence of God as well as our practical charity: "If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal" (1 Cor 13:1).

In the digital world there are social networks which offer our contemporaries opportunities for prayer, meditation and sharing the word of God. But these networks can also open the door to other dimensions of faith. Many people are actually discovering, precisely thanks to a contact initially made online, the importance of direct encounters, experiences of community and even pilgrimage, elements which are always important in the journey of faith. In our effort to make the Gospel present in the digital world, we can invite people to come together for prayer or liturgical celebrations in specific places such as churches and chapels. There should be no lack of coherence or unity in the expression of our faith and witness to the Gospel in whatever reality we are called to live, whether physical or digital. When we are present to others, in any way at all, we are called to make known the love of God to the furthest ends of the earth.

I pray that God's Spirit will accompany you and enlighten you always, and I cordially impart my blessing to all of you, that you may be true heralds and witnesses of the Gospel. "Go into all the world and preach the Gospel to the whole creation" (Mk 16:15).

From the Vatican, 24 January 2013, Feast of Saint Francis de Sales.