

## **Australian Catholic Bishops Conference**

### **Address to Bishops and Congregational Leaders of Religious Institutes**

#### **Reflections on the Church's emerging presence in the digital world**

Mary MacKillop Place, North Sydney, 9<sup>th</sup> May 2015

I would like to begin by acknowledging my appreciation of the possibility of having this time with you. Over the last few years, I have been very impressed by the different initiatives coming from the Australian Church in the area of social media – a positive impression that has been reinforced by my experience during the Media Conference earlier this week. In particular, I would like to thank Bishop Ingham, Archbishop Coleridge and Father Lucas for their commitment to strengthening the links between Australia and the Council.

I was appointed President of the Council in June 2007. That same month, the first generation of iphones was released, and accessible and affordable smartphones were with us. At that time, Facebook was 3 years old, it had just over 40 million subscribers but it was still running second to Myspace. Twitter was 1 year old and was averaging 50,000 tweets a day. Youtube (2005) and Flickr (2004) were healthy infants but Pinterest and Instagram would not be along for another 3 years. I draw attention to these facts with a view to

reminding you just how much has changed in the last decade and, perhaps more importantly, how much is still changing. Over the last 8 years, I have made it a priority for our Council to encourage the Church, and particularly Church communicators, to reflect on the nature of these changes and to develop appropriate forms of engagement. In my talk today, I would like to share with you some of the insights that are emerging from this reflection and consider how they can help us to begin to formulate a strategic approach to digital communication that is rooted in a grounded understanding of the transformation being effected by social media, and that is at the same time true to who we are as Church and the mission to which we are called. My approach will focus on our guiding principles but I will be happy to speak of some of our specific initiatives in response to questions.

## **Cultural Context**

When we begin to reflect on the changes in communication, what some commentators call the 'digital revolution', it is easy to focus on the technological developments. We are fascinated by the speed with which communication devices are becoming more powerful, smaller, more connected and accessible. While this focus is understandable, the truth is that the most significant change is not technological but cultural: the real challenge is to appreciate how much is changing in the ways that people, especially young people,

are gathering information, are being educated, are expressing themselves, are forming relationships and communities. In 2012, Pope Emeritus Benedict specified that: *The new technologies are not only changing the way we communicate, but communication itself.*

It is obvious that the Church must be attentive to its own theological insights , to its own sense of who and what we are, as it seeks to establish criteria for its engagement with the social media. We cannot rely exclusively on the insights of sociologists and ‘media gurus’, no matter how valid their perceptions, as we seek to develop a strategy for our communications ministry. We must always begin with the Gospel of the Jesus Christ, and seek to find ways of expressing to our contemporaries the abiding and ever relevant truth of God’s unconditional love for all people. But as Pope Emeritus Benedict instructed the Pontifical Council: *It is not only a matter of expressing the Gospel message in contemporary language; it is also necessary to have the courage to think more deeply — as happened in other epochs — about the relationship between faith, the life of the Church and the changes human beings are experiencing.... what challenges does “digital thought” pose to faith and theology? What questions and requests? (Address to Pontifical Council for Social Communications, 2011).* This is not a new challenge: the first apostles had to find ways of expressing their faith, which was rooted in the language and thought of Judaism, in a Greco-Roman world

which was radically different in its ways of thinking and its public discourse. The great achievement of Saint Paul was to find ways of faithfully expressing the essence of faith, the kerygmatic nucleus of the Gospels, using language and categories that made sense for people who lived in a 'world' that was very different to the 'world of Judaism' where Jesus had lived.

### **Church and Communications**

I believe it is essential that the Church give more explicit attention to communications. When we talk about the communicative mission of the Church, we are not talking about one mission among many others. We are in fact talking about the fundamental reason why the Church exists. The Church exists by the will of God and it exists precisely to communicate Jesus Christ and proclaim his Good News to all. From the beginning this has been its universal mission. We are called to bring the Good News to the ends of the earth, to ensure that the Gospel reaches and touches the hearts of people in every part of our world. This message with which we have been entrusted – this Good News – is a Person, Jesus Christ. We invite others not merely to know about a historical man named Jesus, to know or follow his teaching, but to enter into a personal relationship with him. We do not ask people to become members of a sect or an ideological movement but to join in community with others who have been called by Christ to recognize and celebrate his presence

among us. Good communication is never simply about the exchange of information but about the creation of relations – a truth that is becoming ever more verifiable in the realm of social media.

Today, when we speak of the ‘ends of the earth’, we must remember the so-called ‘digital continent’. As Pope Emeritus Benedict said in his message for World Communications Day 2013: The digital environment is not a parallel or purely virtual world, but is part of the daily experience of many people, especially the young (WCD Message, 2013). For them, digital devices are not primarily instruments to be used but are part of the fabric of their lives. The connectivity facilitated by these devices has reshaped their existential environment and enables them to live their lives in the context of networks and patterns of friendships, association and community that would have been unimaginable until a decade ago. Moreover, these networks have become fundamental points of reference for them in their pursuit of information and news, for self-expression, for shaping public opinion, for dialogue and debate, and for forming relationships and community. Given the centrality of the networks and the connected media environment in the lives of people today, it is absolutely necessary that the Church should seek to establish a presence in the ‘digital world’. If the Church is not present, and does not share the Good News in this forum, then we risk becoming marginal to the lives of many and are failing in our

mission to bring the gospel to the ends of the earth. Our focus cannot be on self-promotion but rather on witnessing to the free gift that is God's love and concern for all. Our enthusiasm and our conviction, if genuine, will spread to others – cor ad cor loquitur. As Pope Francis said to the Italian Assembly of leaders of religious institutions : *I would say this is the first thing: to help the Church to grow by way of attraction. Without worrying about proselytizing: attraction! (7 November , 2014).*

Communication is also at the heart of our daily lives as believers. The Church is a community, it is the gathering of those who have been called together by Christ. Our 'ecclesia' cannot flourish, our Church will not be a place of communion and belonging, if we do not foster those forms of communication that promote a sense of connection and participation. We must learn to appreciate the potential of social media to ensure that people are being listened to, consulted by, engaged with and valued by the Church and their pastors. This is not just a question of customer relations or marketing but of ensuring that the Church can give witness and voice to the faith of the whole people of God gathered together by Christ (Gaudium et Spes,3.) We must avoid top-down, unidirectional, forms of communication within the Church and allow for the fullness of expression of all believers. Our hierarchical structures will only be

credible if those in leadership are seen to be listening and responding to the voices of the faithful.

## **Presence**

When it comes to understanding how we should be present in the digital environment, I am inclined to remind Church communicators that the basic question is not about how we should use the new technologies to evangelise but rather how we can be an evangelising presence in the new 'world' that has been brought into being by these technologies. Clearly, believers have a right, and a duty, to be fully active citizens of the digital world and to share their beliefs and convictions. Our presence will only be effective, however, if we are authentic witnesses to our faith. We have to manifest our genuine concern for those we encounter by listening to them, conversing with them and encouraging them (Pope Francis, Meeting with PCCS, 21 September 2013). We cannot simply bombard people with our 'answers' but must take their questions seriously and allow them to fully express themselves. This is particularly important in an environment where any question is immediately likely to attract commercial and ideological responses and offerings. If we allow people to go deeper and to probe further, we help to 'give a soul to

the internet'. It is important to remember that we are not ourselves the soul of the digital arena, but our readiness to listen and our openness to the questions of others will enable them to express their deepest personal and spiritual yearnings. In this way, we help to ensure that the digital world can be an environment rich in humanity; a network not of wires but of people (Pope Francis, Message for WCD 2014). If we take others seriously, show respect for them and their views, and avoid any form of manipulation or exploitation; then we are both offering a consistent witness to our faith in Jesus and helping to humanise social media. This is particularly necessary at a time when many are concerned about the increasingly shrill and violent nature of some of the commentary that is found on social networks. We need to add our efforts to those of other people of good will to ensure that humanity's enhanced capacity for expression and communication realizes its enormous potential to strengthen the unity of the human family, to foster an authentic culture of encounter, rather than perpetuate division and rancour.

## **Language**

In talking of language, I would wish to highlight three issues. In the first place, we must adjust our style of communication. As Pope Francis has stated: *God is everywhere: we have to know how to find him in order to be able to proclaim him in the language of each and*



*every culture; every reality, every language, has its own rhythm* (Address to CELAM, 28 July 2013). In the past, the technologies tended to privilege one directional communication: one person or institution broadcasted a message and the audience or public passively consumed it. Today, digital communication requires a more interactive participative style: unless our message engages people who begin to share it, comment upon it and question us about it, it will remain without an audience and we risk talking to ourselves. Unless we take others seriously and enter into conversation with them, we cannot expect them to pass much heed of us or hope to achieve 'traction' for our views and ideas.

Secondly, we need to acknowledge that our traditional mode of expression was very text dependent while the digital culture tends to highlight multi-media content. Words and text are still important but our communication will be more effective if we can also express ourselves with images, video, music and gestures. At the council, we are seeing this very clearly in terms of our use of **Facebook** and indeed with the **PopeApp**. While both our Facebook profile and our app draw on the news and informational content that is aggregated on our **www.news.va** website, we are noticing that it is materials of a visual nature (photos and videos) that are getting most attention and creating the greatest interest on the social platforms.

Finally, in talking of language we should recognise that much of our Church vocabulary – especially our theological and liturgical terms - can be problematic and confusing for our contemporaries. We are challenged to rediscover simpler words and to use more accessible metaphors if we are to capture the attention of the broader public. Again Pope Francis has expressed this most clearly: *At times we lose people because they don't understand what we are saying, because we have forgotten the language of simplicity and import an intellectualism foreign to our people. Without the grammar of simplicity, the Church loses the very conditions which make it possible "to fish" for God in the deep waters of his Mystery (Meeting with the Bishops of Brazil, 28 July 2013).* The Holy Father, however, expresses this even more powerfully in the witness of his own preaching and his extraordinary capacity to engage people through the use of seemingly simple words and memorable images and similes.

## **Strategy**

In terms of evolving an appropriate institutional strategy for our engagement with social media, we are fortunate that we have within the Church a great wealth and experience in terms of the people who are working with Church newspapers, radio, television, web-site as well as those who have been leading the way in social media. I can understand the apprehension of some who are involved with what might be called traditional media but good communication will

always require the skills of professional writers, editors and audio-visual producers. The development of an adequate strategy for the digital world, however, will require that these professionals rethink their way of working. It is not simply enough to take content produced for traditional media and post it on-line. What is needed is more inter-disciplinary collaboration in order to produce material that is truly multi-media and the allocation of resources in such a way as to permit real engagement with those who wish to discuss, question and deepen their understanding of such materials.

Another institutional challenge is that we have to learn to communicate in an environment where traditional 'authorities' do not have the same influence as they once had. People will no longer pay attention, if they ever did, simply because a Church leader is speaking. We have to learn to command attention more by the quality of our interventions, by our responsiveness to others and by our ability to engage meaningfully with those questions and debates that are already claiming public attention. Part of the challenge for the Church in the area of digital media is to establish a networked or capillary presence that can effectively engage the debates, discussions and dialogues that are facilitated by social media and that invite direct, personal and timely responses of a type that are not so easily achieved by centralized institutions. Moreover, such a networked or capillary structure reflects the truth of the Church as a

community of communities which is alive both universally and locally.

I believe there is a need for greater theological reflection in the area of ecclesiology. Taking our lead from the work of Avery Dulles, we need to revisit the issue of our models of the Church. We live in an networked society, which sociologists characterize as being ‘poly-centric’ with people belonging to and attaching varying levels of influence to a variety of networks. In this context, we have to ask if our ‘traditional’ or ‘instinctive’ tendency to think of the Church in terms of an institutional model - a unified society with a clear ‘mono-centric’ authority - is not so removed from the cultural expectations of those we wish to engage as to be unhelpful. I think we can profitably read again Chapter 4 of *Lumen Gentium* which reminds us of the central role of the laity in bringing their faith and the values of the Gospel into all the existential contexts in which they live - *they live in the ordinary circumstances of family and social life, from which the very web of their existence is woven (Lumen Gentium, 31)* and that they will have a legitimate autonomy of action, *By divine institution the Holy Church is ordered and governed with a wonderful diversity (ibid, 32).*

Finally, I would encourage you as Church leaders to be vigilant that the Church does not fall victim of one of the less attractive tendencies of digital culture which is that the social networks risk

becoming 'information cocoons' or 'echo chambers' where people only engage with those who share their views and opinions. We must try to be open to others, to engage in dialogue, to reach out notwithstanding the risks. (*Pope Francis, World Communications Day Message, 2014*). In summary, we need to ensure that the Church assumes a maternal presence that warms people's hearts and encourages those who are disheartened. *We need to bring Christ to others, through these joys and hopes, like Mary, who brought Christ to the hearts of men and women; we need to pass through the clouds of indifference without losing our way; we need to descend into the darkest night without being overcome and disorientated; we need to listen to the dreams, without being seduced; we need to share their disappointments, without becoming despondent; to sympathize with those whose lives are falling apart, without losing our own strength and identity. This is the path. This is the challenge.* (Pope Francis, Meeting with PCCS, 21 September 2013).

## **Conversion**

In conclusion, I want to draw attention to the importance of personal conversion. Good communication is ultimately a human achievement. Who we are, and how we behave, will always speak more eloquently than our words. Our words, our profession of faith and our expression of a desire to share this faith with others, will only speak to others if they come from our hearts. In order to

effectively share our faith and our hopes, we must nourish our own faith in and relationship with Jesus and allow his grace to change us. Conversion is at its deepest a change of heart, a *metanoia*. This will clarify for us whether we are simply members of a sect or true witnesses to Jesus. If our faith is alive in our hearts, and is genuinely a ground for hope in our everyday existence, then it will be natural for us to desire to share it with others. *Be servants of communion and of the culture of encounter! I would like you to be almost obsessed about this. Be so without being presumptuous, imposing “our truths”, but rather be guided by the humble yet joyful certainty of those who have been found, touched and transformed by the Truth who is Christ, ever to be proclaimed (Pope Francis, Meeting with Bishops of Brazil, 28 July 2013).*

Here as ever, we remember that good communication begins with listening: we must cherish God’s word and meditate on it so that it reshapes us, so that our words will be born from our encounter with the Word. By keeping alive the intensity of our communion with Jesus in prayer, the sacraments and service of the poor, we will become credible witnesses to the power of God’s grace and help others find their way to Him. *This is the challenge: to bring the person to Christ. This must be done, however, in complete awareness that we ourselves are means of communication and that the real problem does not concern the acquisition of the latest technologies,*

*even if these make a valid presence possible. It is necessary to be absolutely clear that the God in whom we believe, who loves all men and women intensely, wants to reveal himself through the means at our disposal, however poor they are, because it is he who is at work, he who transforms and saves us (Pope Francis, Meeting with PCCS, 21 September 2013).*

Conversion is especially required of those believers who try to bring their faith into social media. They will often find themselves subject to unfair criticism and confronting expressions of hate and strong rejection, it is important that they resist the temptation to respond in kind. Jesus' command that we 'turn the other cheek' has, perhaps, found a new relevance in social media and is, certainly, more radical and counter-cultural than ever. They need never be afraid to contradict untruths, to explain misunderstandings and to present our faith and the Church in a positive light but they should strive to do so with tolerance and forbearance. They will be more effective witnesses to our faith and hope, if they 'speak the truth in love'.

I assure you that I remain convinced that the Church's efforts in this area will not be without fruit. Even the most superficial familiarity with digital media is sufficient to show that the main drivers of social media are activities related to the human need for connectivity and friendship, the search for knowledge and information, the desire for self-expression and to share, and hope for guidance and direction

expressed in the 'following' of others. All these are core human activities which I believe point to the enduring openness of human persons for an encounter with Jesus. He alone can satisfy the human yearning for friendship and love; he is the Truth who frees us from sin and weakness; he calls us to the fullness of self-giving in love, and he leads his followers to the abundance of life in unity and communion. We should never doubt what Pope Emeritus Benedict called the *power of the word of God itself to touch hearts, prior to any of our own efforts (Message, 2013). As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it. (Isaiah 55, 10-11).*