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# Towards full "neo-liberal" presence?

## Dialogue with the Dicastery for Communication

By Michel Chambon | Singapore  
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The Dicastery for Communication at the Vatican recently released *Towards Full Presence*, a pastoral reflection on engagement with social media. Although a Catholic can only appreciate the pastoral value of this document, its numerous insights, and biblical inputs, it is hard to not see its neo-liberal approach and question its partial way to address challenges raised by social media.



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The problem is not about what the document says. It is pastorally relevant, biblically rich, and ethically subtle. But it only speaks to individuals as if they should bear on their own shoulders the whole responsibility to evangelize the digital space and its social media.

Surely, Catholics need to be mindful of their ways to engage with online interactions. The document elaborates on the Parable of the Good Samaritan to creatively question our personal ways of encountering others through social media. But as Margaret Thatcher famously said, the Good Samaritan did not only have good intentions, he also had money! And I will add that he also had available institutions to truly fulfill his charitable impulse.

### **Not just about individual online**

The Good Samaritan who made himself a neighbor to a stranger in need was not operating in the wilderness. Both men were on a road built by others. After their encounter, the long-term care of the wounded man was transferred to an inn - a specialized institution able to support people in need.

In other words, responding to the challenges of social media is not only a matter of individual responsibility and good behavior. Whether we want it or not, it also involves the presence of and the financial commitment to institutions able to support and evangelize our digital encounters.

Since the Catholic Church stands as a resourceful set of institutions certainly able to act upon the digital space, it is quite a paradox that the Dicastery for Communication put all responsibilities on individuals. And it is regrettable that the text refuses explicitly to develop principles and norms able to structurally respond to the pitfalls of social media. Although the end of paragraphs

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10, 13-15, and 32 touch on institutional challenges, the following sections immediately go back to interpersonal relations and make the whole text fall short.

To move forward and search for guidelines at a more structural level, let me highlight creative ways through which Catholic institutions have corporately engaged with the digitalization of social interactions. Among the too many examples that come to mind – the French section of Vatican News, the Pope's Worldwide Prayer Network, numerous podcast and YouTube channels – I offer three cases from Asia, a continent too often marginalized in conversations about global Catholicism.

### **Looking to the East**

In Asia, missionary societies have long mobilized massive human resources to develop professional news agencies gathering and disseminating information on the religious dynamics and social changes of Asian societies. The American Maryknolls, the Italian PIME, and the French MEP have created three news agencies focusing on Asia: UCANews, Eglise d'Asie, and Asianews. Each has its own framework, challenges, and agenda. But all have increasingly developed their visibility on social media to diffuse professional information about Asian Churches. They manifest the way missionary societies have responded to Vatican II, renewed their missionary commitment, and engaged with the challenges of a digitalized world.

My second example is more local. It comes from Lokon St. Nikolaus High School, a private boarding school in Tomohon, Indonesia, owned by a wealthy Catholic family and where less than half of the students are Catholic. In the early 2000s, the country went through a moral panic about youth accessing cell phones and pornography. To address challenges raised by new technologies,

anthropologist Erica M. Larson explains that the school decided to formulate explicit rules about cell phones on campus and to generate discussion sessions about social media. In 2014, the private institution changed its policy to allow students to bring their devices to class. And it also introduced discussion sessions on the use of social media during Catholic religious education attended by all students. Over the years, the Catholic school has continued to adapt its policies to positively help students question their engagement with new technologies and social media.

My last example is more academic. It relates to ISAC, the Initiative for the Study of Asian Catholics, a scholarly enterprise established with academic colleagues of mine to strengthen social scientific research on Asian Catholics in contemporary societies. While discourses about Catholicism in Asian are often shaped by outdated assumptions, we believe that scholars must find new ways to engage with broader audiences and make their research socially and ecclesiologically relevant. Over the past two years, we have developed online events, social media presence, and podcast series to bring scholarly debates and research findings to more people. We have also mobilized new technologies to design research projects that can overcome socio-political restrictions and expand scientific research on the lived realities of Asian Catholics.

These three examples represent more than the individuals who constitute them. They are organizations that all seek to institutionally address the opportunities and challenges brought by social media. Yet, none of these structures is directly supervised by a bishop. Despite what many believe, Catholic institutional responsibility is not solely episcopal. We all share structural responsibility.

## **But it's not all good news**

Nevertheless, if we want to discern guiding principles for Catholic institutions, we also need to acknowledge that our communal engagements with social media are not always free from moral ambiguities and collective sin. The Church as an institution can fail. We all heard Pope Francis qualifying a large Catholic media outlet as being the work of evil. We need to consider these failures as well.

My first case study will come from Asia. Colleagues have methodologically documented how a large Facebook group promotes questionable agenda through insidious means. This independent group is apparently open to all Catholics of its archdiocese, administered by 6 lay Catholics, and a safe space for dialogue and mutual support -under some reasonable rules. However, what the administrators fail to disclose is that they are less numerous than they pretend, they mostly operate under the guidance of two tormented souls, and they apply all kinds of measures to discreetly delete posts that do fit into their agenda, promote hate speech against alternative views, and harass or exclude dissident voices.

The result is that among some twenty thousand members of this Facebook group, only a few dozen share posts regularly. Their contributions are quite homogenous and often cheesy statements that give the false and highly manufactured impression that this represents Catholicism. After years of anti-Francis campaigns promoted through this group, critical Catholics have complained to their archbishop. In 2021, a warning was finally sent. The administrators reaffirmed publicly the fidelity of their Facebook group to the magisterium while highlighting the legitimacy of those expressing concerns about the current pope. Meanwhile the rest of their toxic and sectarian agenda -which

resonates with the mindset of some local Catholic elites - has not changed. And unfortunately, it is most likely that their archbishop will not do anything about it.

Another example, not Asia but famous, comes from Colorado. In an article published by the Washington Post on 9 March 2023, the world discovered the fallacious ways through which some wealthy American Catholics have generated a private organization to launch a systematic witch-hunt against American priests with same-sex attraction and active on Grindr. Quickly, the structure evolved into something more than a few wealthy individuals who believe that they were serving the Church. It became a stable but secretive entity under no ecclesial regulation. While some bishops and Catholic media have heard about it, they failed to question its scope, legality, and morality.

As we have often seen during investigations related to clerical sex abuses, it was finally a secular media that took the lead to publicly uncover this Colorado-based witch-hunt. Indeed, secular institutions such as private media and civil authorities can play a critical role in questioning Catholic leaders which cover evil. If bishops and Rome do not act, other institutions can save the Church. The creativity of the Holy Spirit is borderless.

### **Three ways the Vatican can help**

With these failures in mind, we now return to the Vatican and its contribution to our digital engagements. Since we do not send money to Rome to simply get lengthy sermons that a parish priest could produce, what is the additional value of the Roman administration? How can the Dicastery for Communication support us, individually and institutionally, in our journey through the digital continent?

To address these questions, allow me to bring three suggestions. First of all, one could hope that the Dicastery for Communication will identify and publicize institutional practices that are deemed positive. As mentioned, there are many experimentations at local and regional levels which deserve attention. Out of this data, the Roman administration could publicly formulate principles and norms able to frame the ways Catholic institutions in their diversity engage with the digital continent. The Church has an institutional responsibility to make social media a safer space of encounter.

Second, if we turn to episcopal regulators, Rome could openly ask bishop conferences to take on institutional and financial responsibilities. And this kind of call cannot only occur behind closed doors. Listening to one another through digital space requires support and accountability. It is, for instance, essential to maintain a diversity of news outlets to secure our ecclesial capacity to spread critical information. Bishops cannot reduce social media to top-down communication and monochromatic evangelization. If we do not want to wait for secular media to come to our rescue, Catholic bishops need to truly support our access to ecclesial information and trustworthy social media.

Third, canon law should not be politely ignored. This legal tool should be mobilized in developing robust and institutional responses to the challenges of a digital world. And adding new canons from the top will not be enough. Local and national Churches need to truly invest in the training of canon lawyers who are not necessarily clergy members and serving the interest of their cast. Canon law is here to protect all of us in all aspects of our Christian life. In a synodal Church, Catholics should have ecclesial ways to make vicious structures accountable without depending entirely on the goodwill of their bishop.

In conclusion, as the "Inside The Vatican" podcast has already noticed, *Towards Full Presence* is a precious but partial text. We now need to hear from the Dicastery for Communication on institutional ways to engage with social media.

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(The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official editorial position of *La Croix International*)

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