DIVINE COMMUNICATION IN THE DIGITAL ERA: A THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION ON AUTHENTIC PRESENCE AND EVANGELIZATION

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Introduction

God and humanity have a dynamic process of communication that defines their rather deep relationship. Though it is not clear, believers are trying to reveal the mystery of the divine presence despite all the challenges. From God's side, He is constantly trying to descend and be identified with His people. Indeed, the relationship between God and humans depends on communication. Being a communicator,[1] having worked in this field for many years, and now learning theology as a preparation to become a priest, this study is relevant. This synthesis paper will discuss and expound on the communication of the divine presence and the relevance of authenticity, truthfulness, and community in the digital age.

Faith & Revelation: God and Humanity Communicate

God first desired to be known and share his divine life. As *Dei Verbum* notes, "Revelation is God's self-communication to humanity."[2] He has shown himself and his plan throughout the

1. Before entering the Society of Jesus, the writer was working as a public relations consultant in Jakarta, Indonesia, and is now still actively involved in various communication activities while studying theology at the Loyola School of Theology, Manila, Philippines.

2. *Dei Verbum* 2. Hereafter *DV*.

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ages and by various means of communication. His revelation was transmitted through words and deeds, such as burning bushes, signs and natural phenomena, dreams, and visions.[3]

Among the all creation, he chose humankind to communicate his divine plan and to have "intimate communion with himself."[4] *Communicare* meant *"to share with," "to share out," "to make generally accessible,"* or *"to discuss together."*[5] This definition implies that the act of revelation is how the Divine reveals Himself to humanity and invites human beings to be in communion with Him.

Furthermore, faith involves a human response, which is also part of the vital role of communication. Communication can happen and become a relationship only if the receiver receives the message and responds to the sender, since we look at communication through the two-way lens.[6] Interaction and relationships are vital in this context. Faith, in a certain sense, is how humans respond to and interact with the Divine's self-revelation. The quality of the response can be shown in moments of existential difficulties; for instance, when a person holds on to his faith even though they find life challenging because of losing a loved one or facing a terminal illness. Authentic believers would hold that the Divine is always with them.

3. Exodus 3:4-6, Exodus 13:21-22, 1 Samuel 3:1-14.

4. *Catechism of the Catholic Church,* 54

5. Betteke Van Ruler, "Communication Theory: an underrated pillar on which strategic communication rests," *International Journal of Strategic Communication* 12, no. 4 (August 8, 2018): 367–381, https://doi.org/10.1080/1553118x.2018.1452240.

6. Van Ruler, "Communication Theory."

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Transmission of Divine Communication

Just as communication happens in everyday life through various channels, transmitting divine revelation requires specific means of communication to share God's love and plan. In the Catholic Church, this transmission occurs through the interrelated channels of Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition, guided by the Magisterium. *Dei Verbum* articulates this relationship clearly: "Sacred Tradition and Sacred Scripture form one sacred deposit of the word of God, committed to the Church."[7] This unified deposit ensures the faithful transmission of divine revelation across generations. The document further emphasizes that "Sacred Scripture is the word of God since it is consigned to writing under the inspiration of the divine Spirit,"[8] establishing Scripture's role as a favored channel of divine communication.

Karl Rahner expounds on the understanding of this transmission process by emphasizing that Tradition is more than just a set of teachings passed down through generations. In his *Scripture and Tradition*, Rahner notes that while we often think of Tradition primarily in terms of authoritative teaching, this tends to represent a "curious and not at all self-evident narrowing-down of this notion."[9] Rather, Tradition encompasses the full mystery of how Christian faith and life are transmitted from one generation to the next. This more expansive understanding of Tradition as a comprehensive transmission of faith life helps us appreciate how divine communication works through multiple channels and means.

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7. *DV* 10.

8. *DV* 9.

9. Karl Rahner et al., *Theological Investigations* 6, *Concerning Vatican Council II* (1961), https://openlibrary.org/books/OL22453827M/Theological_investigations.

This understanding becomes more relevant in today's digital era, when access to Scripture and Church teachings is quickly facilitated through various electronic platforms. While digital technology makes religious texts more accessible than ever before, authentic interpretation of them would still require the guiding context of the Church's living tradition and magisterial teaching. The challenge is not merely to transmit information but to facilitate the genuine passing on of faith life, which Rahner identifies as central to Christian tradition. As theology students and individuals interested in the intersection of faith and digital communication, our role in this process is crucial as we help ensure the authenticity of interpretation in the digital age.

The Challenge to Respond to God's Self-Communication

God has revealed His will and divine plan to humanity throughout history. However, many find it more and more challenging to grasp, embrace, and respond to His invitation. In the present digital age, this problem is taking on new dimensions, especially with the rise of the social media era. The social dimension of sin, "the 'polluted atmosphere' projected by the environmental exterior into which we all are born"[10] has become particularly evident in our digital communication era. This social dimension of sin manifests itself in concerning ways through the impact of social media on mental health, interpersonal relationships, and broader societal issues.[11]

10. *Catechism for Filipino Catholics*, no. 377.

11. World Economic Forum highlights mental health risks associated with constant social media usage, such as overload, invasion, and uncertainty. Patricio V. Marquez, "Mental Health and Wellbeing Risks from Rising Digital and Social Media Usage," *PVMarquez*, http://www.pvmarquez.com/socialmediausagementalhealth.

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Examples include the proliferation of hate speech, cyber-bullying,[12] the spread of misinformation, and the paradox of increasing loneliness despite more excellent connectivity.[13]

Digital communication tools, while offering unprecedented connectivity, can paradoxically distance people from both their fellow humans and God. A Jesuit priest notably observed this phenomenon at one of the Ateneo High Schools, where many students, during confession, acknowledged excessive time spent in the digital world as a spiritual concern. Many students shared that extended engagement with devices and social media had diminished their motivation for learning, personal interactions with friends, and family relationships. Although digital technology is not the primary cause, it has become a strong temptation that can draw people away from greater purposes in life. We all share this problem, another form of social sin driven by our growing focus on the virtual world instead of more meaningful, face-to-face interactions.

However, creation, including the creation of the digital era, is good, not evil. We have experienced, as Duffy shares, that "the evil is the corruption that occurs within a creation that is already complete and good."[14] Therefore, just as sin has a social dimension, we believe that grace also possesses a social nature in the digital space, as "St. Paul is quite sure about the

12. Linda C. Asher, J.D., "Social Media Impact: How Social Media Sites Affect Society," American Public University, https://www.apu.apus.edu/area-of-study/business- andmanagement/resources/how-social-media-sites-affect-society/.

13. Janna Anderson, "2. The Negatives of Digital Life," *Pew Research Center*, July 3, 2018, https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2018/07/03/the-negatives-of-digital-life/.

14. Stephen J. Duffy, "Our Hearts of Darkness: Original Sin Revisited," *Theological Studies* 49 (1988): 597–622.

superabundance of grace"[15] that abounds more than all human sin put together. While digital technology poses challenges to spiritual connection, it at the same time offers unique opportunities for experiencing and sharing grace through virtual community building, relationship maintenance, and new forms of spiritual practice.[16]

Bishop Coyne argued that Pope Francis' references to social media in his encyclical *Fratelli Tutti* emphasize the beneficial aspects of online interaction while highlighting the risks of isolation associated with excessive use of smartphones or computer screens.[17] Another opportunity to consider is that young people can utilize social media in a balanced manner that proactively empowers and elevates often marginalized voices. The key lies in thoughtfully leveraging technology to foster genuine connection and embody grace in both online and offline spheres.

The Trinity as the Perfect Model of Communication

The Incarnate Word

Christ's incarnation is the summit of divine communication, adapting to human comprehension. *Dei Verbum* notes, "it shines forth in Christ, who is himself both the mediator and the sum total of Revelation."[18] This incarnational principle

15. Stephen J. Duffy, *The Dynamics of Grace: Perspectives in Theological Anthropology* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 1993), 63.

16. Janna Anderson, "1. The Negatives of Digital Life," *Pew Research Center*, July 3, 2018, https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2018/07/03/the-negatives-of-digital-life/.

17. Catholic News Service, "Program Explores How Social Media Can Help Young People Engage Their Faith," *Crux*, December 6, 2021, https://cruxnow.com/church-in-the-usa/2021/12/program-explores-how-social-media-can-help-young-people-engage-their-faith.

18. *DV* 2.

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offers a vital paradigm for how divine communication might remain authentic while adjusting to many contexts, including our digital age. The Church today must find means to make divine presence felt in digital environments where many young people interact and "live," much as the Word became flesh to express God's presence in a tangible, human form.

In a world where technology and communication methods are constantly evolving, we must learn to share God's mercy and love as Jesus did.[19] The 34th General Congregation of the Society of Jesus mentioned that "Jesus, who himself communicated his Father's message through parables, miracles, and acts of compassion, must be our model."[20] The incarnation moment demonstrates that effective divine communication involves transmitting information and establishing a genuine and authentic presence.

Christ's public ministry exemplified His presence through personal encounters, communal gatherings, and transformative relationships. We can mention some of Christ's encounters that transformed people through His words and deeds, such as the stories of the woman at the well, Saul's conversion on the road to Damascus, the wedding at Cana, and the Sermon on the Mount. This model of communication challenges us to ensure that digital communication facilitates real encounters that touch and transform people's hearts rather than merely disseminating religious content.

19. Communications Office, "Empowering Jesuits in Communication," *Jesuits*, https://www.jesuits.global/2024/06/06/empowering-jesuits-in-communication/ (accessed January 16, 2025).

20. The Society of Jesus, *The 34th General Congregation of the Society of Jesus* (Rome: The Society of Jesus, 1995), Decree 15, no. 4.

Trinity

The doctrine of the Trinity, which is based on "the oneness of God and the distinction of the divine persons,"[21] gives us a fundamental way to think about genuine relationships and communication in any setting. Within the Trinity, we observe the perfect communication model, where there is an eternal exchange of love, knowledge, and presence among God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This divine pattern offers essential principles for digital communication where God the Father as the Source communicates through self-giving love, God the Son as the Word embodies the message in a form accessible to the recipients, the humankind, and God the Holy Spirit as the Interpreter ensures the message is appropriately received and understood by the recipients.

Karl Barth's interpretation of the Trinity as a communicative relationship, with the Father as speaker, the Son as word, and the Holy Spirit as interpreter, provides valuable insights for digital communication.[22] According to this framework, genuine communication requires a clear source, such as the initiating act of the Father, appropriate message embodiment based on the Son's incarnational example, and appropriate interpretation and reception directed by the role of the Holy Spirit. Reflecting the communal nature of the Trinity mentioned above, we can learn that effective communication should foster connections between persons.

21. Josef Neuner and Jacques Dupuis, *The Christian Faith in the Doctrinal Documents of the Catholic Church* (Bangalore: ATC Publications, 1982), 98.

22. Yeremia Y. Putra and Yohanes K. Susanta, "Karl Barth's Theology of the Trinity in Conversation With Christian Theology of Religions," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 45, no. 1 (January 24, 2024), https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v45i1.2824.

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These Trinitarian ideas thus can direct digital communication practices by stressing the need for actual presence rather than mere transfer of information, incarnational adaptation to different digital environments, and the role of a community in interpreting and living out the message. This theological perspective clarifies how digital communication could be a real extension of divine presence while avoiding the dangers of superficial or alienated contacts. This also compels us to create digital communication strategies that mirror the Trinitarian values of relationship, openness, exchange, and real communion.

Ecclesiology: The Church's Role in Communicating the Good News

The Church plays an essential and continuous role in sharing its teachings. *Dei Verbum* states, "The Church, in her teaching, life, and worship, perpetuates and transmits to every generation all that she herself is, all that she believes."[23] This ongoing sharing process ensures that God's message stays available and relevant to each new generation, even as communication methods change.

Furthermore, the Church's basic kerygmatic purpose gains new relevance in our digital age. The Catechism of the Catholic Church confirms that Christ forms the core of all kerygmatic proclamations and lies at the center of both the universe and history.[24] CCC further underscores that Christ remains the center of all proclamation[25] and that evangelization is the calling of all the faithful.[26] This essential reality guides the Church's approach to its evangelization task in today's digital

23. *DV* 8.

24. *CCC* 426.

25. *CCC* 425.

26. *CCC* 905.

landscape. The universal call to evangelization finds new expression through digital platforms, which offer unprecedented opportunities for sharing the Gospel message.

The Church's duty to convey faith naturally encompasses the digital realm, which requires careful interaction with modern communication platforms.[27] CCC acknowledges that media can contribute to the common good, thereby establishing a theological basis for utilizing digital tools in the context of evangelization.[28] Digital evangelism can benefit significantly from how the apostle Paul adapted his communication method with different audiences.

Considering Paul's interaction with various cultures and settings while preserving the reliability of the Gospel, the modern Church has to efficiently navigate digital environments while maintaining the fundamental truth of the message. Most importantly, it is crucial to maintain the perspective that digital media remains a tool for our ministry rather than a replacement for the sacramental life of the Church. The goal is to use these platforms to guide people of God toward authentic encounters with the Divine Presence while recognizing that virtual interactions complement rather than substitute for physical participation in the Church's sacramental life.

Mary: The Human Model of Divine-Human Communication

Mary's role in the redemption narrative is a "sign of certain hope and comfort for the pilgrim people of God."[29] Her role is an excellent example of how people can genuinely dialogue with God in the digital age. Her reaction to the Annunciation

27. *CCC* 2493.

28. *CCC* 2494.

29. *LG* 68.

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and her intimate collaboration on her son's mission reflect fundamental aspects of genuine communication that are still crucial in today's environments.

Mary first shows the ideal human reaction to divine communication through careful listening and deliberate involvement. Her inquiry, "How can this be?"[30] reveals that honest communication entails active dialogue rather than only passive reception. It teaches us how, instead of superficial interaction, we should approach digital communication with great awareness and genuine involvement. Mary's *fiat,* "Let it be done to me according to your word,"[31] also shows how divine communication should result in specific behavior and change. In our digital age, where knowledge often resides in the virtual sphere, Mary's example reminds us that honest communication with the Divine must manifest as actual dedication and transformation. Mary's Magnificat[32] finally shows how proper reception of Divine communication naturally leads to proclamation. She declares God's goodness with humility and honesty, qualities indispensable for effective digital evangelism. According to Mary's experience, honest Gospel communication results from personal experience with the Divine, preventing digital proclamation from becoming only an information exchange.

This Marian communication model offers excellent insight for preserving authenticity in digital communication. It displayed Mary's perfect loving fidelity to God, defined by attentive listening, sincere response, and humble proclamation. Mary reminds us that in the digital era, good evangelism

30. Luke 1:34.

31. Luke 1:38.

32. Luke 1:46-55.

calls for not only technological mastery but also the essential traits of openness, sincerity, and humility she has shown.

Conclusion

The Church has opportunities and challenges in expressing divine presence via digital means as we enter a time when the Beta Generation, born into seamless technological integration, will make up a significant portion of the world population.[33] This reality invites us to apply the theological ideas discussed in this reflection paper: the Trinity model of perfect communion, Christ's incarnational approach to communication, and Mary's example of honest response and proclamation. The digital era calls for a balanced approach that preserves the fundamental features of divine-human communication while appropriating these to contemporary contexts.

From the revelation in the Old Testament to the incarnation of Christ and the missionary adaptability of St. Paul, today's evangelism must genuinely engage with digital spaces while preserving the depth of genuine encounter and authenticity, precisely as God's revelation has always met humanity where they are.

As I finish my theological studies at LST, I discover that the core mission as the true disciples in proclaiming Kerygma, the Good News of the Lord, remains unchanged, which is to communicate God›s presence and love authentically in every age and via every means available while keeping focus on the ultimate goal, which is leading people to experience genuine encounters with the living God in both digital and physical

33. The new generation born this year will become the Beta Generation in 2025 and, by 2035, make up 16% of the global population. Experts predict that this generation will be characterized by technological integration. McCrindle, "Welcome Gen Beta - McCrindle," *McCrindle*, December 19, 2024, https://mccrindle.com.au/article/generation-beta-defined/.

spaces by bringing hope to the world today that is constantly tempted to despair.[34]

34. This sentence is referring to the statement of Fr. Arturo Sosa, S.J., the General of the Society of Jesus, to the Communication Delegates of the conferences that the vital nature of communications can not only spread the word of the ministries of the Society, but also bring hope. Communications Office, "Communications Serving the Mission," *Jesuits*, accessed January 16, 2025, https://www.jesuits.global/2024/06/28/communications-serving-the-mission/.

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