## Educating and evangelizing today in the digital habitat. Together with young people, toward the future: Part One

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How do we evangelise in the digital environment today?

The Church tackled this important question through the Synod on Young People, along with the need to understand the dynamics of this environment, the need to dialogue with its cultures and evangelise this habitat.

“The digital environment presents a challenge to the Church on various levels; it is essential, therefore, to deepen knowledge of its dynamics and its range of possibilities from the anthropological and ethical point of view. This requires not only entering into it and promoting its communicative potential with a view to the Christian proclamation, but also giving a Gospel flavour to its culture and its dynamics.” (Final Document, The Synod on Young People, no. 145).

In seeking to respond to the Pope’s request on the question of the digital and evangelisation, I would like to start with you, knowing you would like to accompany this series of reflections by interpreting the moment we are living through, especially given the pandemic and the war, seeking to place this complex panorama within the perspective of communication.  The purpose of this series of texts is to try to delve into the big questions that educators, evangelisers, families, priests, religious, young people and communicators are asking themselves about the infosphere, the metaverse, artificial intelligence, ethics and the digital, privacy and security, algorithms, the anthropocene, biometric science, the power of large communication companies and their strategies to maintain their power, controls on personal data, nanotechnology, biotechnology, genetic technology and more. This is the context in which our aim is to explore the principles and methodology for communicating and evangelising in these new scenarios that are becoming more complex in the here and now and will in the future.

PART ONE

Humanity had gone through two great crises over these two past years: one a health crisis from Covid-19 that is still affecting the world, bringing great social, economic and health changes with it; and more recently the crisis of the Ukraine-Russia war, which according to some is the beginning of a new geopolitical shift in the world which can alter politics, the economy and world security.

Be it the health or the war crisis, social media have played a huge role in the social way of seeking and sharing information among family and friends, in the way of interpreting the ocean of news items shared by the media, and in the way we situate ourselves existentially in the world.

We are all part of an immense network of digital and virtual connection. There is data confirming that in a short time digital technology has caused a major shift in people's lives, in the way they manage their lives, in the way they deal with reality.

Moreover, the combination of digital communication, the Internet and artificial intelligence has created a large and complex communication habitat which contributes significantly to human and societal development. The digital has become part of the lives of people and institutions. The European Union itself has put a major project called 'European Digital Decade: Digital Goals for 2030' at the centre of its development for the future.

Themes include digital citizenship, digital business transformation, digital and sustainable infrastructure. The growth of the digital at a personal and institutional level brings out the dynamics of human relationships, new scientific and technological discoveries, and opens up possibilities for education, commerce and work. At the same time, the diversity and ambiguity of information emerges in all this. The question we can immediately ask ourselves is: what is our perception of the reality of life and the world through the digital? What is the role of social media in our daily lives, in our relationships with others as people and citizens?

I would like to touch on some points, through these initial questions, concerning the digital universe. It is important on a conceptual level to state that social media communication, for example, involves three inseparable aspects: digital, internet and artificial intelligence, thus forming an environment in which we communicate on the internet, on social media. Social networks are part of the global structure of cyberspace, embedded as they are in the global platform of the virtual universe.

Therefore, it is always necessary to connect the use of social media with a wider, converging reality. For example, when we use WhatsApp to share news with friends, we are already inside the digital habitat, networked with the whole world, cognitively and emotionally involved within the virtual universe.

Behind the use of social media is the individual person, their culture, their history, their values and their way of being in their social context. Behind this virtual habitat is the complexity of social, economic, political and religious reality which directly influences the way we communicate and use social media. For example, poverty, the great digital divide that affects Africa in particular.

Behind this digital universe we have the different ways the sciences interpret and view the individual, such as neuroscience, artificial intelligence, biotechnology and bioethics. Therefore, any analysis of the way we use social networks confronts us with a vast complexity of analysis of the digital phenomenon.

There is no neutrality in the digital habitat! Being on the net means being involved in an immense and complex global communication system where we are confronted with ideologies, with fake news, with an areopagus, with interests and control by large digital companies, with the power of capital and different ideological interests and the new geopolitics strongly organised from the perspective of cybersecurity.

Privacy, security, the growth of biometric science, the control of personal data, the advancement of artificial intelligence and the world of algorithms are changing the way we communicate. The socio-economic and cultural scenario of our time is rapidly changing.

We live in a society characterised by speed, fluidity, change and innovation. E-commerce and digital finance have created new geopolitical relationships and much is changing: knowledge is power. The digital, financial and economic marketplace is changing the business model of small and large companies, and education is changing too.

Communication changes culture and the way people live and socialise. Communication is intrinsically linked to politics, economics, education, and the interests of individuals, groups and companies. In this context, technology emerges with great power and development: from artificial intelligence to nanotechnology, from biotechnology to genetic technology.

In this immense universe in which people converge through social networks and the internet, there are the great utopias and realities involving the vision of transhumanism, the ecological challenge and consequently that of a potential new anthropology.