



Rereading the vows in the light of digital culture

We are **bold** if our aim is that of discussing and deepening the analysis, in one hour time and in a **simple** way, of the subtitle of this conference: "Re-reading vows in the light of the digital culture". But this is also an urgent task, because of the amazing speed with which information and communication technologies entered and became part of Religious Life, which hadn't previously developed its own **digital culture**, that is to say, some specific theoretical and practical orientations concerning the use (technical skills) and the free, conscious, and responsible (moral) use of ICT in Religious Life.

If we fail to undertake the task of developing a digital culture, which we could call Christian, we would consequently run the risk of being immersed in a pre-established culture without any possible discretion, i.e. discernment. However, facing this challenge is also an opportunity, that of developing an evangelical and evangelising culture of communication. Evangelical, since it is imbued with the richness of the Gospel values, and evangelising, as a modern *areopagus*, in which many digital missionaries have already been spreading the Good News with boldness and simplicity.

As you can see, there are many aspects that I want to deal with in my presentation, the bud of a thought that has not fully grown yet; therefore, I invite you to react in the chat to what you will hear. I believe that it is necessary to develop together a digital culture for Religious Life, in order to be proactive in the face of a digital culture which, as we shall see, is taking hold. The webinar format and the limited time at our disposal will not allow for much room for debate, but I invite you to write your reflections in the chat or send them to my email address: webmaster@assumpta.org.

From the culture that we are imbued in to the culture that we build

Though I may repeat myself, I must state that religious life is imbued in the digital culture, and, even if we may find it hard to accept, without our being aware of it. And this is a great concern for me, not only for the digital natives entering our houses of formation, but also for middle-aged and retired religious. In this section we will pinpoint advantages and disadvantages of digital culture, in the perspective of our living out the three pillars of religious life: prayer, community, and mission.

Prayer life

We can state that:

- o thanks to light electronic devices, ICT unburdened our lives of heavy paper liturgical and spiritual books, enriching our prayer life by giving us access to biblical sources and to the works of the great masters of spiritual life;

- o the use of apps has been helping many religious to renew their spiritual life, offering new ways of praying, carrying out meditation or life revision, all based on different methodologies, so much so that everyone may choose the one he/she finds most appropriate;

- o videoconferencing has given the opportunity to be in contact with the people who accompany us in our spiritual life...

And we could go on and on with listing the advantages of the digital culture in our prayer life. But we must also ask ourselves what is most appropriate of the digital culture, in terms of nourishing our spiritual experience.

Paper books (e.g. Bible, breviaries, spiritual works...) avoid the unavoidable distractions that are proper of digital devices, which offers other interesting inputs, apart from the text itself. Do we have enough willpower as not to check our WhatsApp or the text message that pops up on our mobile phone, while meditating on the readings of the day?

Can the prayerful and personal reading of the Bible, carried out according to the methods endorsed by our tradition, whereby the believer is open to the Holy Spirit's action, at times consoling and at times desolating, at times showing great lights and at other times proving not very fertile, but in which God's action is always at work, be replaced by an audio or video, that someone produced and that will always comfort or suggest us ideas by satisfying our senses? Will it not override the imagination and motions by which God wants to speak to us?

How much time is ICT stealing from reading books or prayers as loving forms of dialogue with God?

On the other hand, digital media are turning into one of the causes of what is now known as "procrastination", or the tendency to postpone or delay important tasks in favour of more enjoyable or less demanding activities.

Community life

The digital culture has fostered a sense of community, interconnecting us to other communities and/or provinces of our congregations, and by allowing us to exchange news, experiences, resources, concerns, joys, hopes... but it also involved other Church institutions and the whole People of God in this process. Now more than ever, we can really share, shape, celebrate and engage our faith together. Online meetings have not only allowed for spaces for fraternal sharing, but also for increasingly used spaces for research and discernment that make synodality possible.

However, to create a common digital culture, it is necessary to create a culture of communication, that is, a desire not only to receive information and resources from others, but also to generate content of my own: sharing experiences, resources, and thoughts.

"I don't have time" or "It is too expensive" often prove everyday-life excuses for investing time and money in the pursuit of some objectives as opposed to others. Discernment is essential in order to set common priorities. In an individualistic culture such as ours, personal channels are being prioritised over institutional ones. And the same man or woman who says he/she does not have time to write to the rest of the province or the congregation about the beautiful experience he/she has lived in his/her community, or about a resource that has proved useful, keeps his/her personal networks nevertheless updated. To what extent am I willing to communicate who we are, sharing what we live and do?

The digital culture in religious life must move from "I" to "we".

This also entails investing time and resources in goals and activities that make the media truly accessible for the greatest possible number of people. It is essential to train and be trained, a solidarity between generations and social groups is needed to share knowledge and technology. To what extent do I use my time to train others, even if I am not an expert?

The practical application of this process in vocations ministry is quite evident: it is not an *influencer* who can attract the youth to live their vocation of following God, but a contemplative and apostolic community can.

International Meeting of Communication for Religious Life

imcrl2023@uisg.org - www.uisg.org/en/communicating-religious-life - www.uisg.org

Apostolic life

The digital culture has also facilitated collaboration with people who live far away from us, creating teams whose members do not live close to each other, even at an international level. The digital culture has also made pastoral mission more effective, facilitating the creation of content, the access to sources, the sending of contents... And it has developed new places of mission.

At the apostolic level, as in the workplace, the biggest challenge we are currently faced with is the digital disconnection. The fragile rhythm between the three pillars that sustain religious life (Prayer - Community - Apostolate) often ends up being broken, because we feel pressed by the Kingdom. Activities increasingly turn into activism, when there is no real disconnection from the *Areopagus* that we always carry with us in our pockets.

In addition to this great fact of being literally burned out, rather than just feeling exhausted, by work, the professionalisation of many of our mission platforms comes into play. Is the Kingdom of God and the God of the Kingdom at the centre of the content that we publish, exchange...? The proclamation of the Kingdom and the condemnation of the anti-Kingdom must remain central to our mission.

Rereading the vows in the light of digital culture

Though many of the things we have just mentioned affect the very core of religious life, we shall now move on to the main subject of our intervention, and instead of talking about "the vows in the light of digital culture", we are going to discover how the evangelical counsels can enlighten the digital world.

The digital culture finds its strength in its sensitivity[1]. It engages our senses, especially sight and hearing, since the most consumed content on the Internet is audio-visual, and produces enjoyable sensations. Nowadays, instead of waiting or travelling, contemplating our surroundings, sleeping or reading, we spend our time consuming digital content. A little over twenty years ago, we would have seen many people holding thick books on the underground, whom are now replaced by people swiping their fingers from one video to another, or playing games. Few people read or listen to books, let's be honest. And this is also happening in religious gatherings, whose main concern seems to be discovering the wifi password. Nowadays, when we gather in one of our mountain communities to rest during holidays, few

sisters can be seen reading under the trees; more are those who come to sit with their chairs in front of the main entrance, where the wifi connection is better.

Increasing is the number of young or middle-aged religious who, at the end of their working day, are often up late at night, relax by reading text messages, updating their social networks, looking at comments people left them, or reacting to contents from friends and strangers. Amadeo Cencini, quoting Bishop Semeraro, affirms that Evagrius Ponticus' "Noonday Demon", should be now rather called "Midnight Demon", midnight being "a time in which a certain indolence 'of sloth' is often manifested in the face of a temptation that we do not always recognise as such in its more ambiguous meaning, namely, 'that of ending the day by satisfying, through communication media'"[2], something we might call a need to disconnect from the worries of the day, to connect with friends, to the news or soap operas of the world... in essence, to rest by "doing nothing", as the fervent monk in the desert was assailed at midday.

To paraphrase Cencini again, these practices may not be "coherent with one's own identity as a consecrated person and with the truth-beauty-goodness linked to it. Whoever ends the day", or rests during it,

"by resorting to exciting images and visions, cannot certainly claim to be found, when the morning comes, with the fresh desire to see the face of God, proper to one who has awaited the dawn 'like watchmen in the morning' (cf. Ps 129:6), to be with his Lord, savouring His Word and welcoming His beauty. If the person has filled and nourished his/her senses with a certain food, (mis)educating them with a certain kind of flavours, if at dawn he/she wakes up with his mouth still full of those flavours, the bad breath and the feeling of heaviness and frustration that come from uncontrolled binge eating, he/she cannot claim to appreciate other flavours, nor to be differently (divinely) attracted to His sensibility. That is to say, if external senses are nourished by a certain food, one cannot think or claim that the corresponding internal sense will change its direction. And if for whatever reason that frustrating and painful taste (such as regret) should also disappear, then it would mean that the last vestige of a healthy penitential sensibility is also disappearing".[3]

Once more, we must state that, unlike the abovementioned authors, we are not referring to sinful content, which exponentially increases this danger, but to all contents that, entering our minds through our senses, generate sensations and emotions (creating attracting gratification), which will also develop a will-related (influencing decision-making processes) and, eventually, mental (influencing the person's moral judgement capacity).

International Meeting of Communication for Religious Life

imcrl2023@uisg.org - www.uisg.org/en/communicating-religious-life - www.uisg.org

If this action is frequently repeated, if this content is searched for (and the Google algorithm lures us to do so), a justified need, "it's my time off", originates; but the occupying forces that settle in my inner castle, affections, ideas and beliefs, can hardly be expelled.

The masters of spiritual life have always warned us about the need of taking care of our time of rest, as opposed to the leisure that distances us from the ideal of life. The human sciences provide an anthropological basis for this differentiation. Our subconscious processes the contents that our sensations, emotions, and affective life bring to it, the content of which will build one or another kind of sensibility, bringing us closer to or distancing us from our vocation as disciples, whether in religious, priestly, or married life. The evening is an important time for processing this content, which is why St. Ignatius recommends going to bed having gone over the meditation points for the following day during the Spiritual Exercises[4], but let it now be a practice for life. In the spirituality of my congregation, the "Great Silence" is proposed, according to which the time between completing and ending the morning prayer is intended for what we might call a disconnection with the world, in order to connect with God. This is the communication that nourishes and gives meaning to the Consecrated life[5], and the more we fill it with this love that "the Spirit has poured into our hearts" (Romans 5,8-11), the more we will empty it of what distances us from it.

Although we can draw different conclusions on how to live the vows in this digital culture, and on the other hand, how they might be enriched, let us look at some important aspects in more detail.

Chastity

As we have pointed out in the previous section, only by filling ourselves with the Love of God can we empty ourselves of other forms of love, and be a manifestation of the Love of God by loving without exclusivity or possession, even to the point of donating our lives. But love, like faith and hope, is like a fire which, if we do not nourish it, goes out, so the flame of God's love must be cared for with simple means: personal and community prayer, nourishing ourselves with the great masters of spiritual life to borrow their words and thus re-read the experience we are making, living the sacrament of the Eucharist and Reconciliation, learning to love in the school that is also our community, but also by means of accompaniment, daily re-reading... .

The rest of the relationships in my life, including those I establish online, must be integrated into this love, or they will take God's place. A person in love has no room in his or her heart and in his or her networks for other loves;

if we fall in love, which can happen, it is because our heart was already somewhat empty. And this emptiness is very often being filled by relationships we create on the Internet, which are more discreet and impersonal than personal ones, but which are also able to trap our loving capacities. Many consecrated people have left religious life because they fell in love with a person with whom they shared interests and tastes, and with whom they used to time on the Internet.

"Learning to love requires time and multiple conversions" states our Rule of Life; this is not an easy path in any vocation, and much of what I say can also be applied to married people and priests. Being careful and attentive in the use of social media or in the selection of content is very important. We cannot go everywhere on the Internet and think that no online place may ever affect us. And if they do affect us, we should not be scandalised for the fact that we are human, that we experience the same temptations and difficulties as our contemporaries. We must especially keep an eye out for:

- addiction to friends, families, colleagues... Measure the time spent on social networks (including WhatsApp) - and the cause: are the reasons apostolic? How often do you check your mobile phone? Do you wait for a text message from one or more people in particular? What messages, photos... do you keep? Why? No problem - It is just necessary to become aware and talk about this issue, so that your heart is only inhabited by the God of the Kingdom and the Kingdom of God.
- pornography, which is not only accessible on the Internet, but which is also unintentionally found on many websites. Many experts warn against this danger, because what begins as a release of tension or curiosity may end up generating addiction. The sexual need is one of the few human needs that increases rather than decreases, the more it is nourished, because it releases dopamine, a substance that generates pleasure, but it is just addictive like drugs or alcohol.
- damaging charity, by contributing to backbiting, to comments that destroy communion. Charity must be a criterion of discernment, to understand what to say or republish, and what not to say. Do not say on the Internet what you would not say in front of the person involved. Even if what you are saying is true, is it worth destroying a person's reputation? Any message should be fact-checked, it is not a criterion of truthfulness "it has reached me through many contacts" or "I have seen it published on many networks", it may be that nobody has taken the trouble to verify it.

If we want to grow in our expertise in this field, it may be useful to open ourselves to someone. The "evil spirit" flees when it is discovered, as St. Ignatius would say. And any shared burden is always less heavy. Rereading also helps to become aware of the extent to which sins can originate, motivating us to discover that, with the help of God and our brothers and sisters, we can grow in virtue. But above all, with care and attentiveness to prayer and community time. As we already said, being prudent in the use of digital media is very helpful, to keep these media away from times of personal and community prayer, and to cultivate personal relationships with our community, family, and friends.

Digital media also help cultivating relationships with sisters and lay people from other provinces or countries, to share, celebrate, shape, and engage our faith. In my humble opinion, at the time that religious life is presently going through in some countries, such as Spain, lay people and sisters may create virtual communities that support our religious vocation, naturally without renouncing to build our communities of life. The same goes for the spiritual accompaniment, that helps facing life and growing in holiness, since ICT offers a means to access this important instrument of Spiritual Life.

Poverty

Articulating this vow with the incredibly fast development of ICTs is proving to be very difficult, a cause of damage for some and of double life for others. For the sisters who belong to older generations or who live in some parts of the world, who knew how to take care of their devices to make them last longer, it is not easy to understand that however good the physical aspect of a computer or a mobile phone may be, they no longer work because of the progress of programs and applications, which require more powerful devices. It is difficult to find the balance between the equipment I need to carry out my mission, to be up to date (not to leave anyone behind), and the equipment I want, because it is just trendy.

In following the One who sends us "without bag or baggage" (Luke 22:35), we must consider the roads that lead us to the areas where we are to proclaim the good news. Any device must enable us to enter the digital continent where we are called to evangelise. We must learn to ask with simplicity, as well as to avoid economic abuses and to respond to the needs of our sisters.

However, we must also keep a balance in buying new devices, remembering that this vow could indeed speak its word in the digital culture of "use and throw away" and "buy trendy items". I would like to analyze with you some issues related to Justice, Peace, and Care for Creation in living the vow of poverty:

International Meeting of Communication for Religious Life

imcrl2023@uisg.org - www.uisg.org/en/communicating-religious-life - www.uisg.org

- Some components of digital media have been generating wars, as it is the case for superconductors (which make it easier for information to be stored and conveyed on ever smaller surfaces), which are difficult to produce industrially and have been discovered in regions where they are easy to obtain, though in exchange for weapons or for child or underpaid labour. This is the case of coltan, a mineral mix of columbite and tantalite[6].
- The environmental problems digital media generate: E-waste, which is difficult to recycle, contains toxic and non-biodegradable materials that can contaminate soil and water, if not properly processed; data centres and communications infrastructure require high energy consumption, both to store-process information and to keep equipment cool, with the unavoidable need of an increased consumption of fossil fuels and emissions of greenhouse gases, contributing to climate change. A considerable carbon footprint is left by digital media, and by their production, distribution, use, and maintenance; a process, that goes hand in hand with a depletion of natural resources, including the heating of cold areas where large computers are being installed to avoid cooling them artificially.

Before buying a new computer, and in view of the challenge that our vow of poverty may pose to digital culture, let us ask ourselves whether it is really necessary to change our devices, or whether we can continue using them.

The digital culture is also characterised by an apparently happy world that does not mirror the reality of a world in need of transformation. It is therefore urgent, though with prudence, to denounce the anti-Kingdom and proclaim the Kingdom.

Obedience

The digital culture offers new and unprecedented ways of living the vow of obedience in synodality. The search and decision-making processes can be more open and participatory, thanks to platforms that have been designed for multinational companies and whose work is rooted in the reflection and determination of people living in different countries and cultures. The same is true for collaborative work, which is no longer subject to the availability of people who can easily move around. Consultation in decision-making is possible thanks to easy on-line questionnaires.

At the level of governance structures and broader citizen action, we can join the UN in stating that the culture of communication, and also the digital culture, plays a fundamental role in the implementation of the Millennium

International Meeting of Communication for Religious Life

imcrl2023@uisg.org - www.uisg.org/en/communicating-religious-life - www.uisg.org

Agenda, in order to inform, educate, and denounce, with the goal of generating a common awareness for the challenges we have been globally facing, to foster collective commitment and to promote effective international collaboration between governments and organisations. Creating this culture of inclusive and accessible communication requires involving as many people as possible, promoting citizen participation, using both traditional and digital media, fostering media literacy, using clear and accessible messages, and measuring and assessing impact for continuous improvement, which is why planning is so necessary.

On the other hand, Pope Francis[7] has also been a prominent leader in promoting effective communication as a tool to foster bridge-building between different cultures and communities, as well as collaboration, solidarity, and collective action. In his magisterium, he highlighted the importance of collaboration between governments, non-governmental organisations, the private sector, civil society, and individuals, to address the global challenges of caring for our common home. Our pontiff also emphasised the importance of effective and respectful communication in all areas of his spiritual leadership, from his homilies to his social media posts, and meetings with political and religious leaders around the world. Pope Francis has been a witness and teacher in how to put the different means of communication at the service of the culture of encounter and care, highlighting the importance of a communication which is based on the ethical principles of truth and charity, capable of building bridges and overcoming divisions. He has been able to adapt his messages to different audiences and channels.

Pope Francis has stressed the importance of the culture of communication in education, as well as the formation of young leaders in the Church and in society. He urged educators to teach effective and respectful communication skills, in order to foster a culture of dialogue, encounter, and common care. He advocates an education that fosters intercultural understanding and the inclusion of marginalised communities, in order to overcome the "throwaway culture".

Pope Francis also insists on the importance of the culture of communication in evangelisation. A message that must be conveyed authentically, respectfully, and in a way that is able to reach people in their life context and in their concrete reality, and that generates personal processes of discovery or faith deepening processes. Convinced that the Christian message leads to joy, breaks the vicious circle of anguish and destroys the spiral of fear, he insists on using all possible means to spread a different kind of contents on the web.

We have before us a fascinating challenge: Let us face it with boldness and simplicity, always being moved and inspired by the Spirit. Thank you very much.

[1] I refer to Amadeo Cencini's definition of sensibility: "Sensibility is that emotional orientation, but also includes the mental and decisional, impressed on our inner world by experience or previous choices, in different areas of life. [...] This is why we defined sensibility not only as an emotional orientation (creating attracting gratification), but also as a will-related (influencing decision-making processes) and, eventually, mental (influencing the person's moral judgement capacity) orientation. And this is just why this orientation takes deeper and deeper root, and the person's sensibility is increasingly attracted towards this direction and justified by the person, being a mental attitude that generates a habitual praxis (and it is generated as well)." Amadeo Cencini, *Dall'aurora io ti cerco. Evangelizzare la sensibilità per imparare a discernere* (Edizioni San Paolo, 2019).

[2] Quoting M. Semerano, *Custodiamo nostro desiderio. Considerazioni con il mio presbiterio* (Albano Laziale: Miter Thev, 2017), 41. He openly refers to sexual satisfaction, obtained by means of watching pornographic videos. Without possibly denying this risk, other contents also exist, that, in not being so dangerous, affect the life of our congregations.

[3] Amadeo Cencini, *Dall'aurora io ti cerco*, 38. The author sometimes quotes G. Cucci, *Dipendenza sessuale online. La nuova forma di un'antica schiavitù*, (Milano: Ancora, 2015).

[4] "First Addition. After going to bed, just when I want to go asleep, to think, for the space of a Hail Mary, of the hour that I have to rise and for what, making a resume of the Exercise which I have to make." Ignacio de Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises* (Santander: Sal Terrae, 1995), n° 73

[5] "If the Holy Spirit is and represents the power of God's love, or the father-and-son relationship, in which they are forever linked to one another, and if sensibility relates to the affective orientation of human beings, I believe it would be proper to define the Spirit as the sensibility of God, the One in which the Father God and the Son God show together their hearts,

International Meeting of Communication for Religious Life

imcrl2023@uisg.org - www.uisg.org/en/communicating-religious-life - www.uisg.org

feelings, emotions, interests, and passions ... Isn't the Holy Spirit Itself the highly disorganized and organized divine energy of creative and redemptive love?". Amadeo Cencini, *Dall'aurora io ti cerco*. 32.

[6]Dev Nathan and Sandip Sarkar, "Blood on your mobile phone? Capturing the gains for artisanal miners, poor workers and women", *Capturing the Gains for Artisanal Miners, Poor Workers and Women (February 23, 2011)* (2011): [ctg_briefing_note_2.pdf \(mit.edu\)](#)

[7] Pope Francis' magisterium in this field is outstanding, and because of that we will just quote his messages for the World Day of Social Communications, which, as it has always been in the past and also with other popes, are usually published on the day (January 24th) in which we celebrate the feast of St. Francis de Sales, patron saint of journalists. Cf.

[https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/es/messages/communications.index.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/es/messages/communications/index.html) (Last checked in April 2023). The World Day of Social

Communication was created by the expressed will of the Second Vatican Council, and it is usually celebrated on the day of the Ascension, in remembrance of the Lord's mandate to go into the World and proclaiming its Gospel. The development of the communication culture may thus be easily understood and read through, by re-reading the topics all popes have been

dealing with since the year 1967.

Mercedes Méndez Siliuto. Responsable de comunicación de las Religiosas de la Asunción webmaster@assumpta.org - <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5815-2651>