

Maximizing social media for evangelization and religious activities during the COVID-19 pandemic as a model going forward

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ISSN: 2243-7703
Online ISSN: 2243-7711

OPEN ACCESS

Received: 30 March 2021

Revised: 17 May 2021

Accepted: 10 June 2021

Available Online: 16 July 2021

DOI: 10.5861/ijrse.2021.680

Abstract

This qualitative research paper proposes that the Catholic Church can maximize social media for evangelization and religious activities during the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, the social media platform can be used in the future, even after the pandemic, so that the Good News can reach more people. In the first part, we discuss the changes done by the Church in Her practices during the COVID-19 pandemic. Second, a discussion on evangelization is given so that an understanding of the concept will be achieved. Third, we highlight the need to maximize social media so that the Gospel message will be heard by more people. Thus, this paper emphasizes utilizing social media for a common good.

Keywords: social media, evangelization, COVID-19 pandemic, Catholic Church, religious activities

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1. Introduction

The past year, 2020, has put the world into a difficult situation due to the outbreak of the coronavirus. As of writing, there are 134,957,021 confirmed COVID-19 cases (World Health Organization, 2021). Thus, having a large number of infected individuals, the outbreak led the World Health Organization (WHO) to declare it as a pandemic. This global health crisis led governments to implement safety protocols and impose lockdowns in different countries in the world. Thus, the world has been put on hold because of the threat of the spread of the novel coronavirus (Ahmed & Memish, 2020). For this reason, human operations were forced to change drastically. There are changes in how people study, work, and express their faith. Moreover, sporting events such as the Olympics were postponed for the people to stay at home and be safe from the virus. Hence, mass gatherings are not allowed so that the spread of the virus will be lessened. The people then need to adapt so that instead of places where many people are falling in line, to contribute to ensuring public health, most human activities must be done online.

In line with this, the Catholic Church is among the ones who need to adapt to the situation so that they can continue administering the sacraments even though no people are attending physically. This is the case because the churches were closed so that the people will have less physical contact with other people to avoid an outbreak. Before the pandemic, many people attend religious activities. Some people go to masses daily, attend novenas, pray the rosary, and celebrate festivities. In the Philippines, millions of people usually gather in the streets to attend the annual translation or devotion to the Black Nazarene (Calano, 2020). Another festival that usually involves millions of people is the feast of Santo Niño de Cebu (Ramos, 2020). Looking at these examples shows us that religion is often the source for mass gatherings. However, the protocols that the pandemic requires changes this practice of many people gathering for a religious activity. Thus, the situation that the pandemic put the faithful in prompted them to stay at home while attending liturgical celebrations (Corpuz & Sarmiento, 2021).

Understanding the given situation, the closure of the churches impelled Church leaders to do church differently and to re-imagine the future of the church (Pillay, 2020; del Castillo et al., 2020). This situation made the Church more flexible so that their mission can still be carried out. One of the innovations that the Church did during the pandemic is by doing liturgical celebrations virtually. For the Catholic believers to still attend liturgical celebrations at home, masses were streamed online so that the faithful can still attend (Dulle, 2020). Since the masses are to be livestreamed, different churches have been using social media as the medium to reach the people. However, it is important that if the pandemic ends, will the Church go back to not using social media to let people attend liturgical celebrations? For this reason, this paper aims to answer the question: "To what extent can the Catholic Church use social media?" Thus, this study focuses on social media and how it can be of help in fulfilling the mission of the Church to spread the Good News as we go forward.

Hence, the objective of this study is to review the practices done by the Catholic Church to continue their religious activities during the COVID-19 pandemic and use it as a means for evangelization going forward. Recognizing that the Church used social media to reach the people during the pandemic, it must be the model for the future so that the Gospel message will be heard by the people. Thus, this study proposes that social media must be used by the Church even after the pandemic so that they can share the faith with everyone.

2. Methodology

This research paper provides content analysis on existing literature that focuses on evangelization, social

media, Catholic Church, and the COVID-19 pandemic. Reports, documents, journal articles, and books from different electronic databases and sources were downloaded from the world wide web.

This research study follows this structure for its discussion: (1) the first part provides information on the changes that were made by the Catholic Church in terms of Her religious activities due to the COVID-19 pandemic; (2) the second part focuses on defining the concept of evangelization; and (3) the third part proposes that the situation that the pandemic resulted to, which is the maximization of social media, can be used as a model going forward so that the teachings of the Gospel can reach more people.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 The Church and the COVID-19

The Catholic Church has been known for Her tradition and practices which usually involves the faithful. In the Philippines, some of the famous religious festivals are the traslacion or devotion to the Black Nazarene, the Sinulog Festival, or the feast of Santo Niño de Cebu, and the re-enactment of the coronation of Virgen de los Remedios de Pampanga. The famous Sinulog festival usually has millions of attendees who join the penitential walk every year (Ramos, 2020). Also, the traslacion always has millions of devotees who join in the procession (Calano, 2020). Moreover, thousands of Catholics in Pampanga attend to watch the re-enactment of the coronation of Virgen de los Remedios de Pampanga (Lacson, 2020). Aside from these celebrations, during Sundays, parishes are usually full of churchgoers who fulfill their Sunday obligations to the church by attending masses. Hence, religious activities are often reasons why a lot of people gather in one place.

Acknowledging that the Church usually enjoins a community of believers, a shift from gathering physically to meeting virtually must be done due to the coronavirus outbreak. On December 31, 2019, the first confirmed cases of COVID-19 in Wuhan, China was reported (Taylor, 2021). During that time, governments are not yet aware of what is about to come. However, when a spurt of COVID-19 cases was reported and people were killed by the virus, WHO declared it an international public health emergency (Taylor, 2021). To mitigate the spread of the virus, WHO proposed guidelines so that the people will be well-guided. The recommendations given to the people are the following: wear a mask that covers your mouth and nose, observe physical distancing, avoid mass gatherings and poorly ventilated spaces, wash your hands often, cover coughs and sneezes, and clean and disinfect (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021). Thus, these guidelines required people to stay at home and avoid physical contact with other people. Different activities are forced to be changed so that no one will be infected by the virus and, at the same time, continue the activities that should be done. Employees who are not members of the skeletal workforce were forced to adjust by working from home. Students were asked to attend online classes since they will not be able to go into their respective schools (Muldong, Garcia, & Gozum, 2021). In addition, the Church also shifted to online masses to cater to the faithful.

To observe physical distancing and follow strict lockdowns, religious activities during the COVID-19 pandemic were done virtually. In the Philippines, upon imposition of the quarantine measures, subsequent instructions for local dioceses and parishes were given by the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) to hold Masses virtually so the faithful could still fulfill their spiritual needs (Corpuz & Sarmiento, 2021). Even for the Holy Week celebration, the faithful are asked to stay at home and attend religious activities online so that the believers will be safe from transmitting the virus (Gozum, Nucum, & Noriega, 2021). As Corpuz & Sarmiento (2020, p. 4) emphasizes, "Online platforms as a type of media can be used for the worship of the Church." These celebrations of online masses and other religious activities are done as a form of adapting to the 'new normal,' which is a life with COVID-19. Thus, the Church must utilize the use of social media during the COVID-19 pandemic so that religious participation can still be achieved.

3.2 *Evangelization*

Through time, preaching the Word of God has been the purpose of the Church so that my people will be inspired by the Word of God for them to uplift each other to live a life inclined to God. Basically, by definition, the word evangelization is often defined as proclaiming the Word of God. Usually, evangelization is connected to the Catholic Church since proclaiming God's message is Her mission. However, the idea of evangelization goes beyond proclaiming the Gospel; rather, it focuses on transforming the individuals so that we can live in a better society. As Pope Paul VI (1975, #1), in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, points out, "There is no doubt that the effort to proclaim the Gospel to the people of today, who are buoyed up by hope but at the same time often oppressed by fear and distress, is a service rendered to the Christian community and also to the whole of humanity." Moreover, this statement by Pope Paul VI was emphasized by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (2021) as they explain, "We can rephrase his words to say that evangelizing means bringing the Good News of Jesus into every human situation and seeking to convert individuals and society by the divine power of the Gospel itself." With this, the Church has always been known as the evangelizing Church.

In addition, the idea of the Church in their goal of evangelization is to let the people be aware of the truth about the life and teachings of Jesus. By knowing these teachings, the faithful are drawn towards living the Gospel values and transforming the society to a just and peaceful one. Thus, it is in this manner that the Church becomes an evangelizing Church wherein the people are spreading God's Word and transforming human lives. As it was accentuated, "Those who sincerely accept the Good News, through the power of this acceptance and of shared faith, therefore, gather together in Jesus' name to seek together the kingdom, build it up and live it. They make up a community which is in its turn evangelizing" (EN #13). This is the same mission Jesus gave to the twelve apostles and through this, we are called to replicate the given mission by emulating the Gospel values. Thus, evangelization is always towards conversion since it is only through conversion that the faithful truly accept the Gospel. As the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (2021) points out, "Conversion is the change of our lives that comes about through the power of the Holy Spirit. All who accept the Gospel change as we continually put on the mind of Christ by rejecting sin and becoming more faithful disciples in his Church."

Apart from this, given the current situation of the society, which is fast-paced and ever-changing, Pope John Paul II urged everyone towards a new evangelization. But what is new evangelization? It was defined as, "The New Evangelization calls each of us to deepen our faith, believe in the Gospel message, and go forth to proclaim the Gospel. The focus of the New Evangelization calls all Catholics to be evangelized and then go forth to evangelize" (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2021). Thus, the mission is not limited to the Church leaders; rather, it is extended to the faithful, the real church. Looking at this, a renewed relationship with Jesus and the Church is asked from all believers. Hence, the role of proclaiming God's Word also becomes the mission of the faithful.

3.3 *Maximizing Social Media for Evangelization*

Because the churchgoers will be staying at home, parents have larger roles to play in becoming active during the pandemic by having a house church through attending online liturgical activities (Corpuz & Sarmiento, 2021). Since the pandemic prompted different individuals to change the way the Church administers Her sacraments, the use of social media has been promoted so that the faithful can be reached. Lim (2017) says, "Social media presents new opportunities for the church in the 21st century to fulfill the purposes of God." Amidst the limitations in human interactions that the pandemic gave us, the use of social media by the Church during the pandemic is a good way to stay connected with the faithful. However, this trend that the pandemic gave us must be extended until the pandemic is done. This is because social media is a great avenue towards proclaiming God's Word since it reaches more people.

To support this point, even Pope John Paul II emphasized that media must be used to reach more people. In his apostolic letter *The Rapid Development*, he states, "In fact, the Church is not only called upon to use the

mass media to spread the Gospel but, today more than ever, to integrate the message of salvation into the “new culture” that these powerful means of communication create and amplify. It tells us that the use of the techniques and the technologies of contemporary communications is an integral part of its mission in the third millennium” (John Paul II, 2005, #2). This explanation of Pope John Paul II aims to give the Church an awareness that for the Church to succeed in fulfilling Her mission in today's technological age, the ability to adapt to the new media must be done. Even in his message for the 36th World Communications Day, Pope John Paul II (2002, #2) claimed that “For the Church, the new world of cyberspace is a summons to the great adventure of using its potential to proclaim the Gospel message.”

Having this perspective in mind, the changes that the world is having in terms of technological advancements must be an opportunity for the Church to find new ways to evangelize. John Paul II (2002, #3) states, “The Church approaches this new medium with realism and confidence. Like other communications media, it is a means, not an end in itself. The Internet can offer magnificent opportunities for evangelization if used with competence and a clear awareness of its strengths and weaknesses.” Thus, for the Church to be effective in using the internet or social media in evangelization, the challenges that the Church might face must be identified. As we go forward when the pandemic ends, the danger of people who become accustomed to doing things online must be considered. John Paul II (2002, #3) adds, “It is important, therefore, that the Christian community thinks of very practical ways of helping those who first make contact through the Internet to move from the virtual world of cyberspace to the real world of Christian community.”

Even though the danger of people being accustomed to doing online activities will always be present, it must not be a hindrance for the Church to use social media as a medium towards evangelization. The internet or social media can still be used for proclaiming the Gospel while still promoting people to attend physically so that they may receive the sacraments. To provide an example, the internet or social media can be used for catechetical purposes especially today's generation who are more active in the cyberworld. As John Paul II (2002, #3) proposes, “Especially in an unsupportive culture, Christian living calls for continuing instruction and catechesis, and this is perhaps the area in which the Internet can provide excellent help.” Since this is the case, maximizing social media through creative ways of making the teachings of the Church more appealing can be a good avenue for catechism. Catechists can even create creative posters and videos of different bible stories so that children can be informed of the essential information about their faith even though they are just scrolling at their Facebook newsfeed or YouTube applications.

Moreover, through live streaming masses and other religious activities, people who cannot attend these activities due to different reasons such as health or age can attend because of social media platforms. As long as the Church can be innovative in its ways of proclaiming the Gospel, it will be more appealing to today's generation. However, when using the internet as a medium for evangelization, they must always be reminded that it is Jesus whom they are representing. With this, the essence of what they do in social media will remain. As John Paul II (2002, #6) emphasizes, “For it is only when his face is seen and his voice heard that the world will know the glad tidings of our redemption. This is the purpose of evangelization.”

With this, we recommend different social media platforms to be used for evangelization. Parishes should continue at least one mass per day through Facebook and YouTube so that those who cannot attend physically will be able to attend virtually. The said social media platforms can also be used for novena prayers and praying of the rosary. Social media applications such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram can be used to provide photos that contain daily gospel readings, gospel reflections, bible verses, and inspirational messages. Moreover, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Tiktok can be utilized to post short videos of the priest's homily, short prayers, and informational videos so that the netizens will be able to watch or hear God's message. Moreover, when the situation goes back to normal, announcements from parishes can be done through social media accounts so that they will be more compelled or be reminded to attend their church masses. These suggestions can be done by the Catholic Church so that they can fulfill their mission of spreading the Word of God. By adapting to the changing times, the Church can still be relevant by using social media as a means to spread the faith, inspire people, and

give hope to those who need it. Hence, through learning from the necessary changes that the Church made during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Church can continue maximizing the internet for evangelization so that the Gospel message can be heard by the people.

4. Conclusion

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, safety protocols were to be observed and lockdowns were imposed so that the spread of the virus will be mitigated. With this, different human operations were changed. For this reason, even the different religions need to adapt to the 'new normal' so that they can still comply with their obligations. To be specific, the Catholic Church, especially during the beginning of the pandemic, needs to observe the safety protocols while still celebrating religious practices. Thus, the Church utilized social media so that the faithful can still attend masses.

Since social media became the avenue for the faithful to attend masses, it is also the recommended tool to spread the word of God during the pandemic. Different religious activities can be done virtually with the aid of different social media platforms. Novena prayers, praying of the rosary, Taizé, recollections, and other activities can be facilitated through Facebook, YouTube, and other streaming platforms. Also, social media platforms such as Twitter and Instagram can be used to post daily gospel readings, prayers, and video clips of homilies so that the Gospel message will be read or watched by different netizens. Moreover, when the situation goes back to normal, announcements from parishes can be done through social media accounts so that they will be more compelled or be reminded to attend their church masses. Thus, this trend of using social media platforms during the COVID-19 pandemic is still recommended going forward so that the faithful will always find inspiration from the Gospel.

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