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CYBERCATECHESIS: JOURNEYING TOGETHER WITH THE YOUTH IN COMMUNICATING FAITH TOWARDS A SYNODAL CHURCH

Kristhalia Dessindi* & Dominikus Sukristiono*

Sanata Dharma University, Yogyakarta, Indonesia

Abstract

This paper is intended to contribute to the discussion of the “revitalization (renewal) of catechesis in the digital and social media era,” especially in the context of Millennials and Gen Z in St. Antonius Padua Parish, Kotabaru, Yogyakarta. With the advancement of digital media, the inclusion of digital media in the pastoral care of young people, especially evangelization to Millennials and Gen Z, is an urgent need to be followed up by the Church. This paper focuses on the youth’s involvement in digital catechesis towards a synodal church. The authors conducted qualitative research with a naturalistic descriptive design through a participatory observational literature review to collect data. As the Church today echoes the spirit of synodality, God’s people are invited to participate in the mission of the Church with full faith and joy of love because Christ himself sent us to the world to proclaim the Gospel. The main result of this inquiry is that the

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spirit of synodality in the Church can be seen in the apostolic spirit that each youth carries out to realize a truly Christian life through various services in cybercatechesis. They are active in peer catechism activities, accompanying initiation sacrament lessons, and coaching young people. Their lay apostolic zeal greatly contributes to the wider spread of the Gospel, even reaching many existing places and touching the daily life of Christian people.

Key Words: Cybercatechesis, Cybertheology, Synodality, Gen Z, Youth Catechism, Evangelization

Introduction: The Context of Digital Culture, Digital Natives and Synodal Church

On February 28, 2011, in his address to participants of the Plenary Session of the Pontifical Council for Social Communication, Pope Benedict XVI said: "Today we are called to discover, in digital culture also, the symbols and metaphors that are significant to the people and that can be helpful in speaking about the Kingdom of God to contemporary man."¹ Calling the present context as "digital culture" shows that for him recent technological inventions such as the Internet do not only signify an advancement of means of communication, but, as they deeply influence how people think, react, and make decisions being digital has become the way we live as human beings. We are not merely using digital technologies, but we live "digitally."

Among Christian communities, young people are those who are mostly engaged in this development as they were born in such an era. Sociologists and popular media call this youth as Millennials and Gen Z.² They are usually characterized as "digital natives" as they are "'native speakers' of the digital language of computers, video games and the Internet."³ This is on par with "digital immigrants," that is,

¹ Benedict XVI, "Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI to Participants in The Plenary Assembly of The Pontifical Council for Social Communications," February 28, 2011, https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2011/february/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20110228_pccs.html.

² We are aware of the critics of sociologists on generation labelling that it might be arbitrary and have no scientific basis. Nevertheless, such labelling should not be rigidly understood implying that certain generation has such and such characteristics. These labels used only to indicate roughly those who were born after 1980's. (See: Rebecca Elliott, "Generationalism: Understanding the Difference between What Generations Are and What Generations Do," *The Sociological Review Magazine*. Online (n.d.), accessed July 25, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.51428/tsr.fmel4859>.)

³ Marc Prensky, "Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants," *On the Horizon* 9, no. 5 (2001): 2, <https://doi.org/10.1108/10748120110424816>.

those who were not born in the digital era. They might still enjoy and live in the digital culture but, “always retain, to some degree, their “accent,” that is their foot in the past.”⁴

Theology and its discourse are always contextual. These two undergoing developments should naturally lead us to recontextualize our theology. The context of digital culture should not only lead us to ask, “What would we do theologically with this new digital technology?” thinking that this new development is just an instrumental advancement. Being aware that this technology has been affecting how we live, think and make decision (viz. being our culture), we need to further ask, for instance, “What would faith formation and communication in such an environment be like?” “How would human beings and their intelligence be understood given the advancement of artificial intelligence?” “How Jesus Christ who lived 2000 years ago would be understood by the digital natives who live in a different situation?” “What is the meaning of scripture if natural language is replaced by computation and codification?”

These are all valid theological questions that need further considerations and ramifications. This present paper, however, would only deal with the first question regarding communication of faith or catechesis: How do we communicate faith among these digital natives in the context of digital culture?

This paper aims to answer this question by highlighting several catechesis initiatives of the Catholic Church in Indonesia that involve young people. Interestingly, these efforts go hand in hand with the present ecclesiology that synodality is our way of being Church. As we know, being a synodal Church is the *modus vivendi* (way of life) and *modus operandi* (way of action) of the Church.⁵ Synodality is at the service of the Church’s mission, in which all its members are called to participate. We have co-responsibility in the mission, since we are all missionary disciples, each baptized person is called to be a protagonist in the mission. The youth community has this responsibility, and they

⁴ Prensky, 3.

⁵ International Theological Commission, “Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church,” March 2, 2018, art. 6, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20180302_sinodalita_en.html.

are at the heart of the Church in its evangelizing missions, especially in the digital age.⁶

This paper is divided into four parts. After this introduction, in the second part, based on Antonio Spadaro's view of cyber-theology, we will delve into the idea of cyber-catechesis as a way of communicating faith. In the third part, we will investigate the practices of cyber-catechesis that have been done in St. Anthony of Padua Parish in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. We chose this parish since we think that in the spirit of synodality, young people in this parish took even the initiative to create digital catechesis in an inclusive and synodal Church. The youth community's participation in the synod is actualized in the Church's effort and service program. Finally, it will conclude by offering challenges ahead.

From Cybertheology to Cybercatechesis

The digital culture brings about new understanding of communication, including new understanding of speaking, sharing and listening. It is part of our daily activities that we read and listen to various kinds of content and get access to any information anywhere at any time and these are all possible with just one hand by searching and scrolling down. Social media has become the new way of giving (posting), sharing and getting information. This new kind of media becomes the anthropological space, and it places humans as decoders and search engines for information including about God. In particular, the digital environment brings us closer to listening activities. Many people enjoy listening to music and watching podcasts on their respective devices. Apple's emergence, which gave birth to the iPod, brought young people closer to the culture of listening to music freely in any situation. The presence of Apple has changed the philosophy of listening as a lifestyle.

Being aware that digital media is no longer a place and means of communication, but an integral part of daily life, some theologians assert that there must be unique theological reflections on how faith is understood and communicated in this new context. Antonio Spadaro remarks that "The Internet is...not at all a simple *instrument* of communication, which one can choose to use, but it has evolved into a

⁶ Holy See Press Office, "Preparatory Document for the 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, 07.09.2021," September 7, 2021, art. 30, <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2021/09/07/210907a.html>.

cultural “environment” that determines a style of thought ... It is a way to live in and organize our world. It is not a separate environment, but it is becoming ever more integrated into our everyday lives.”⁷ In recent theological discourse, the theological responses to such development could be called by different terms, such as “digital theology,” “theology in digital age,” “theology of the internet,” and other. However, it seems that the term used by Spadaro, “cybertheology,” is the catchiest one.

What is cybertheology? Spadaro writes, “Cybertheological reflection is always reflexive knowledge that starts from the experience of faith. This becomes theology in the sense that it responds to the *formula fides quarens intellectum*. Cybertheology is not, therefore, a sociological reflection on religiosity on the Internet, but is the fruit of faith that frees from itself a cognitive impulse at a time when the Web’s logic marks the way of thinking, knowing, communicating, and living.”⁸

The new task is placed in the context of cybertheology as the study of spirituality expressed on the internet and everyday representations and sacred imaginations. In the concept of cybertheology, reflection starts with the experience of faith. On this concept, Spadaro emphasizes the intelligence of faith in the internet age, reflecting on the power of faith in the light of web logic.

Thus, in a cybertheological reflection, theologians would systematically reflect on the consequences of the digital culture on the faith, particularly on how Christians would understand, communicate and express their faith. For instance, Spadaro considers terms used widely and frequently in digital media, such as “saving,” “converting,” “justifying,” “sharing,” and “community.” Interestingly, these terms are also used in theological discourse. However, he shows that there are continuities and discontinuities in the meaning of these terms in the theological area and in the digital culture. Furthermore, he also shows that classic theological terms, such as Church and ecclesial communion, revelation, liturgy, and the sacraments, would have a new understanding. Let us consider how human beings would be understood in a cybertheological reflection.

As we have mentioned in the first paragraph of this section, searching and listening, which are part of communication, are not merely activities of someone’s day but they become the anthropological

⁷ Antonio Spadaro, *Cybertheology: Thinking Christianity in The Era of The Internet*, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), 2–3.

⁸ Spadaro, *Cybertheology: Thinking Christianity in The Era of The Internet*, 17.

space of human beings. Spadaro thinks that there is a theological consequence to this development. Classically, it is understood that “faith is born from listening and listening relates to the words of Christ” (Rom. 10:17). Listening has been the centre of faith since the Lord invites, “Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord alone” (Deut. 6:4). In such a context, listening to the Word of God would be understood as an act of obedience (*ob audiere*), in the sense that listening to the Word of the Lord implies receiving and doing it. However, in digital culture, the act of listening is no longer understood as an act of transferring messages. Listening (including to the Word of God) is just someone’s environment while he or she is doing something else.⁹ This is surely a challenge for understanding that faith that comes from listening: *fides ex auditu* is no longer seen as faith that comes from listening to the message, but as faith that comes from being accompanied by the Word of God. In this context, God reveals Himself to seek a deep relationship with human beings that implies heart, mind and strength. God calls every individual out of faith in Him and makes everyone a hearer of the Word.

Another challenge posed by this shift in our understanding of communication is that we are now bombarded with information. There were times when books and other printed media were limited and the faithful might choose those which had imprimatur and nihil obstat in order to separate which information was valid and which was not. In the digital era, we are all allowed to get any information and with respect to religious matters, we need to sort out for ourselves which information is valid and accountable. Human beings are not merely listeners or readers to what is shared but they should also decode the information they listen to. They become the decoders of information.¹⁰

The changing understanding of communication and how faith would be communicated are challenges to the practice of catechesis. Surely what we need is a kind of digital catechesis. We might call it “cybercatechesis.” Just as the meaning of catechesis is a form of communication of faith in God who saves, cybercatechesis focuses on communication between humans that creates situations and an atmosphere of life to help the growth of people’s faith through digital culture.¹¹ The digitalization of catechesis integrates digital culture into

⁹ Spadaro, *Cybertheology: Thinking Christianity in The Era of The Internet*, 20.

¹⁰ Spadaro, *Cybertheology: Thinking Christianity in The Era of The Internet*, 23.

¹¹ Komisi Kateketik KWI, *Hidup Di Era Digital: Gagasan Dan Modul Katekese*, (Yogyakarta: Penerbit Kanisius, 2015), 14.

faith communication with virtual vehicles as the instrument. Cybercatechesis seeks to develop an incarnation pattern that begins with a hopeful encounter with a developing digital culture and then familiarizes oneself with the expressions and idioms of that digital culture.¹² Cybercatechesis, therefore, is not only related to the use of digital technology but also to the ability to adapt to new languages or new idioms of digital culture, including adjusting catechetical pedagogy in harmony with the mentality of digital natives. Hence, catechesis must reach out to young people to greet them, primarily through existing social media networks.

In the next section, we will show how the practice of cybercatechesis especially among young people is done. Before doing it, we will describe, rather briefly, the method we were using. The insight we got is that cybercatechesis provides ways of being a synodal Church especially among young people.

Method

We investigated the practice of cybercatechesis done in St. Anthonius Padua, Kotabaru, Yogyakarta Indonesia. Our main questions are: How cybercatechesis is practiced in the context of a parish community and what impacts are exerted by such a practice. The catechesis was given through social media, such as Instagram (@gerejakotabaru). We investigated the process of producing the topics, the products (i.e., the contents) and the impact of these products. We were therefore using a naturalistic design through observation and direct participation.

Cybercatechesis: Active Participation of the Youth in Communicating Faith Towards a Synodal Church

From our investigation, there are at least two pivotal findings we can present: a) Cybercatechesis as journeying together with the youth; and b) From catechesis “for” the youth to “with” the youth.

a) Cybercatechesis as Journeying Together with the Youth

The “digital natives,” (the Millennials and Gen Z), live (search, surf, listen to, read, etc.) the social activism in the new “agora” of the digital age to build civic society. Social media is a reference for information search engines and an instrument for engagement in the public sphere. The Church admits that going beyond “using instruments of

¹² Komisi Kateketik KWI, *Hidup Di Era Digital: Gagasan Dan Modul Katekese*, 14.

communication” young people “live in a highly digitalized culture” (*Christus Vivit*, henceforth CV, 86).¹³ Pope Francis calls young people in the digital age influencers of God. They are “precious reflections of the young Christ; their radiant witness encourages us and awakens us from our lethargy” (CV 49). He also encourages parishes to “examine, respectfully and seriously, the situation of their young people, in order to find the most fitting ways of providing them with pastoral care” (CV 103). Going beyond seeing them as the future of the Church, young people are the “present of the Church” (CV 64). They begin to “assume a number of responsibilities, sharing alongside adults in the growth of the family, society and the Church” (CV 64).

In the spirit of the synod, young people can take the initiative to create an inclusive and synodal Church. The youth community’s participation in a synodal Church should be present in every Church’s effort and service program. The presence of young people in various fields of Church service signifies the endeavour to ‘walk together’ between the Church and young people as travelling companions in realizing the Kingdom of God. They realize that they are a fellowship of Christ’s disciples who participate in Christ’s mission as prophets. Through this awareness, they contribute responsibility as individuals in the communion and mission of the Church (*Christifideles Laici*, 2).¹⁴

As disciples of Christ, the faithful have the duty and responsibility to carry out evangelization. The Acts of the Apostles had the spirit of proclaiming the Gospel by saying, “We cannot help but speak about what we see and hear” (Acts 4:20). The spirit of the Apostles is an inspiration as well as a mission call and invitation to proclaim the Gospel. That mission is an essential element of the Church, since the Church exists to evangelize the world (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, henceforth EN, 14).¹⁵

Based on our observation of the cybercatechesis of the youth in St. Antonius Padua Parish, Kotabaru, Yogyakarta, the synodal process in

¹³ Pope Francis, *Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation Christus Vivit*, 2019, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20190325_christus-vivit.html.

¹⁴ Pope John Paul II, *Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation Christifideles Laici*, accessed July 20, 2024, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_30121988_christifideles-laici.html.

¹⁵ Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, accessed July 20, 2024, https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19751208_evangelii-nuntiandi.html.

this parish is carried out by conducting meetings of groups of parishioners, especially among youth communities. The outcomes of sharing their experience of faith can be seen in the community, neighbourhood, and parish groups. In their communities, we experienced that the youth have awareness to proclaim the Gospel. This awareness was born from their attitudes and actions in daily social activities by sharing Christian values in life. Their involvement in the evangelizing mission of the Church is evident, among others, in the practices of teaching faith at the service team, the neighbourhood, and the parish. They are active in peer catechism activities, accompanying and coaching young people who attend lessons on sacraments of initiation. Their apostolic zeal dramatically contributes to the broader spread of the Gospel, even reaching many existing places and touching the daily life of each faithful member. In particular, they participate actively in digital catechesis.

The Church, too, has recognized technology's significance and made efforts to incorporate it into religious education, commonly referred to as catechesis. Social media and digital technology help the Church carry out its message. Communication media brings essential benefits for people as well as for the Church. One of them aims to encourage people's development and progress. The presence of the internet and technology are essential tools for many activities. This led to the creation of digital catechesis. In this context, digital catechesis refers to using digital tools and resources to support the formation and education of people in their faith, especially young people. The internet and social media have shaped a new way of communication, and this reality has become an exceptional opportunity for dialogue, participation, socio-politics, and citizenship (CV 87).

b) From Catechesis "for" the Youth to "with" the Youth

To realize the synodal Church and move the mission of evangelization, the Church can pursue it through catechesis with young people. The young people referred to here are Millennials and Generation Z, who have creative and innovative characteristics. In the context of the Church in Indonesia, they like to get involved as subjects of evangelization. Meanwhile, the writer sees that catechesis with young people can invite them to the evangelizing mission of the Church.

Catechesis is an organic and systematic formation of faith for children, young people, and adult, including the transmission of

Christian teachings, to help them attain the fullness of Christian life (*Catechesi Tradendae*, henceforth CT, 18).¹⁶ In addition, catechesis aims to form Christian life patterns so that a person can cultivate one's mind and heart to find true truths that are increasingly lived out through witnessing and not just imparting knowledge (EN 18 & 21).

In its development, the substance of catechesis has experienced revitalization. In the beginning, it only imparted Christian teachings. Now, it becomes more alive through witnesses of life experiences shared in different ways. In the course of time, catechesis, which in the beginning was very formal, now it has become informal. This happens because the substance of catechesis is a communication of faith in Jesus that takes place in the life of the faithful, especially the youth.

These changes give rise to an ecclesiastical debate on the pastoral approach to youth in different way, direction, and point of emphasis.¹⁷ According to the General Instruction for Catechesis 181, "The catechesis of young people must be deeply revised and revitalized." This statement challenges us, as a Church, to revitalize and renew catechesis so that it is more relevant and contextual to the world of young people. Catechesis is no longer determined to impart knowledge of faith to young people but to invite them to catechize. In the spirit of the synod with young people, catechesis is no longer "for" but "together with." This choice of word invites them to participate in the mission of evangelization through "catechesis with young people."

The term is used to say that young people have the same responsibility and role as priests in the missionary work of the Church. The Church also sees young people as God's presence. *Christus Vivit* sees "the Now of God" (CV 64) and young people's hearts as holy ground bearing seeds of divine life. (CV 67) The Church's view of young people put them in a special place in the Church to realize the synodal Church.

We see that the Church's synodal efforts in catechesis can be realized using the Community Catechesis model with the study group approach method. This model has been developed since the Indonesian

¹⁶ Pope John Paul II, *Apostolic Exhortation Catechesi Tradendae*, accessed July 23, 2024, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_16101979_catechesi-tradendae.html.

¹⁷ Jody Hunt, "And Then There Was Zoom: A Catholic Theological Examination on the Development of Digital Youth Ministry," *Religion* 11, no. 11 (2020): 565, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel11110565>.

Bishops' Conference's Catechetical Commission met in 1977. The Community Catechesis is "of, by, and for" the people. This model of catechesis helps participants respond to their faith in everyday life because faith must be socialized and integrated into real life.¹⁸

The Indonesian Bishops' Conference's Catechetical Commission agrees that the Community Catechesis is a typical model for Indonesian catechesis emphasizing deliberation, joint social analysis, and sharing faith experiences to respond to concrete daily problems. The active participation of the participants is very crucial in this catechesis. The role of a catechist is only to facilitate. What is communicated in this catechesis is faith experience in Jesus Christ.

To implement the Community Catechesis model for young people, renewal is needed. The renewal includes method, means, and direction. The tendency for catechesis even today still falls into doctrinal practices. Hence, communication is still one-way. Meanwhile, in the spirit of a synodal Church, the Church provides space and opportunities for everyone to be actors in evangelizing mission.

The method employed in this catechesis is a study group method. This method was inspired by Pope Benedict XVI's invitation to young people to study YOUCAT, Catechism of Young People. Pope Benedict XVI invites young people to study the contents of YOUCAT together by forming groups to share experiences of faith and discussion. In the study group, several steps are used in catechesis: know, meet, share, and express. "Know" means that as Christians, we have knowledge of our faith, be it the main points of faith teachings or issues concerning faith that are urgent to be discussed as topics that can arise in catechesis. "Meet" means we can gather to form a fellowship and carry out a catechesis as a communication of faith. It is followed by the "sharing" stage by each participant and ends with the "express" stage, which is a follow-up of the shared faith.

The hope is that through the Community Catechesis model and adopting the study group catechesis method, communication can take place in multi directions.¹⁹ Catechesis should have dialogue and get along with social problems, ultimately bringing people to correct and

¹⁸ Daniel Boli Kotan, ed., *Hasil Pertemuan Kateketik Antar-Keuskupan Se-Indonesia XI: Katekese Keluarga Di Era Digital* (Yogyakarta: Komisi Kateketik Konferensi Waligereja Indonesia, 2020), 36.

¹⁹ Kotan, *Hasil Pertemuan Kateketik Antar-Keuskupan Se-Indonesia XI: Katekese Keluarga Di Era Digital*, 65.

evaluate their lives. In the study group method, young people can synergize in catechesis. The spirit of synergizing opens opportunities to communicate and express opinions, and everyone has the right to contribute. Using the study group method in catechesis provides an opportunity for everyone to express one's ability. Limitations are used as a joint evaluation and mutual respect for one another in listening to their experience of faith.

Conclusion and Challenges Ahead

Synodality must not be compared to a "town hall meeting" where few community members attend and only the most vocal and critical speak up. Instead, journeying together is a dynamic process involving hierarchical and lay elements collaborating. We can journey with the Millennials and Gen Z in the digital age to spread the Gospel around the world.

By realizing the synodal Church, we can form networks with young people to proclaim the Gospel in the digital era. Cybercatechesis is an integration of the Gospel's message into a new culture and the use social communication networks as a space for encounters and faith communication. It does not only involve the use of digital instruments, but it is also a planned process of integrating catechetical language and pedagogy into the mentality of the digital generation.

Therefore, it is necessary for cybercatechesis to include media awareness education, the use of digital means and digital media-based catechesis. It is necessary to develop catechetical languages using symbolic pattern, such as catechesis, which emphasizes narratives, testimonies, films/dramas, music, and songs. Apart from that, a harmonious pedagogy, namely participatory pedagogy, makes catechesis a communication space for today's digital generation.

Finally, youth and priests experience youth ministry as a "network of relationships." The digital catechesis must cultivate this relationship to create a synodal Church.