

CHAPTER XIII

Tracing the Spiritual Path in the Digital Era: The Church's Responsibility in Educating Its People

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Abstract

The development of digital technology has had a significant impact on religious life, especially for the millennial generation and Gen Z, who are familiar with the online world. On the one hand, digital technology opens up more comprehensive access to religious information and knowledge and new opportunities in education and evangelism. However, on the other hand, new challenges have also emerged, such as the spread of disinformation, loss of privacy, and the decline in the quality of relations between people. The Catholic Church must formulate concrete guidelines so that people wisely use digital technology according to the values of the Christian faith. Digital ethics education and adapting religious learning models are essential so that the younger generation has the wisdom to deal with the online world. Developing people's discernment abilities is also vital so that digital technology is synergized with traditions and human values rather than alienating people from their true purpose in life. By wisely exploiting opportunities in the digital era while being alert to the risks, the church can continue to realize its mission of presenting Christ's love amidst changing times.

Keywords: Spiritual path, Digital era, Church Responsibility, Catholic Educating

Introduction

The rapid development of digital technology in the last few decades has had a significant impact on modern human life, not least in the religious dimension. The emergence of the digitalization phenomenon has fundamentally changed the way believers interact, communicate, and even build new communities. Digital media has now become an inseparable part of people's daily lives, especially the millennial generation and Gen Z, who was born and grew up in the era of digital technology (Hermawan, 2021).

Pope Francis encouraged young people to wisely exploit digital technology opportunities while being alert to the risks (Fransiskus, 2019). The Catholic Church is challenged to formulate concrete guidelines for the faithful responding to various digital world developments to align with evangelical values. Therefore, the church needs to be wise so that people are not vulnerable to being swept away by this fast-paced flow of change (Amirullah, 2021). With the emergence of various new ethical issues due to advances in digital technology, such as data privacy, cyber security, cyberbullying, and others, The Catholic Church must formulate digital ethical guidelines responsive to these problems to guide people to act wisely online (Budi, 2021). Discussions regarding digital ethics are vital, so evangelical values remain relevant in people's lives in the digital era (Budiyanto, 2022).

In terms of education, it is necessary to transform religious learning models into more adaptive and digitally literate ones (Grant, 2020). Collaborative, interactive, and contextual approaches are essential to apply so that religious education can answer the problems of people's religiosity in the digital world. Understanding technology needs to be balanced with a deepening of faith so that people, especially the younger generation, do not lose their identity in digital globalization (Wuysang, 2021).

Apart from the various opportunities and challenges, an in-depth discussion of the Catholic Church's strategy to respond to digitalization is essential and urgent. Through multidisciplinary studies and referring to the views of experts, it is hoped that concrete and wise steps can be formulated for the church and people to build an authentic religious life amid the swift flow of digitalization. This discussion is essential so that universal evangelical values remain relevant to humanizing technological progress for the common good.

Literature Review

The Rise of Technology and Its Impacts on Spirituality

Digital technology has developed rapidly in recent decades. One of the main impacts is the blurring of boundaries between the physical and digital worlds (Lopez, 2021). In Catholic religious education, the church's digital presence through social media and digital platforms has influenced how people interact with Catholic institutions and teachings (Bidin, 2022). The active presence of the Catholic church in the digital world has a positive potential to reach more people (Johnson, 2020). However, on the other hand, the transformation of religious

experiences into digital forms also risks obscuring the meaning of rituals and traditions. The biggest challenge is bridging physical and virtual realities and maintaining tradition's intimacy and sacredness amidst the openness of digital technology (Purnama, 2023).

The presence of digital technology and social media changes how religious identities are formed and expressed. Religious references and inspiration now come from digital content, online communities, and influencers (Connell, 2019). This has the potential to create superficial and temporary spiritual experiences. Therefore, ethical guidance is needed for people to navigate the digital world, filter information, and build virtual communities that support authentic faith formation (Gunawan, 2021).

(Ritzer, 2022) analyses how digital technologies and artificial intelligence radically change the ontology and epistemology of modern humans. Religious knowledge and experience are now increasingly mediated and constructed through algorithms. The digital world has also created new phenomena, such as church hopping, where people jump from one digital community to another in search of new teachings and experiences. This challenges the church to embrace people from various backgrounds and provide spiritual guidance amidst the dynamics of the digital world (Hartono, 2021: Hartono, 2021).

The Catholic Church's presence in the digital world has the potential to blur geographical boundaries and create a global community. This opens up new opportunities and challenges in sharing faith across cultures online. The Church must develop technical capacities and theological adaptations to serve people from various backgrounds who can now connect through digital platforms (Sullivan, 2020). The Catholic Church uses artificial intelligence and big data for digital evangelism and fundraising. This allows the Catholic Church to reach more people. For this reason, wisdom is needed so that the utilization of big data by people still upholds human dignity (Vianney, 2022b).

The emergence of a fully digitalized model of church and online community. This model is seen as an adaptation to the preferences of millennials and Gen Z, who are familiar with the online world. However, the challenge is to build authentic relationships and solidarity, not just connect online. For this reason, a humanizing digital community model is needed, with assistance and a personal touch even in the digital world (Lyon, 2021). Thus, the development of digital technology brings many opportunities and challenges to people's faith lives. It requires wise efforts from the church and Catholics to filter, adapt, and integrate

technological innovations into authentic spiritual traditions. Education and mentoring are essential so that people, especially the younger generation, can make positive use of technological advances to deepen and actualize the Catholic faith in a digital context.

The Church's Teachings on Ethics in the Digital World

The development of digital technology has created new ethical issues that require moral guidance, especially regarding privacy, data security, equal access to information, and others. The Catholic Church must formulate digital ethical guidelines that align with Catholic moral teachings. In his 2019 general audience, Pope Francis emphasized the importance of integrating Gospel values into technological developments for the common good (Bidin, 2021).

The basic principles of Catholic teaching on digital ethics include human dignity, solidarity, subsidiarity, and social justice. The church must emphasize that digital technology must uphold human dignity as the image of God, not just as a tool or commodity (Monika, 2022). Pope Francis affirmed that the church must use digital technology to proclaim the love of Christ, not propaganda or provocation of hatred (Fransiskus, 2019); the church must also be vigilant against the misuse of personal data and manipulative practices on social media. For this reason, an ethical framework is needed that directs the Catholic Church and its people to be responsible online in a wise, just, and humane manner (Billington, 2021).

Algorithmic systems on digital platforms often reinforce existing biases and prejudices in society. The Catholic Church must develop critical digital literacy to address this inequality (Devito & Birch, 2020). Catholics need to be aware of hateful, hoax, pornographic, or provocative digital content that is contrary to the Gospel (Kristianus, 2022).

Students and teachers must implement A digital literacy curriculum to build a healthy online community (Gunawan, 2020). The Catholic Church must also formulate guidelines for parents to accompany children as they explore the digital world. The Catholic Church should use digital platforms to share theological knowledge that enlightens the faithful. These contents are essential to overcome misinformation and damage to faith (Matthew, 2023).

The Catholic Church is challenged to formulate a solid digital ethics framework in line with the principles of the Catholic faith. It is essential to guide people as they navigate the digital world, which is full of opportunities and

challenges for religion and morality. Through this guide, digital technology is expected to realize justice, solidarity, and human dignity for the glory of God the Creator. A more inclusive and multidimensional approach to ethics is needed, as the digital world is diverse and complex. Digital ethics needs to embrace various marginalized groups that are vulnerable to being marginalized online, such as people with disabilities, minorities, and women. Churches need to work together across faiths and cultures to develop digital ethics that are aspirational and humanizing (Sullivan, 2021).

A contextualized and casuistic approach is needed, providing mere normative statements without touching the dynamic digital reality. Therefore, the Catholic Church needs to be directly involved in the praxis of digital ethics, not just watching from a distance (Johnson, 2021). Dialogue and discernment must be established as essential in formulating digital ethics guidelines involving various relevant parties (Petrus, 2023). From a sociological perspective, Lyon (2022) describes the emergence of a polarised society due to algorithms on social media that create echo chambers. The Catholic Church is required to be a moral compass and counter social segregation that has been digitally reinforced over the past decade. The Catholic Church must become an agent of reconciliation that unites people across groups through digital platforms (Andreas, 2021).

Educating the Faithful on Finding Meaning in the Digital Era

The development of digital technology has brought about profound changes in various aspects of human life, including the perspective on the meaning and purpose of life. The challenge for the Catholic Church today is to educate people to continue to find transcendent meaning amidst the hustle and bustle of the digital world (Vianney, 2022a). In his Encyclical *Fratelli Tuti*, Pope Francis emphasizes the need for digital humanism so that technology remains oriented towards universal human values (Fransiskus, 2021).

Faith education is needed to equip people to filter information and find authentic meaning amid the flood of digital data (Bloom, 2021). (Budhi, 2022) School curriculum and catechesis must be enriched with digital literacy to constructively integrate faith and online life (Rogers & Field, 2019). From a philosophical perspective, Ritzer (2020) criticizes how digital technology has blurred the boundaries of space and time, causing ontological disorientation in modern humans. The Catholic Church must offer contemplative guidance so that

people can still feel God's presence and find the purpose of life amid the hustle and bustle of cyberspace (Eka, 2021).

The emergence of new phenomena, such as faith vlogging and religious influencers on social media (Grant, 2022), represents the desire of the digital generation to find the relevance of faith in their daily lives in the online world. Mentoring is needed so that these practices do not lead to the commodification of religion. Therefore, collaborative and interactive learning models are required to invite young people to reflect on faith actively amid digital reality. Contemplative praxis must also be adapted to digital forms, such as online retreats, to reach more people from various places (Setiawan, 2021). The Catholic Church needs to utilize digital channels to disseminate in-depth yet contextual catechetical content so that people, especially the younger generation, can find the relevance of faith in their daily lives (Laurensius, 2022).

Some of the phenomena mentioned above show that through various educational efforts and wise assistance, the Catholic Church can guide people to continue to find transcendent meaning and purpose in life amid the swift flow of the digital world. Positive utilization of digital platforms can help people reflect on faith contextually so that evangelical values remain relevant in enlightening life in the era of digital technology. The church must embrace and accompany young people born in the digital era, not judge or shun them. Through sincere and open dialogue, millennials and Gen Z can be invited to reflect on authentic faith experiences amid the digital culture that is familiar to them. The church must also act as a positive influencer online, offering constructive faith perspectives amidst the flood of dubious information (Vincent, 2021).

A contextualized catechesis model is needed to invite young people to reflect critically on digital technology's positive and negative impacts on their faith (Prasetyo, 2022). Catholic religious education must guide young people to filter and sort digital content, avoiding destructive ones while utilizing faith-building ones (Budiman, 2020). Some churches have practically utilized virtual reality technology to simulate spiritual journeys, such as pilgrimages to ancient Jerusalem, tracing the way of the cross, or visiting basilicas in Rome. This approach is practical in making biblical and spiritual experiences more concrete and contextualized for digital natives. However, assistance is still needed so that VR simulations do not shift the true meaning of the tradition (Julianus, 2021).

Thus, through a collaborative, contextualized, and technology-savvy approach to education, the church can accompany people, especially the digital

native generation, to continue to find the meaning of faith amid the swift flow of the online world. Wise use of digital platforms can bring people closer to authentic spiritual traditions and experiences rather than obscuring them. Digital technology, if based on evangelical values, can develop a more profound and more contextualized spirituality.

Discussion

Developing Discernment in the Use of Technology

The rapid development of digital technology has changed almost all aspects of human life. The challenge for Christians today is to develop discernment in responding to and utilizing digital technology. Discernment, or the wisdom to accept the good and reject the bad, is needed so that technology is always used for the proper purpose and is beneficial for the growth and development of the life of faith (Vianney, 2021). Pope Francis reminds us that technology has many positive and negative consequences. Therefore, Christians must be wise in responding to it, avoiding the traps of cyberspace but also utilizing opportunities for good (Fransiskus, 2019). Catholic religious education that encourages discernment must start early so that people, especially the younger generation, can make wise decisions about using digital technology throughout their lives (Thompson, 2020).

From a moral perspective, Devito and Smith (2022) underline the need to develop a digital conscience in people to distinguish ethical or unethical online behavior independently. Conscience must be constantly trained and guided by the principles of faith to navigate the ambiguous digital world (Budhi, 2021).

Dialogical and reflective education models are needed to build discernment skills. People must be trained to ask critical questions, analyze positive and negative impacts, and reflect on essential choices (Parker, 2020). The skills of self-introspection and contemplation are also necessary to open ourselves to God's illumination in daily decision-making related to digital technology (Budyanto, 2022). Discernment education also needs to be done collaboratively by increasing dialogue between people of different ages and backgrounds. The contextual perspectives of younger believers familiar with technology can be combined with the wisdom of senior believers who are more experienced in faith. Thus, discernment can be formed communally rather than individualistically (Santos, 2019).

Continuous, collaborative, and contextualized discernment education is essential so Christians can think clearly and act wisely when utilizing digital

technology for the good of themselves and others. Discernment helps Catholics integrate faith by using critical thinking to live in technological progress positively so as not to be dragged down by the opposing currents of the digital world. Thus, humans remain active actors, not just passive technology consumers.

Providing Guidance on Online Behavior and Activities

The rapid development of digital technology has given birth to various new behavioral trends and activities in the online world. Today's challenge for the Catholic Church is to provide moral guidance so that people are wise in their online behavior and activities. People are vulnerable to digital behaviors contrary to evangelical values without adequate guidance. A digital citizenship curriculum is needed to equip people, especially the younger generation, with the ethics and skills to interact healthily and responsibly online (Hartono, 2021). Concrete guidelines must be given regarding various issues on social media, such as bullying, hostility, and hate speech that damage human dignity (Budhi, 2022).

A collaborative learning model in digital ethics education is needed so that people are actively involved in contemplating ethical cases in the online world rather than just being presented with normative guidelines (Santos, 2020a). Concrete examples from role models are also crucial for forming positive habits in online interactions and activities (Budi, 2021).

The risk of addiction and isolation due to excessive digital media use (Grant, 2019) requires practical guidance to be given to people regarding ideal screen time and offline activities that are important for life balance (Hartanto, 2022). The dangers of oversharing on social media can also adversely affect individual privacy and safety (Simangunsong, 2020). However, people's engagement in online communities has expanded access to sources of religious tradition and knowledge. The Catholic Church can empower this phenomenon by guiding people to engage in constructive and mutually edifying digital discussions about faith. The Catholic Church also needs to ensure that online religious discussion platforms are run responsibly to avoid the spread of hate speech or misinformation (Ritzer, 2021).

Thus, concrete and ongoing guidance is needed for Christians to behave and operate responsibly in the digital world, aligning with evangelical values. Through collaborative and contextualized digital citizenship education, people are assisted in being witnesses of Christ, who brings peace and love to the digital society.

Reaching People Through Digital Methods and Media

The development of digital technology has opened up new opportunities for the church to reach more people through digital methods and media. The Catholic Church must creatively utilize various online platforms to participate in the evangelizing mission in the digital era (Budianto, 2021). In his Encyclical *Fratelli Tutti* (Francis, 2021), Pope Francis encourages using communication technology to build dialogue and universal brotherhood.

In an article in the journal *Theological Studies*, Peters (2019) outlines the opportunities of the church's use of social media, websites, and mobile apps to spread the good news. These platforms allow for broader engagement of the people. The challenge ahead is to develop a multimedia evangelism strategy that is contextualized and touches the hearts of digital natives (Hardiyanto, 2021). This phenomenon represents the desire of the digital generation to stay connected to the church tradition, even in a digital format that is more familiar to them. However, mentoring is still needed so that this online interaction strengthens faith personally and not just superficially (Gibson, 2020). Meanwhile, from the negative side, Ritzer (2021) describes the risk of the church being trapped in the logic of algorithms and surveillance capitalism on corporate digital platforms. According to (Bintang, 2022), churches must critically design digital ministry strategies without being thoroughly co-opted by global technology business schemes. The financial and outreach aspects must still be in line with evangelical principles.

The digital ministry model must be inclusive and pay attention to the technology access gap to not further widen the gap between rich and poor regarding religious access (Ekadjati, 2021). Efforts such as providing technology facilities and digital literacy training need to be made by the Catholic Church to ensure that the digital methods developed empower all levels of believers. Thus, the creative utilization of digital platforms and methods has excellent potential to expand the reach of the church's mission. However, wisdom and an evangelical spirit are needed so that their utilization remains oriented toward love, justice, and equality. This is important so that the digital revolution truly brings all people to Christ (Amirullah, 2022).

Adapting Religious Education for the Digital Age

The rapid development of digital technology has changed the way millennials and Gen Z generations learn and interact. The rapid growth of digital technology requires the Catholic Church to adapt and utilize various digital platforms in religious education to reach young digital natives (Hermawan, 2022).

In his Encyclical *Fratelli Tutti* (Fransiskus, 2021), Pope Francis encourages the creative utilization of technology for humanist and inclusive education.

A blended approach in catechesis combines face-to-face and online learning with various advantages. Using videos, games, and digital simulations can increase the interest and participation of young people (Muliawan, 2021). The creativity and collaboration of young people need to be accommodated through project-based learning and other ventures that capitalize on their interest in technology (Hartanto, 2022). Young people are encouraged to learn material digitally outside of class first, so face-to-face learning time is optimized for discussion and contextual deepening of faith (Grant, 2020). Churches must also use big data and algorithms wisely to provide personalized learning journeys according to people's interests and needs (Wuysang, 2021).

However, Santos (2019) reminded us that the adaptation of Catholic religious education in the digital era still pays attention to relational and dialogical aspects and is not entirely replaced by anonymous digital content. The active involvement of young people as prosumers of digital content can foster agency and creativity, but there must still be personal assistance from educators. From the practical side, the church has developed several exciting breakthroughs, such as interactive applications for understanding Scripture, gamified faith learning platforms, and virtual reality technology to stimulate a more concrete appreciation of spiritual experiences for digital natives. These adaptation efforts are essential to making the heritage of tradition relevant and attractive to the postmodern generation. However, at its core, technology is only a tool to channel and enrich faith, not replace it (Santana, 2021).

Churches must continue innovating and adapting contextualized religious education approaches in the digital era without abandoning traditional heritage's humanist and dialogical values. Positive optimization of digital technology can enrich faith education to make it more holistic, personalized, and relevant to people in changing times.

Promoting Healthy Relationships and Community in the Digital World

Intensive use of social media is often associated with a decline in the quality of social relationships and sense of community among young digital natives. Today's challenge for the church is to balance and enrich people's online lives by building healthy and humane digital relationships and communities (Vianney, 2022). In *Christus Vivit*'s document (Fransiskus, 2019), Pope Francis encourages

young people to use technology wisely to promote solidarity, not individualism. Catholic Religious Education must provide digital communication skills and cyberbullying ethics so that young people can relate responsibly in the online world (Santos, 2020) and avoid the danger of dehumanization due to the loss of personal contact in online interactions (Amirullah, 2021).

Social media such as Facebook can potentially build social capital if used for appropriate purposes, such as sharing faith aspirations and supporting each other spiritually (Grant, 2020). According to Bidin (2022), in the book *Building a Calming Maya Community*, the key is to foster healthy dialogue, not superficial public monologues just for popularity. From a theological perspective, Thompson (2021) emphasizes the importance of integrating Christian values so that the often-impersonal digital media can become a warm and humane community medium. Although invisible, people must be reminded that Christ is present in all our online interactions, so we are still called to love others (Bintang, 2022).

Some initiatives that the Catholic Church can do practically include building a moderated faith discussion platform, organizing regular digital retreats, and utilizing group chats to share reflections and support each other's spirituality. The most important thing is to foster awareness that, although virtual, our interactions online must reflect evangelical values for the common good in the digital world (Dimas, 2020). Thus, through various efforts in education and wise mentoring, the Catholic Church can inspire and equip people to utilize digital technology to build healthy, authentic, and sustainable relationships and communities. Christian values are very relevant to humanizing the social spaces in the online world that are prone to dehumanization.

Conclusion

The rapid development of digital technology has brought many changes to the religious lives of people, especially the millennial generation and Gen Z, who grew up with digital technology. Many positive opportunities are offered, such as expanding access to religious information and knowledge, facilitating interaction between people across geographies, and opening up new methods of education and evangelism. On the other hand, there are new challenges and risks, such as the spread of misleading information, loss of privacy, and the deterioration of the quality of relationships between believers due to mere virtual interaction.

To address this phenomenon, the church must formulate concrete guidelines for people to utilize digital technology wisely. Education on ethics and behavior in

the digital world needs to be improved so that people, especially the younger generation, have the wisdom to navigate the online world. Religious learning models also need to be adapted to be more contextual, interactive, and digitally literate to answer the spiritual problems of the people in this digital era.

Developing people's ability to discern or understand digital technology is essential. By integrating the values of faith, people are expected to be able to wisely utilize technological advances for positive things while avoiding the traps of the digital world that damage human dignity. The church must also continue to innovate in using digital platforms for education, evangelism, and service activities while adhering to the evangelical spirit. In essence, advances in digital technology must be synergized with traditions and human values taught by religion not to distance humans from the true purpose of life. By embracing digital innovation wisely and with wisdom, the church can continue to realize its mission to bring the love of Christ to all people amid changing times.

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