

CYBERTHEOLOGY IN THE AGE OF DIGITAL REVOLUTION AND ITS IMPACT ON CHRISTIANITY

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Abstract

In the twenty-first century society, there are so many ways to connect and engage with one another that it is seemingly impossible to remain disconnected or unreachable. The digital age with its prolific use of the Internet and associated applications has affected every facet of human life. With half of the world's population having access to the Internet, this technology is not only having an impact on the way people work and spend their leisure time but is also changing the way they maintain their religious and spiritual life. This paper proposes that the digital culture calls for not only sociological but also theological reflections that may lead to a new brand of theology called cybertheology. It also proposes that if there were such a thing as cybertheology, it would represent a form of contextual theology that attests to the special social milieu of the digital age. This paper discusses what is involved in the cybertheology, its procedures, challenges and the way forward. The method employed in this analytical research is qualitative in nature.

Keywords: Cybertheology, Context Theology, Digital Culture

Introduction

We live in a time and space in human history that is being described by different names such as; the digital age, the information age, or the computer age, the jet age. The shift from the industrial age to the digital age was ushered in about three decades ago when the Internet was introduced and its use became prolific, especially through applications such as the World Wide Web and email. While technological developments vary widely from nation to nation throughout the world, one would be hard pressed to find any country, even the most under developed, that does not make use of digital technology either in its political governance or economic activities. In Nigeria, Pentecostal and Charismatic churches are taking advantage of the new media technologies to disseminate their message and attract and mobilize membership across the world. Nigerian Christians in Diaspora are also connected to their homeland churches through the Internet, while new forms of religious practices and networks are increasingly prevalent.

Today our lives are filled with technology through which we communicate, work, play and even engage with for making ends meet. This implies the pervasive presence of digital media as an integral part of our everyday life. Although studies on media are mostly done by sociology and communication students, living in a digital age has significant implications for theological reflections. Despite this being the case there is gap in terms of a religious response to technology. In response to this, the aim of this article is to stimulate theological reflections with regard to living in a digital culture.

This reflection paper is designed to consider how the Internet has impacted our day to day lives and the ways in which the technological devices on which we access volumes of resource we call the Internet, has influenced the Christian theology and teaching in particular. Such the technologies have also led us to reconsider the formation of human minds in a new direction. Despite the impact of technological advance of this century, mankind still has a spirituality. The technologies that we use can affect the higher reaches of man's intelligence: thought, self-expression, communication, and the understanding of the world. This reflection is aimed at examining the theological advantages and challenges in doing online theology.

Conceptual Clarification of Cybertheology

Cybertheology is a term that describes the new field of theological reflection formed from the impact of cyberculture, with the two objectives of reflecting on faith in the reality of contemporary daily life in the light of the logic of the network, and of the phenomenon of digital culture from the perspective of the Christian faith (Silva 45–46). Created in 2012 by the Italian Jesuit Antonio Spadaro, Cybertheology follows this reasoning: Cyberculture modifies human thinking, as it has developed a language and way of communicating in new ways that affect all human beings in their communicative essence. If we understand theology as *Intellectus Fidei* (thinking faith), has not the Internet changed the way we think faith today, that is, how we do theology? (41–50).

Cybertheology focuses on virtual church, mission, discipleship and the use of social media and academic sources online. It explores how our thoughts and actions affect Christianity and its theology and then looks at how technology can strengthen them. Cybertheology seeks to redefine the way we transact, connect and communicate in the name of mission. Most importantly, it seeks to have a positive influence on the way we perceive reality and God. Since the internet helps us control information by collecting, storing, retrieving, organizing and transmitting it, today's ministry leaders must learn to be savvy users.

Cybertheology takes the Internet as its *locus theologicus* from which its different view of society derives, detecting the important aspects in order to develop its

reflection. Applying the theology of the Second Vatican Council, we can consider the network a theological place of the “signs of the times,” because it forms a great phenomenon that marks contemporary history. Also, in Melchor Cano's classical conception of theological places, we can classify the network among the alien places, the fruit of reason and human history, that contribute to the construction of theological knowledge, but do not appear as proper places or essential sources of theological wisdom (Amaro 7).

In order to define Cybertheology, we need to assume what it is not. Cybertheology does not fit into the category of contextual theology, since digital culture defines the contemporary global culture present in all the nations of the planet. Nor should we consider it a theology of communication (although it has the same roots in the theology of Trinitarian communion), for it does not study communication itself, but the hyper-communicative life of women and men of today, especially of digital natives. In this way, Cybertheology has a wide range of approaches, ranging from re-reading of the classical concepts of systematic theology to analyzing the various pastoral practices to creating new evangelization projects.

Understanding Digital Culture

Digital Culture is understood as the contemporary explosion of Information and Communication Technologies and how they affect the gathering and processing of information as well as human interactions, worldviews, beliefs and opinions. By placing *Inter Mirifica* (Decree on Mass Media) on the front burner at the first session of the Second Vatican Council, the Council Fathers set the Church in motion for embracing the digital culture (Sanders, web). This move was because of cultural shift which involves digital communication and the way it reshapes how we interact with one another, form and maintain relationships and also gain knowledge and understanding (Jerome 34). The digital age offers the opportunity for a wider range of voices to contribute to conversations and academic research (Lewis 21). Describing this age of digital culture in an interview with *Relevant Magazine*, Kinnaman discloses that younger Christians today are living in what he describes as “Digital Babylon” which is in many ways similar to the kind of head-snapping change that Daniel and his peers experienced in Babylon; namely exposure to a broader world, immersion in a whole set of worldviews and beliefs and ideas about spirituality, relating on a regular basis with people who hold different views and perspectives about God, human meaning and flourishing (web). Pope Saint Paul VI said the church feels guilty if it failed to use the media for evangelization (EN no. 45). Although the technological benefits are vast, our media is replete with stories of the casualties of this game-changers: a sedentary lifestyle and its health effects, cyber-bullying, internet predators, the psychic damage from trolls, addiction to gaming, issues of body image, and so on. How should the theological sector, drawing upon its

scriptural and teaching heritage, come to grips with the deficits that are being spawned by the technological revolution? What is our theological, pastoral, social and pedagogic responsibility in nurturing this new generation?

Our digital age raises important philosophical and theological questions about what constitutes true community, the quality of interpersonal relationships in a technological society, the interplay between “real” identity and “constructed” identity, and the discernment of God's “presence” in a virtual world, to identify several pertinent issues. These questions are not necessarily new. Social thinkers such as Jacques Ellul, Neil Postman and Marshall McLuhan have long since warned that the values associated with technology had the potential to erode culture and religion as much as enhance it (Sanders Web). It also means that the technology is new, but the idea is not.

However, these reservations about the dangers of technology have real traction, a number of Christian writers have theologically evaluated the opportunities provided by the e-media. Jacques Ellul and others are largely positive about the role of e-media within society and the ecclesial community, arguing that there is biblical and theological warrant for the e-media being a legitimate conduit of the divine presence in teaching, mission and pastoral ministry within the church local and universal. Another who understands the powerful opportunities that e-media can provide is Pope Francis, whose Twitter profile is one of the most influential accounts among world leaders showing possession of the twitter account (Bonzio 4). Heidi Campbell has also addressed many of the concerns that online communities only provide a chimera of what Christian ministry is face-to-face, highlighting the appeal and spiritual usefulness of email communities for digital believers (Sanders Web).

Context of Theologizing in the Digital Age

Writing on *Digital Communication, the Church and Mission*, some scholars drew lessons from Hebrews 1: 11 to make their point forthwith: “in the past God spoke to our ancestors through papyrus and paper in many different and various ways, but in these last days, his Word is shown through the digital realm” (Phillips, Lewis & Bruce 3). These scholars disclosed that God is all about communication which is why John's Gospel opens with the Word being present with God and communicating with God. They insist that, that Word is associated with light and life and creativity which are “the very hallmarks of the digital age, and is transmitted to the world, enfleshed amongst us and we have seen his glory. That communicated Word, that enfleshed Word, makes known God, exegetes God to all of us. A communicative God incarnates himself within a specific culture and within a specific cultural mode of communication” (Phillips, Lewis & Bruce 3). This shows the power of communication in all ages. Since the interplay between faith and culture are

indispensable to the faith, it behooves the *Pontifical Council for Culture* to live up to its mandate of “reading the signs of the time.” This means not only coming face to face with modern realities which influences the faith but taking up serious reflections on the rapidly evolving culture and the linguistic developments that are changing and affecting the way people communicate today with the resulting influences on their very existence (Pontifical Council for Culture web).

Although technological development has been a part of human society ever since pre-historic times when man managed to control fire, the development of computer technology in the last part of the twentieth century and in the beginning of the new millennium has taken human society to unprecedented heights, especially in the area of communication. The digitalization of information and transmission of information in this form is a unique development that has affected how information is produced, disseminated and consumed on the global space. Digital libraries and journals are continually being launched online with the hope that these resources will be more accessible to the general public, not to mention as effective ways to cut costs. The Internet as a new and unique form of communication, however, holds a lot more ramifications for human society. In the document “The Church and the Internet,” produced by the Pontifical Council for Social Communications, the Catholic Church recognized the power of the Internet in bringing about “revolutionary changes in commerce, education, politics, journalism, the relationship of nation to nation and culture to culture changes, not just in how people communicate but in how they understand their lives’ (no. 2 web). Indeed, with the rise of social networks, communication via the Internet is no longer limited to sharing information, but also represents new ways of creating and maintaining relationships that transcend proximity and other limitations presented by religion, culture, and social status. Pope Benedict XVI remarked that social networks are responding to a fundamental human need to come together—a need nourished by aspirations rooted in the human heart (Communication Day 2013).

The fact that the Internet in all its manifold forms and applications has permeated every aspect of modern human society means that this form of communication must be reflected upon not only sociologically but also spiritually and theologically. Pope Saint John Paul II has called the media “the first Areopagus of the modern age” and declared that “it is not enough to use the media simply to spread the Christian message and the Church’s authentic teaching. It is also necessary to integrate that message into the ‘new culture’ created by modern communications” (EN no. 45).

Technology has created for us an entity known as cyberspace, which has often been mistakenly identified with virtual reality, a simulation technology employing specific devices and graphics to create an interactive and immersive environment for

the user. Cyberspace, is the notional environment, especially when we are chatting with friends and feel as if we are meeting them in a particular space. While cyberspace is not physical, it is not necessarily virtual. As Pope Benedict XVI asserted, “The digital environment is not a parallel or purely virtual world but is part of the daily experience of many people, especially the young” (communication Day 2013). Indeed, for some gone is the day when they speak of going online or offline as if one sets out the time to take a stroll in some sort of digital wonderland only to return to real life with all of its real-world issues and responsibilities. In today's globalized digital world, the Internet is a place where we keep in touch with family and friends, meet new people and form new relationships, do business and keep updated on local and international news, search for information on anything from how to knot a tie to how to share photos, ideas, and feelings with others on social networks, blogs, or forums. Pope John Paul II compared cyberspace to the ancient Roman public forum “where politics and business were transacted, where religious duties were fulfilled, where much of the social life of the city took place, and where the best and the worst of human nature was on display” (web). In some ways, cyberspace is symbolic of this town market with all the bustling sights, sounds, and colors fused together.

Cyberspace is no longer a place out there but integrally connected to our life so that it is becoming increasingly more artificial to make distinctions between our online and offline life. According to Antonio Spadaro:

The Internet is therefore not at all a simple instrument of communication, which one can choose to use, but it has evolved into a cultural “environment” that determines a style of thought, creating new territories and new types of education, contributing also to the definition of a new way to stimulate the intelligence and to tighten relationships (87).

It is, therefore, unsurprising that Domenico Pompili argues that the Internet is a place with real human presence and qualifies as an anthropological space (62). This realization forces us to give credence to its existence and its role in shaping our thoughts and feelings, and ultimately our spiritual and theological sensibilities.

Characteristics of Digital Culture in Theology

Communication in and by the Church is essentially communication of the Good News of Jesus Christ. It is the proclamation of the Gospel as a prophetic, liberating word to the men and women of our times; it is an art of giving testimony in the face of radical secularization, to divine truth and to the transcendent destiny of the human person; it is witness given in solidarity with all believers against conflict and division, to justice and communion among peoples, nations, and cultures” (Aetate Novae, no 9).

Given some of the main characteristics and changes in the human person and in the world around us, the urgency of a new attitude and posture becomes evident, not only in the pedagogical form, but also in the personal attitude of the teachers and their communicative, relational, ecclesial, and theological qualities, thus reinforcing the need for digital metanoia. The introduction of digital tools and their use on a massive scale has caused profound and complex changes on many levels with cultural, social and psychological consequences that are not entirely evident. The highly digitized culture has a profound impact on ideas of time and space, on our self-understanding of others and the world around us and our ability to communicate, learn and be informed and to enter into relationship with others. It is responsible for changing language, shaping mentalities and restructuring values (DC no. 359-360).

The internet and social networks create an extraordinary community for dialogue, exchange between persons, access to information and knowledge. It provides effective protection for the most vulnerable and publicizing violations of their rights. It offers forum for reaching and involving young people in pastoral initiatives and activities. Among other positive elements of the digital culture is the extension and enrichment of human cognitive capacities. Digital technology assists the memory through tools of data acquisition and retrieval. In various regards one can speak positively of a digital enhancement.

The effect of exponential digitalization of communication and of society is leading to a genuine anthropological transformation. It has categorized humans into three digital participants. Digital natives, meaning persons born and raised with digital technologies in a multi-screen society who feel no discomfort in manipulating and interacting with them. In contrast to this group of participants, there is the digital non-natives, especially educators, teachers and catechists who are not in digital compliance. Then the digital immigrants who were not born into a digital world but entered it later.

However, digital culture has its dark sides and negative impacts. It creates loneliness, manipulation, exploitation and violence and even dark web. Digital media exposes people to the risk of addiction, isolation and gradual loss of contact with concrete reality, blocking the development of authentic interpersonal relationships. New forms of violence are spread through social media such as cyberbullying and cybercrimes. The internet is responsible for the spread of pornography and exploitation of persons for sexual purposes for through gambling. It creates mechanisms for the manipulation of consciences and of the democratic process. It facilitates the spread of fake news and false information, fomenting prejudice and hate sites devoted to defaming and attacking religious and ethnic groups. Some of these target the catholic church indirectly. Digital spaces can create a distorted vision of reality, loss of the inner life and boundaries, loss of identity and roots, cynicism as

a response to emptiness, and in progressive dehumanization and isolation within oneself (DC no 364).

To a large extent too much online activity can bring about shallower relationships where people become too individualistic and unwilling to foster face-to-face relationships, cause information overload, encourage a rise in narcissism and pride where everyone becomes interested in pontificating in an attempt to see who gets more likes, followers, or view counts, breeds online relativism where objective truth becomes the majority opinion and whoever is loudest becomes authority, instigates difficulty in prayer and contemplation because of the constant temptation to multitask, etc.

Digital Metanoia in Cybertheological Era

People create technology to facilitate or supply some need of human life. Technological innovations have always brought about great changes in the habits, customs, and structures of society. But why do digital technologies now seem to have a greater impact on human culture than previous ones? Previously, innovations occurred in other sectors such as transportation, industry, and commerce, which are undoubtedly important sectors of society. However, digital technology touches the human essence: its ability to communicate, relate, and know. By affecting the constituent aspects of the human being, contemporary technological innovations have caused a digital revolution. Some scholars believe that this leads to a qualitative change in the human being. For example, the French philosopher Michel Serres wrote that we are experiencing one of the greatest ruptures in history, since the transformations of Neolithic times (Amaro da Silva 11). Therefore, new fields of study are emerging such as the anthropology of digitalization, an interdisciplinary approach on the effects of cyberculture and cybernetics in all dimensions of human life.

In this way, the digital age can also be called the era of hyper-communication or hyper-connectivity. People created the new information and communication technologies to provide more opportunities for communication, relationships, and the exchange of information and knowledge. However, paradoxically, we see some contradictory phenomena occur, such as disinformation, fake news, generational conflict, growing intolerance, and even indifference. Understanding the network and how it modifies our life in fundamental aspects forms the first step in accomplishing a digital metanoia. For this, people must understand the network not as a tool, but as an environment of relationships, and how this changes our relationships with catechumens, for example.

Digital metanoia is defined not only by an opening stance and positive vision of technology and digital culture, but by the formation of a critical sense about this

reality, realizing its potentialities, risks, limits and challenges. To enable people to live this metanoia, we must make clear what we mean by network and digital culture. The network that we believe transforms all spheres of society is not the global computer network, but the global network of people interconnected through the new technologies. Therefore, we must focus on the person, not the technique. This for me is the conversion demanded of this age.

Digital Natives as the New Protagonists of Cybertheology

A fundamental question to think about in the formation of the Christian faith involves knowing the person whom one wishes to form. For several years catechetical pedagogical training has considered the developmental psychology or the age of the candidate. What we propose here adds one more factor that plays an extremely important role in the current reality: the study of the generations. We focus on understanding the mind and the world of the digital natives who constitute the target audience of all the catechetical work: children of Baptism and First Eucharist, young people of Confirmation Catechesis, their parents, godparents, and even catechists, since the digital generation has already reached adulthood.

The French sociologist Michel Serres points out the contextual, cognitive, and behavioral differences present in the digital generations he termed “Thumbelina” to demonstrate the ability of the net generation to command their smartphones with their thumbs and to signal the prominence that the young people of that generation have reached in all fields of society. Some of their characteristics include: They inhabit predominantly urban spaces, a much more populated environment than their ancestors knew and where multiculturalism is the standard of society; they have greater sensitivity to the environmental and sustainability issues of the planet; they have a high life expectancy, although the physiology of their body is more fragile and sedentary due to the comforts and pleasures of contemporary life. In the Western world, they did not experience the horrors of war, although they witnessed the migratory phenomenon coming from the East. In short, they live in another notion of time, another world, and another story (14-17).

The Thumbelina generation also no longer has the same head; its cognitive and learning functions have also changed by their interaction with the media and by inhabiting the digital realm. To this, Serres states that the previous generation transformed the society of the spectacle into a pedagogical society; that is, they let the media assume the role of teaching the digital generations (18–19). Because they were extremely exposed to and encouraged by picture frames, digital natives developed a degree of anxiety and attention deficit. Living everything at a fast pace characterized by real-time responses, they no longer know how to “do nothing,” wait, listen, contemplate, or tolerate silence. Thus, they multitask, and manifest an ability to manage various sources of information and activities at the same time; this can seem not a quality but a difficulty in concentrating and completing a task.

Another brain alteration indicates that digital natives have more difficulty storing information, the so-called Google effect, in which the brain does not store as much information because it knows that it can reach it with a click (Dashevsky web). For Serres, these cognitive changes of the digital natives are not a negative thing; on the contrary, he believes that the brain of the Thumbelina generation is better constituted rather than full. Having no more energy to store data, this “empty space” gives vent to creativity and true intelligence, inventive intelligence, so Thumbelina can concentrate its forces in producing original ideas (38–39).

Their way of relating has also changed. They have a much greater number of contacts and social interactions over the Internet, which does not mean an improvement in the quality of relationships. “Individuals no longer know how to live as a couple and divorce; they do not know how to keep themselves in the classroom where they move and talk; they no longer pray in the Church. Everywhere people refer to the end of ideologies, but it is the affiliations that created them that were discarded” (23). With more individualistic characteristics, the human being in the digital age has more ephemeral, flexible, fragile, less lasting relationships. This phenomenon is often called Liquid Love.

Challenging Implications of an Online-Church

No doubt the world is changing as such, the Church cannot remain stagnant. As Timothy Cardinal Dolan of New York Archdiocese in the United States of America once said in an interview with the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) journalist, Christiane Amanpour, the Church cannot change the deposit of faith, but she can change its packaging. He notes that the mission statement is to conserve, in the best sense of the word but that that does not mean we might not change the way it is presented (Krever web). Interestingly, Holmes insists that as Christians, we don't have to water down our message in order to be effective in the digital culture (web). I wish to consider a few challenges posed by information technology in doing theology today.

Decline in Church Attendance

There are fears that creating an Online virtual Church would bring about decline in Church attendance. Over the past two decades there has been a steady increase in the number of religious Web sites, e-mail communities, and spiritually focused networks. Whereas online spiritual exploration seems to be increasing, it is important to note that church attendance within many mainline churches continues to decrease rapidly. In countries like the United States of America, a study discovered that fewer people were going to Church because the rest are busy logging into internet (Fitzgerald web). There is the tendency for some offline Christian faithful especially young people to lazy about by not going to Church under the pretext that they can access the Church service or prayers on mobile applications. The apparent

media-mania, in which many people are often online almost twenty hours a day, seven days a week, creates a false sense of being comfortable with the virtual church than the real Ecclesial Assembly of God's people. According to Phillips, the traditional church used to be identifiable by architectural details and accouterments, such as stained-glass windows, pews, statues, vestments, and the smell of candles or burning incense. Now the norm has become the technical array of equipment, such as cameras, lights, and multimedia. Phillips noted that technology is not only essential to a service, but the music played during service as well. Technology provides the big screen set up for large or mega-churches as well as systems necessary to enhance production and promotion (59).

A practical consequence of online worship is that it eliminates the need for a geographically centred community. By connecting to fellow worshippers only through the disembodied internet, the church would be indispensable for the formation of the faithful into the kind of human beings that the church desires them to be. In other words, "the more disembodied we become, the less ourselves we become, and the less human we become, the more distant God becomes in our individual and communal life" (Fogam 153).

Cyber-church Promotes Individualism

When we get caught up in the online world, it's easy to miss making time for in-person interactions and conversations. This can lead to a decreased sense of community and an increased sense of detachment from the church and its members. We need to be intentional about creating gathering and meeting opportunities outside of church where our members can interact and engage. This is because human communication through interpersonal and group communication is crucial to human existence. As it were, advocating for a sacred space on the internet notes Nilles seems to threaten basic human communication and interaction (20). Since social media communication is often a private affair, the sense of real face to face communication appears endangered. Although embodied communities are identified as promoting "interrelatedness," the controlled online environment is said to promote secondary relationships at best, and individualistic ones at worst. To corroborate with this, Schultze notes that "information technologies carry an instrumental bias in favor of individualism and against shared moral understanding" (181). In other words, the online environment is seen as promoting individual choice and freedom while "expense of" should be followed by the quality losing value; "expense" and then "devaluing community.

According to the traditional understanding of community, it is formed as belonging to individuals rather than individuals belonging to a community. These "individualized online connections are further described as displacing communities with networks as people belong to different networks based on individual interest

and choice” (Miller 197). This individualized nature of online community through different networks is described as 'networked individualism' in which each person sits at the center of his or her own personal community (Cloete 3). This implies that relationships that are formed through online communities are therefore more person-centered and need-centered than place-centered.

The Loss of Communal and Traditional Life

The early Christian community was known as God's family through fellowship and sharing of communal life experiences. The scripture says, “everyday they devoted themselves to meeting together in the temple area and to the breaking of the bread in their homes” (Acts 2:42-46). This faith socialization started by the early church is still being practiced in various forms today. The presence of various church groups such small Christian communities, the legion of Mary, St. Vincent de Paul, women and men associations, followership of Christian students, catholic charismatic renewal of Nigeria, and many others have kept the witness of faith as seemed among the early followers of Jesus. Through these communal and traditional groups parish priests collaborate with lay men and women in an effort to increase awareness of their charisms and live the values of ministry, prayer and spirituality says Peter Fogam (152). These are traditional communal life things around which Christian communities in their different parishes have historically found focal practices of fraternal intimacy and virtue.

Social media platforms like Facebook or Myspace, Twitter, Instagram, Yahoo, Gmail, WhatsApp, Skype, Snapchat just to mention a few are privately-oriented. Aside from the false sense of community it creates through information sharing and communication with people we may not know or have seen, it appears that creating a “church” on cyberspace would further entrench individuality. The implication is the individual replaces community. In this case, the sense of a community is submerged in an individual's whims and caprices. The argument that the Internet is destroying neighborliness and sociability is compelling but, as noted previously, not substantiated by much current research. “Internet users are, on average, not socially isolated, but quite to the contrary a relatively socially active group” (Spooner & Raine XX). Several studies have demonstrated the Internet is not a substitute for offline community participation, but merely serves as a supplement to extend these relationships and communication in unique and novel ways. Nevertheless, a principal claim made by this article is that Internet-based interaction reflects changes within the greater society toward new forms of relationship networks. Using the Internet as a social or even as a spiritual network demonstrates the shift toward loose, dynamic, and self-regulated forms of socialization. This seems to be long term impact.

The Dilemma of Neighborhood in the Digital Culture

The key concept for present day digital society is connection. If one is present but not seen to be connected, such an individual is said to be lost or alone. Connection implies relationship, even if those relationships do not always mirror actual ones in real life. For instance, on Facebook, one's course-mate, teacher, religious superior, as well as gaming partners are all collapsed into the category of "friend". On Twitter, all the people who are connected to you are your "followers." In some ways, these words not only ignore the true nature of the relationship between you and a particular person with whom you are connected, but they also distort the meaning of what it means to be "friend" or "follower." The compression of relationships into singular categories "sanitizes" and strips relationships of their complexities and nuances that only come when there is direct human contact. Online religion observes Helland could be seen as a medium of nondenominational, non-affiliated religious participation and as an open religious environment that caters for people who want to be religious and spiritual on their own terms (30–34). This could imply that in a digital age there is much believing without belonging in the traditional sense.

For this reason, the type of relationships presented by the digital culture needs re-examination and redefining. In the Christian culture, the image of the Good Samaritan in the parable told by Jesus has always been upheld as paradigmatic considering the importance of engagement with physical people around us. Authentic relationship of neighborliness according to the paradigm is not restricted by boundaries imposed by culture, religious norms, social or historical bondage. However, note that this story narrated two millennia ago has not lost any of its relevance through all the ages, including the present digital age. If anything, the digital age with its new opportunities and limitations have helped us to be able to reflect on this relationship paradigm in new ways.

While the digital age proves the power and the possibility of neighborliness, it has yet to be able to fulfill the relationship paradigm that Jesus put forth. In the story, before the Samaritan took out his wallet to pay for the expense of the room in the inn for the victim to recover, the story tells us that the Samaritan saw the man by the margins, took pity of him, bandaged his wounds, pouring oil and wine. Then he put him on his donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him (Luke 10:33-34). Thus, being neighborly is much more than being willing to shell out cash. In fact, money does not even come first in the order of things. Being neighborly, in Jesus' paradigm, means recognizing someone's presence and seeing his pains and suffering, and feeling compassion towards the other. Moreover, it requires a physical dimension, which in the parable, is exemplified by the acts of going to, bandaging the wound, pouring oil and wine, lifting up onto the donkey, and taking to the inn. These concrete, up-close and personal actions imply that real relationships require the aspect of embodiment to convey the true sense of neighborliness. The digital age may help us to "see"

farther and wider, and it may motivate us to open our e-wallet to support a particular charity, but if we are unable to embrace the dying or wipe the tears of a person who has lost her/his home to natural disaster, then we must reflect on how to live in this digital age so as to truly be neighbors of one another with human contact at every level of our lives. These acts of charity cannot by viral philanthropy be the norm given the culture of cybercrime these times.

Digitalization Impacts on Spiritual Practices

Another profound issue raised by the proliferation of information technology concerns its impact on some Christian spiritual practices. The obvious questions that arise are whether digitalization would create cyber churches and thereby make ministers irrelevant. Can religious rituals take place on screens? These are relevant questions because for a wide range of ceremonial items and events, physical presence or full body engagement is integral. Physicality is a necessity for spirituality (Fogam 158). For instance, how possible is it for rituals such as anointing of the sick, sacramental confession and Holy Communion to be performed online? Virtual reality is no substitute for the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist, the sacramental reality of the other sacraments, and shared worship in a flesh-and-blood human community. There are no sacraments on the Internet; and even the religious experiences possible there by the grace of God are insufficient apart from real-world interaction with other persons of faith. Here is another aspect of the Internet that calls for study and reflection. At the same time, pastoral planning should consider how to lead people from cyberspace to true community and how, through teaching and catechesis, the Internet might subsequently be used to sustain and enrich them in their Christian commitment (Church & Internet no. 9).

The church is often referred to and experienced as a community of care, worship, and even as an alternative community. Religion online, on the other hand, has some interesting implications as it implies that religious and theological information from a variety of sources is available online. This means that the traditional structure of the church as the primary source for religious and theological information and authority is bypassed. The same applies for authentic figures like pastors that were seen as authorities in a previous age with regard to religious and theological information. Cheong summarizes this challenge as follows: “the Internet challenges authority by expanding access to religious information in a way that undermines the plausibility structure of a religious system” (27). It is therefore important to have a closer look at what mediated religion entails. The fact that the media became an important source for religious information and to engage with it for spiritual experience refers to the agenda-setting function of the media. Part of how the media decides on what to report on and how to report on it is by filtering information.

If religious online communities are also formed through individual choice, it could lead to homogeneous groups with the same theological viewpoints. Online religion also has the potential to perpetuate offline fundamentalist theological views of fundamentalist communities that, for example, still see women lesser or inferior to men and chooses to understand the Bible exclusively from a patriarchal perspective. At the same time, online religion could create a space for people to voice alternative theological views that do not fit the offline religious community. Current studies by Huchings and Teusner support both perspectives, namely that online religious communities deliberately replicate familiar offline everyday activities (112). On the other hand, members may use their online activities consciously to resist traditional forms of community and to form a more fluid religious identity that allows them to experiment with new ways of religious interactions online (Campbell 67). This fluid nature in online communities is very important as an individual does not have to be restricted to a particular environment but can choose to leave or stay on his or her own terms. At the same time, it could have implications for commitment and participation which is often valued in offline religious communities. This kind of community argues Miller does not foster mutual responsibility and interdependency (19). Relationships in online communities could be viewed as purely instrumental because people engage mainly for what they can get out of it and not primarily to share responsibility for each other, which is in sharp contrast to why and how offline communities are formed.

Recommendations and Conclusion

Although there seems to be many ways religion could benefit from the use of digital technologies, it could also be seen as religion's worst nightmare (Helland 30). Consequently, the enigma of the digital age for human relationship with nature is that while it seems to help us have greater intellectual connection with nature, it can also cause the emotional and physical connection to be decreased. In light of the context where human relationship with nature is impacted greatly by technological developments, cybertheology cannot fail to address the implications of this reality on the mission of God to bring life to all abundantly. A cybertheology will only be relevant and valid when it is able to offer a way for humanity to flourish in the digital environment, but not at the expense of nature or the richness that human- nature relationship brings. A few words to make this conclusion to the following groups.

Church leaders in leadership positions in all sectors of the Church need to understand the media, apply this understanding in formulating pastoral plans for social communications together with concrete policies and programs in this area, and make appropriate use of media. Where necessary, they should receive media education themselves. Pastoral personnel such as Priests, deacons, religious, and lay pastoral workers should have media education to increase their understanding of the impact

of social communications on individuals and society and help them acquire a manner of communicating that speaks to the sensibilities and interests of people in a media culture. Today this clearly includes training regarding the Internet, including how to use it in their work. They can also profit from websites offering theological updating and pastoral suggestions.

To educators and catechists, the Pastoral Instruction *Communio et progressio* speaks of the “urgent duty” of Catholic schools to train communicators and recipients of social communications in relevant Christian principles. To parents, for the sake of their children, as well as for their own sakes, parents must “learn and practice the skills of discerning viewers and listeners and readers, acting as models of prudent use of media in the home”. As far as the Internet is concerned, children and young people are often more familiar with it than their parents are, but parents are still seriously obliged to guide and supervise their children in its use.

To children and young people: the Internet is a door to a glamorous and exciting world with a powerful formative influence; but not everything on the other side of the door is safe, wholesome and true. “Children and young people should be open to formation regarding media, resisting the easy path of uncritical passivity, peer pressure, and commercial exploitation.”

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Bonzio, Alessandro states that for every tweet of Pope Francis there are approximately 11,000 “retweets” in Spanish and 8,200 in English. However, Pope Francis is realistic about the limitations of online interconnectivity, observing on The World Day of Communications 2014: “The desire for digital connectivity can have the effect of isolating us from our neighbors, from those closest to us ... it is not enough to be passersby on the digital highways, simply 'connected'; connections need to grow into true encounters.” See “Internet, a Gift from God’ – The Pope of the Digital Age,” http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/.../pope-francis-digital-age_b_4955367.html. accessed 23/05/2022.

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