

The Role of Priests in Modeling Digital Habits And Promoting Digital Literacy.

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Abstract

Only a few decades ago, computers were remote tools found in large corporations and Fortune 500 companies. Today, they are so commonplace that even our handheld devices are now minicomputers, and with the computers came the internet. These two capabilities unleashed a tremendous wave of evolution occurring through the years and revolutionising the world of business, communication, entertainment, education, and to a large extent, our ministry as priests. Cyberspace and the virtual world which were once envisioned as a separate, secular sphere of individual and communal activity are now far more likely to be integrated within the day-to-day lives of the many users of internet and socially networked technologies. The prevalence of digital devices has become so pervasive that it now appears like we can no longer function without them. With the ubiquitous presence of these devices and easy access to internet connectivity, come lots of promise and challenges and priests are not immune to these challenges. Despite the challenges, we cannot afford to exclude ourselves from the opportunities. Against this backdrop, this paper examines the role of priests in modeling digital habits and promoting digital literacy within our ecclesiastical enclaves and perhaps in the larger world and the need for diligence in the use of social media cognizant of its potential drawbacks.

Key words: Priest, Priestly Ministry, Internet, Digital World, Digital Literacy, Social Media.

Introduction

The ubiquitousness of computers is a relatively new phenomenon. This is because only a few decades ago, computers were remote tools found in large corporations and Fortune 500 companies. Today, they are so commonplace that even our handheld devices are now minicomputers, and with the computers came the internet. These two capabilities unleashed a tremendous wave of evolution occurring through the years and revolutionising the world of business, communication, entertainment, education, and to a large extent, our ministry as priests (Azuwiki, 2023 makes a comparison between the gradual

and organic global internet/digital revolution with a forced revolution by the courts or other means in “Civil Rights or Civil Wrongs? The South's Response to Judicial Social Change...”). Religion writer, Elizabeth Drescher explains the faith dimension of this evolution as an evolving ‘improvisational habitus’ shaping contemporary religious practice (Drescher, 2011). For Rainie and Wellman (2012), cyberspace and the virtual world once “envisioned as a separate, secular sphere of individual and communal activity, new media spaces and tools are now far more likely to be integrated within the day-to-day lives of the many users of increasingly mobile, broadband-connected, socially networked technologies.” The prevalence of digital devices (handhelds, iPads, laptops, or desktop computers) is so pervasive that it now appears like we can no longer function without them.

With the ubiquitous presence of digital devices and easy access to internet connectivity, come lots of promises and challenges to which priests are not immune; neither can we afford to exclude ourselves from the opportunities either for fear of the challenges themselves or perhaps culpable ignorance. It is against this backdrop that this paper examines the role of priests in modeling digital habits and promoting digital literacy within our ecclesiastical enclaves and perhaps in the larger world. It is instructive however, to define the identity of the priest as a prelude to understanding his role in the digital milieu and the ecclesial community.

A Priest in the Digital World

A Roman Catholic priest is a man called by God to serve Christ and the Church through the reception of the sacrament of Holy Orders. Thus, any correct view or concept of the priest in any context, must be based on scripture. As such, for our understanding of the identity of the priest, we must return to the scripture which says, “Every high Priest is taken from among men and is appointed to act on their behalf in their relations with God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. He can sympathize with those who are ignorant or who have gone astray, because he too is subject to the limitations of weakness. That is why he must make sin offering for himself as well as the people, daily. No one takes this honour upon himself; it needs a call from God as in Aaron's case” (Hebrews 5:1-5). This scripture passage immediately highlights the “set apartness” that characterizes and must characterize the priesthood.

The priest, according to St. Ephraim, is a man set apart for special duties and consecrated to the ministry of the gospel; a man in orders or licensed to preach the gospel; a presbyter. These duties bestow on him the gift of a “special dignity;” a sacerdotal dignity that surpasses all understanding (De Liguori, 2015). The priest is an Ambassador for Christ. As St. Paul writes: “We are Ambassadors for Christ (2 Corinthians 5:20).” He is also an ambassador of the whole world, to intercede with God and to obtain graces for all creatures. He is a minister destined by God to be a public ambassador of the whole church, to honour God and to obtain God's grace for all the faithful” (De Liguori, 2015).

Priests are the dispensers of divine graces and the companions of God. As the Catechism of the Catholic Church states: “the priest serves the faithful by building up and guiding the Church in the name of Christ, who is head of the body” (CCC 1547). All priesthood reaches its climax in that of the Lord Jesus Christ; hence the title of Pope John Paul's 1992 Post-synodal Exhortation on the Formation of Priests in the Circumstances of the Present Day, inspired by the book of the prophet Jeremiah 3:15 is most apropos – *Pastores Dabo Vobis* – “I will give you shepherds.” According to Pope John II (Angelus, January 14, 1990),

Certainly, there is an essential aspect of the priest that does not change: the priest of tomorrow, no less than the priest of today, must resemble Christ. When Jesus lived on this earth, he manifested in himself the definitive role of the priest, establishing a ministerial priesthood with which the apostles were the first to be invested. This priesthood is destined to last in endless succession throughout history. In this sense, the priest of the third millennium will continue the work of the priests who, in the preceding millennia, have animated the life of the Church. In the third millennium, the priestly vocation will continue to be the call to live the unique and permanent priesthood of Christ.

Fortunately, the digital world does not change any of these ontological realities. However, for Oliver et al, (2020), “the digitalization of the world (and its impact on our ministry) is the water in which we now swim rather than an outside force to be mitigated or leveraged.” In his message for the 48th World Communication Day (2014), Pope Francis said, “The digital world is a public square, where people interact and share ideas.” Before him, Pope John II (Angelus, January 14, 1990), said:

The life and ministry of the priest must also adapt to every era and circumstance of life. For our part we must therefore seek to be as open as possible to light from on high from the Holy Spirit, so as to discover the tendencies of contemporary society, recognize the deepest spiritual needs, determine the most important concrete tasks and the pastoral methods to adopt, and thus respond adequately to human expectations.

According to the renowned ancient Greek philosopher, Heraclitus, the only thing that is permanent in life is change. This is because reality is in constant flux and the life around us constantly evolving; nothing remains static. Adaptability, therefore, remains crucial for growth and survival. Embracing change leads to personal growth while resistance to change can lead to stagnation. The digital and social media reality is one of those preponderant changes of modern life. Priests must adapt to it in the most positive sense, and more essentially, model for young people, best practices for its use. The various online media, including social media (facebook, whatssAp, Instagram, X amongst others) provide us priests with a golden opportunity to spread

inspiring messages, provide guidance and support to individuals both far and near and especially those who are in situations where they have limited access to church services and or religious materials. As Archbishop Claudio Celli observes, “Social media can be a powerful tool for building community and fostering relationships (Celli, 2013).”

The Internet

The internet is a worldwide system of interconnected computer networks and electronic devices that communicate with each other using an established set of protocols. It was originated by the American Research Projects Agency (ARPA) in 1969 (Yasar, 2019). The initial idea was to build a network that would allow researchers at various universities to communicate with one another via research computers. From 1989, communications over the internet greatly improved when the Hypertext Transfer Protocol (HTTP) was created, enabling different computer platforms to connect to the same internet sites. In 1993, the Mosaic web browser was created. This is a web browser for accessing files, graphics and other documents on the World Wide Web (WWW). It is sometimes recognized as being the application that made the web available to the public. Such features as ease of installation, reliability and a user-friendly interface contributed to its popularity (Rouse, 2017). It was the first browser to display graphics alongside text, and because it integrated multimedia, including text and pictures, mosaic was one of the first widely accessible web browsers and helped popularize the World Wide Web and the Internet in general.

Today, the internet is a cooperative, public, and self-sustaining resource that is available to hundreds of millions of people globally, positively impacting social communications, education, sports and entertainment, religion, social awareness, transportation (via sites like Uber, bolt, Lift), with trade and commerce as the biggest beneficiary through outlets like Amazon, eBay shopify, Temu, Walmart, etc.

Nigeria and its Digital Space

In Nigeria, the internet penetration rate is placed at 55% according to latest available data (Sasu, 2024). This means that Nigeria has about 123 million internet users making Nigeria one of the countries with the most wide-spread internet availability in Africa. Considering that the world's internet penetration rate is 66.2% (two-thirds of the world's population has internet access), Nigeria ranks high amongst the world's internet users (Kemp, 2024). With Nigeria's remarkably young population (actually one of the youngest and largest populations in the world), it is understandable that most of Nigeria's internet users are young people who access the internet via mobile phone devices. In fact, over 84% of internet traffic in Nigeria is generated by mobile devices. (MTN alone has over 65 million internet subscribers). This, however, indicates a lack of adequate equipment to fully explore the internet (Sasu, 2024). In terms of costs, Nigeria ranks among the nations with lower costs for mobile data in the

African region. Globally, out of 227 countries in the world, Nigeria is ranked amongst the first 35 nations in the order of cheap to the most expensive internet data affordability.

An interesting dynamic is that most of the noticeable internet usage in Nigeria is notably linked to social media. Social media has become an integral part of modern life. It is not surprising, therefore, that many priests are actively on social media. In the view of Paulinus Ogara, “the presence of priests on social media is a necessity, as priests can leverage this public square to reach a wider audience, transcending geographical boundaries and connecting with people who may not have access to traditional religious services (Ogara, 2024).”

Digital Literacy

According to the American Library Association (ALA), digital literacy is the ability to use technologies to find, evaluate, create and communicate information. In their view, a digitally literate person is:

- a. One who possesses technical and cognitive skills to process information in various formats.
- b. One who can use different technologies effectively.
- c. One who utilizes digital features to collaborate with others and participate actively in civic society and improve communities.
- d. One who optimizes digital literacy skills and abilities to curate data and media, consume safe and credible online information, create relevant content, create forums of like-minded people for various subjects (University of the Potomac, 2022).

a. Principles of Digital Literacy

Learning and developing digital literacy is predicated on four key principles:

- i. **Comprehension:** This refers to the ability to understand digital content.
- ii. **Interdependence:** This means understanding the nature of the interconnectivity of all media forms and the best ways for users to consume content more conveniently. For example, understanding how moving image (such as film, television, video, and animation) is connected to still image (such as photography), audio image (such as radio and podcast) and print media (such as books, magazines, newspapers, fliers and billboards). This is a key element in developing digital literacy.
- iii. **Social factors:** Understanding social factors such as gender, age, education, income, etc. help to understand how particular media is perceived or viewed and what content is more widely accepted. This plays a central role in building an organic system media creation, sharing and storage which ultimately determines which media becomes successful in the long run.
- iv. **Curation:** This is the principle that allows media users to find, organize and save digital content to their taste.

Digital literacy embraces a vast collection of skills that help a person to exploit digital tools to their fullest through finding, creating, sharing, and evaluating information (University of the Potomac, 2022).

b. Importance of Digital Skills

The abundance and use of digital technology is a now a recurrent feature of daily life in contemporary society. It entails analyzing and being aware of opportunities and problems in the digital sphere in addition to employing digital technologies to find and process information. Due to the deluge of media and information in our digital world, digital literacy is now very essential. Digital literacy guarantees that users safeguard their privacy, evaluate digital data and information critically, and use digital platforms in an ethical manner while interacting with people in an articulate manner. Proficiency in digital literacy, therefore, enables people to learn, evolve, and adjust to the digital world. These abilities transform users from passive consumers into active, confident individuals who can participate fully and professionally in the online world by encouraging the development of innovative and analytical uses of technology (Charles Sturt University Website).

Based on the foregoing, the following skills are essential in today's world especially for priests who must minister to a digitalised world.

- i. General computer knowledge and skill:** This is the basic skill required for a successful application of digital media in every life.
- ii. Researching:** We are today inundated by an incredible mass of media resources. The ability to find relevant information amidst this cacophony of media is an essential skill which allows one to operate different digital platforms and use them meaningfully.
- iii. Adaption to technological innovations:** The only thing that is constant is change. Since we are presented with new technological advancements every day, the ability to adapt to change becomes an asset if we are to maximize the opportunities presented by these new technologies, or at least, to remain relevant.
- iv. Collaborating with others on different digital platforms:** Today, a great measure of work and education is done digitally. It is, therefore, imperative to acquire the ability to navigate various digital media that thrive on collaboration with others.
- v. Creating digital content:** This involves the ability to create and upload original content or ideas on digital platforms (such as X – formerly known as twitter, Instagram, YouTube, Facebook, WhatsApp, ticktock etc.). This includes utilizing digital tools to connect with others and attract “consumers” with your content.

The Need to Promote Digital Literacy by Priests

Digital literacy does not only benefit the individual, but societies at large as

digital literacy skills help countries' security and economic development. Today, businesses, banks, churches, and all kinds of service providers who have strong online presence not only stand taller than the rest, but they also actually control the market. Understanding digital footprints and responsible ethical actions online, is thus, essential in competitive global markets (Murray and Pérez, 2014). Thus, fostering digital literacy has become indispensable to effective functioning in a digital world. We cannot but encourage the teaching and learning of digital skills for all age groups and subgroups within our ecclesiastical tutelage. Developing the ability to learn, share, and organize media using digital technology opens up a whole new world for the user. The lifelong skills developed allow the user to use digital platforms thoughtfully and responsibly. These skills are also easily applicable across different media and applications and help in managing digital footprint in a responsible and affirmative manner.

Access to information in a digital world does not necessarily mean access to knowledge. Priests must, therefore, help to equip our pastoral dependents and others around us with the ability to make well informed decisions based on online information (Santos and Serpa, 2017). They must be made aware of the preponderance of online fake news, AI generated videos, memes, and the possibility of superimposing images, one on another to create a desired effect, or news, albeit true or false. Therefore, people should be wary of swallowing every online information hook, line and sinker. It is true that those under our pastoral care (especially young people) benefit by feeling connected to a digital community of their peers and by developing the confidence to effectively use technology in their social engagement and learning activities (Santos and Serpa, 2017). As such, they need to be guided by responsible adults in their social engagements and learning activities. After parents, the next set of responsible adults are priests and teachers; we happen to be both.

Priests must help parishioners and other pastoral dependents to develop digital literacy knowledge and skills by any means possible including through employing digital resources in our pastoral ministry. For example, by using digital media (screens, projectors, photography and recording equipment, etc.) in our homiletic endeavours, introducing online giving and point of sale (POS) machines in churches and church functions, opening a church Facebook, Instagram, X (twitter) page and posting church activities online, in addition to your already existing church WhatsApp group chats. Weekly parish bulletins can be published online in addition to the traditional hard copies; develop your people's skills by setting up parish-based computer schools or media centres. Additionally, initiatives like "Digital Catholicism" involve leveraging online media technologies as tools for evangelization while simultaneously spreading the message of faith in cyberspace itself (Samasumo, 2024). Through these channels, we not only provide information, skill and knowledge, but character and the digital behaviors of our pastoral dependents can be molded from the ground up.

Digital Habits in a Digitalised World

The idea of digital habits is generated by the concept of electronic or computerized technology, especially in contrast to analog or physical systems. As demonstrated above, a good percentage of the Nigerian population have access to internet services and are exposed to its promise. Most of this exposure occurs via social media which claims a large proportion of the Nigerian internet space especially amongst young people. As of last year, 2023, about 32 million Nigerians are on social media as users. The most popular of all being WhatsApp and Facebook, followed by Instagram and Tiktok and popularly patronized by young adults who constitute the largest population of social media users in Nigeria.

The Priest as a Model of Digital Habits

“If anything is true, whatever is noble, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable, if anything is praiseworthy, think of such things” (Philippians 4:8). This is an aphorism of the imperative for the pursuit of right amongst us priests. Thus, saying that the priest is the model of digital habit is another way of saying that the priest is a model of right conduct. Just as the Rite of Ordination states, “Believe what you read. Teach what you believe. Practise what you teach.”

The Church from time has always taken care to influence the moral behaviour of her children. She can leverage that moral authority to foster responsible social media use in her magisterial endeavours. Pope Francis often emphasizes the value of truth and communication while speaking out against the proliferation of fake news and polarization on social media. The Pontifical Council for Social Communications in 2002 in its document entitled, “The Church and Internet” highlighted the importance of priests' online presence: It states: “Priests should be aware of the importance of the Internet as a tool for evangelization and should be able to use it effectively” (Pontifical Council for Social Communications, 2002). Adults in general and priests in particular have a central role to play in providing guidance to young people on the use of technology, in promoting healthy digital habits and stressing the importance of balance in online and offline activities. In guiding the young, priests model to them responsible use of social media and other digital technology. In Sunday homilies and catechetical and moral instructions, priests can incorporate teachings on awareness, self-discipline, and responsible stewardship of technology, helping young people cultivate a healthy relationship with digital media. By modelling ethical digital behaviour, priests can foster a culture of respect, empathy, and honesty in online engagements.

According to Pope Francis, “The digital world can be a place of encounter and dialogue” (Pope Francis, World Communication Day, 2014). So, most for young people who are particularly adept at and are increasingly turning to social media more intently as a way of life (their source of information, entertainment, social connection, interaction, and even worship), we must endeavour to meet

them where they are, lest we lose them. Thus, social media for us must be a tool to engage with this group and other groups more closely. With this medium, priests can provide spiritual guidance, answer religious questions or even critical life questions. Through it also, we can offer comfort and succor to those in need of it. For example, some ecclesial communities of the Church of England use AI-powered chatbots to engage with congregants online, offering pastoral support and prayer. The various online media, including social media provide us priests with a golden opportunity to spread the message which can inspire, provide guidance and support to individuals both far and near and especially those who are in remote places with limited access to religious services and or religious materials. As Archbishop Claudio Celli observes, “Social media can be a powerful tool for building community and fostering relationships” (Celli, 2013).

While digital and social media can be an aid to the Church's evangelization efforts, it's necessary to maintain vigilance and uphold ethical standards in its use. Priests themselves are to be mindful of the obligation to maintain a balance between online engagement, the use of social media and the physical and moral demands of their ministry, such as pastoral care, worship, and spiritual growth. This means that boundaries must be set, time prioritized, and distractions avoided. Only by an intentional and responsible use of social media can its benefits be harnessed and its potential risks minimized.

Effective Strategies for Priests to Model Digital Habits and Promote Digital Literacy

a. Personal Digital Literacy Skills

- i. Adopt the mindset of life-long learning. Do not say I am too old to learn or that it is not relevant to me. Every digital skill comes in handy today even at the most unexpected moments.
- ii. Try experimenting with digital tools; phones, computers, ipads, etc.
- iii. Keep up to date with new technological advancements.
- iv. Focus on the technologies and digital platforms that benefit you most.
- v. Take online courses about different digital technologies and how to use them.
- vi. Ask for help when using new technologies.

b. Corporate or Community Digital Skills

- I. Organize summer digital media trainings for our teaming young people (many of them idle in our parishes).
- II. Bring Youth Corpers and or other experts to train your people in digital capabilities, especially parish staff.
- III. Where possible, partner with media technology companies to bring

local and national media awareness into the community.

- IV. Host a diocesan wide, statewide or even nationwide digital programmes competition to create awareness and increase visibility for digital literacy education.

Some Key Aspects to Note

In developing digital literacy skills, care must be taken to focus on certain key aspects to promote best practices, maximise digital benefits and avoid legal challenges.

- a. Legality (for example copyright matters, etc.).
- b. Preservation of privacy (of yourself and others) and security online.
- c. Cultivating a balanced attitude to the use of digital media.
- d. Making conscious efforts to understand the professional, social and cultural implication of the use of technology and model same to others.
- e. Ensuring respect for others in the digital environment.

Implications of Digitalization for Priestly Formation and Ministry

According to Pope John Paul II in his Encyclical, *Pastores Dabo Vobis* (1992): “The entire particular Church has the responsibility, under the guidance of the Bishop, to develop and look after the different aspects of her priests' permanent formation. For Pope John Paul II (1992), “The formation of future priests, both diocesan and religious, and lifelong assiduous care for their personal sanctification in the ministry and for the constant updating of their pastoral commitment is considered by the Church as one of the most demanding and important tasks for the future of the evangelization of humanity.” Earlier in the document, Pope John II (1992) states:

“...In addition, they live in a world which in many respects is new and undergoing rapid and continual evolution. A.5

ll of this cannot be ignored when it comes to programming and carrying out the various phases of formation for those approaching the ministerial priesthood. ...Likewise, faced with the difficulties of contemporary culture and society, they feel compelled to re - examine their way of life and their pastoral priorities, and they are more and more aware of their need for ongoing formation”

Against this backdrop and conscious of the ever-advancing information and communication technology, it is imperative that the formation of future priests incorporates aspects of media awareness that prepares them to meaningfully engage the digital world around us. This must be done while keeping watchful care over actions that display maladaptive tendencies arising from social media use.

A 2019 study of 173 major seminarians in Kenya showed that that 4.6% of the participants had severe internet addiction, whereas 34.1% were moderately

addicted to the internet. Thus, the prevalence of internet addiction was 38.7% (Landry et al, 2022). The study most strategically revealed that the affected seminarians are often unaware of their addictive state. This calls for seminary authorities to implement ways to prevent internet addiction as well as means to test and detect internet addiction amongst seminarians so that they can receive the needed support through specialized programmes (Landry et al, 2022). Priests are not immune to these addictions, neither are parishioners and others under the priests' pastoral care.

One of the Achilles heels of the priesthood today is the large erosion of moral trust due to exposure from social media. The sins of priests, much like the sins of other sectors of society are being advertised on social media more than ever before, including fabricated stories and concocted pictures of priests and non-priests in white garments and religious habits. For example, a purported picture of a priest and a purported nun made the rounds in the middle of 2024, claiming that the couple was set to marry on October 26, 2024. The couple came out with a video of their own to counter the false news including details of their wedding which took place on the 6th of August 2023 and the fact that the husband is a “Bishop” and the woman, a “Divine Vanguard” in the Brotherhood of the Cross and Star Bethel Church (Olumba Olumba). Similarly, in recent times, social media have been splashed with voice notes and bashing of priests on account of either minor or major administrative or pastoral malfeasance. Prior to the digital and social media age, the uproar and the public chastisement these errors (sometimes inculpable mistakes) invite would have been avoided rather than expending precious digital space and time as these matters are adjudicated and re-adjudicated in the public square. We must realise that in the social media age, priests, like celebrities all others in public office stand precariously in the eye of the storm. Thus, things like the eye-scratching videos of priests engaging in what could safely be termed scandalous dance steps within the liturgy, the chilling feelings they evoke, spelling at best, disappointments to fellow priests and a scandal to the faithful must be avoided. Or worse still, priests exuding their personal faith conflicts or inculturational confusion by bringing into the liturgical worship, insignia proper to traditional worship, or dressing in similar cultic ways with townsmen celebrating new yam festivals or other festivals that clearly debase morals, though they are supposed to be giving glory to the God of the earth who gives yield to our farming labours.

The internet is here with us and it's not going away. We must make use of it, promote it for research, homiletics, parish events, youth programmes, general evangelization and defense of the faith (Gokum, Pilani and Azuwike, 2024); but we must do so wisely. Many individuals and pastoral workers have landed in trouble through Facebook, WhatsApp and the rest. We must take care not to fall victim even as we must not forget that the internet does not forget. Mind what you post on the internet and the sites you visit. Most internet sites use cookies not only to track users' internet behaviour for marketing purposes, but they also

become aids to criminal or ethics investigation should the need arise. Whereas there is nothing wrong in posting family and friends on WhatsApp status, for instance, to mark their birthdays and special events, habitual posting of the opposite sex in their numbers on a regular basis by a celibate pastoral worker only gives room for the public to possibly doubt the worker's character (especially when it is a man with a religious vocation). We can mitigate our troubles like intelligent professionals by being a bit more reticent in our digital media exposure and usage.

Conclusion

From the foregoing, it is clear that the presence of priests on social media is not only justified but necessary in today's digital age. By engaging with people on these platforms, priests share their message, foster community, promote interfaith understanding, and provide spiritual guidance to those seeking it. Thus, rather than a distraction, social media can be an opportunity for priests to extend their ministry, connect with others, and make positive impacts in the world. But this must be done within reasonable limits and sane professional boundaries. Since the medium is the message, we must prepare well if we must be online preachers or evangelizers, paying attention to good diction and good tones. This presents the user in a better light, keeps the user secure and attracts more traffic rather than being a turn off to viewers.

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