

## **“Time is greater than space”... *but is it?***

### **An Ecclesiology of Counter-Environment in a Digital Age**

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Among the expressions that are becoming synonymous with Francis’ papacy—indeed, that capture most evocatively the spirit of the pastoral reform being spearheaded in the Roman Catholic Church in our digital times—I find none to be more intriguing than this: “Time is greater than space.” This “first postulate” among the “four” proposed as the “hooks” that anchor this papacy—the others being “unity prevails over conflict,” “realities are more important than ideas” and “the whole is greater than the part”<sup>1</sup>—strikes me because, when I try to sit with the actual words—“time-is-greater-than-space”—I find the effect bewildering.<sup>2</sup> As a theologian with an interest in media ecology,<sup>3</sup> one thing I have learnt is that “words”—and their effects—matter and they must be paid careful attention to.

In this paper, I will explore a three-fold hermeneutic of the “Francis’ principle.” Through presenting Pope Francis’ own use and interpretation of the phrase, we can see an anthropological and theological hermeneutic at play. Together they can be understood as revealing a new ecclesiology for a digital age. I will argue, however, that there is a third, more hidden significance to this “Francis’ principle.” Precisely because in a digital age, “time is greater than space” is not an immediately graspable metaphor, I will show that it also functions as a mechanism for conversion. The third more hidden meaning of “time is greater than space” is that it acts as a “counter-environment” to our assumed digitally mediated “environment.” In so doing it recreates the “reader” to enable them to

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<sup>1</sup> <http://chiesa.espresso.repubblica.it/articolo/1351301?eng=y>

<sup>2</sup> This is because the phrase makes no sense literally, that is, scientifically. I also struggle to understand it conceptually, that is philosophically. This tells me that it can only be read metaphorically. However, what really strikes me is the way Pope Francis presents the phrase—as if it were *literally* not *metaphorically* true. It is this very “matter-of-factness” that causes a “jolt” and makes the reader pause to think again. Why, I have been wondering, is the Pope presenting something as “true” when it is obvious that it isn’t? This question is the reason I believe this phrase deserves a deeper study.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.media-ecology.org>

embrace the very anthropology and ecclesiology that it points towards. “Time is greater than space” is not just a metaphor that in being cracked open gives the reader useful information. Rather, as the reader actively attempts to crack it open, he or she will be re-formed.

I will present this three-fold hermeneutic in three steps:

In the first part, I will offer a close reading of “time is greater than space” through the Pope’s own writings. This reading will give us the intended anthropological and theological meanings through which one can tease out Pope Francis’ vision for an ecclesiology in a digital age.

Secondly, however, I will try to unpack, why as a metaphor, as words that quite literally “leap” (from the Greek, *meta-pherien*) from the page, “time is greater than space” has a mystifying effect. I will argue that this effect stems from how we have learnt to experience “time” and “space” under digital conditions, and therefore with how the words understood literally register in a digital environment.<sup>4</sup> Space is no longer simply “space,” nor is time simply “time.” Both have undergone a radical—Einsteinian?—revolution and the common experience of space and time is no less bewildering than the scientific hypothesis of the “spacetime continuum.”<sup>5</sup> Thus, to construct a metaphor on terms whose immediate meaning is not self-evident is to be on shaky ground indeed. It is not surprising that it is the vision of the church and pastoral praxis grounded in this first postulate of “time is greater than space” that seem to cause so much controversy—many dare say “confusion”—in

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<sup>4</sup> In fact, what I am proposing is really a four-fold “exegesis” of “time is greater than space.” But precisely because my point is that the phrase makes no sense “literally,” then it must be interpreted metaphorically. The anthropological sense can perhaps be likened to medieval “tropology,” while the theological sense can be considered to be “anagogical.” But what allows for both interpretations is, in fact, the prior conversion, or the leap that allows the phrase to be understood metaphorically. This fourth more hidden meaning can perhaps be likened to the “allegorical” sense as explored by the medieval tradition of Christian exegesis. After all, “time is [truly] greater than space” only when Christ’s salvation and promise of divinization is factored in.

<sup>5</sup> As I prepared this paper, I consulted basic articles on the philosophical implications of Albert Einstein’s general theory of relativity from which the hypothesis of a “spacetime continuum” emerges. (E.g. <https://einstein.stanford.edu/content/relativity/q411.html>). I also consulted fresh theological reflections on the new physics/cosmology. Among these, the work of Robert John Russell is notable. See for instance, his “Eschatology and Scientific Cosmology: From Conflict to Interaction,” *What God Knows: Time, Eternity and Divine Knowledge*, Harry Lee Poe and J. Stanley Mattson, eds. (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press: 2006).

From a media ecology point of view, however, what is most striking about spacetime is that unlike previous western assumptions about “space” and “time” that were construed in “visual” metaphors (reflecting a literate mindset), spacetime is an inherently “tactile” metaphor reflecting the “tactile” bias of the “electric” milieu.

the Roman Catholic Church. Conflicting interpretations of the metaphor could lead to a communication breakdown.

Still, in the third section and, at the risk of sounding even more baffling than Pope Francis himself, I will argue that the power of the aphorism “time is greater than space” is precisely its radically *disorienting* effect. It “works” in a digital context, because it “does not work.” I will resolve this (apparent) enigma through insights from fragments of the later (unpublished) reflections of Marshall McLuhan and what he considered to be the most crucial role for the Roman Catholic Church under “electric conditions”: to become a “counter-*environment*.” Following the pedagogical logic of the impostor, trickster and the fool for Christ, McLuhan (and perhaps Pope Francis) would agree that “time is greater than space” acts as Menippean satire, and therefore is strategy to convert heart and minds, because it is subversive. In other words, like medicine, the words are healing, and the aphorism acts gently but surely to “message” us into becoming a new self. Pope Francis is certainly emphasizing that the Christian must be firmly rooted in the world—indeed in a digital world. Yet simultaneously the “Francis principle” is most effective in teaching the Christian how not to be *of* the world—and that’s precisely by exaggerating the paradoxical spatial-temporal dynamics of digital culture. As Menippean satire, “time-is-greater-than-space” re-orientes the reader to stay rooted in the original Christian kerygma of joy, and therefore to recover an *instinctus* for truth, even in a cultural setting that, in some respects, could tend to distort it.

### **Part 1: “Time is greater than space” – unpacking the aphorism**

There are three decisive formal communication events in this papacy when “time is greater than space” takes center-stage. The first is the famous Jesuit interview of the Pope by Fr. Antonio Spadaro, S.J. published simultaneously on Jesuit journals all-around the world in September 2013.<sup>6</sup> There, Pope Francis does not quite use the phrase, but depicts in brushstrokes the metaphorical universe from which it will emerge.

God manifests himself in historical revelation, in history. Time initiates processes, and space crystallizes them. God is in history, in the processes.

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<sup>6</sup> <http://americamagazine.org/pope-interview>

We must not focus on occupying the spaces where power is exercised, but rather on starting long-run historical processes. We must initiate processes rather than occupy spaces. God manifests himself in time and is present in the processes of history. This gives priority to actions that give birth to new historical dynamics. And it requires patience, waiting.

Pope Francis is presenting the age-old *mythos* of God-human encounter in a decidedly human, created context. This is the first clue to Bergoglio's intent: in the tradition of Latin American theology, he is not interested in the Scholastic and modern God of abstract categories and definitions. Divine-human encounters do not happen on transcendent planes anyway. Rather, God empties Godself to encounter us in messy and ambiguous human situations. Still, in Bergoglio's mythical universe, even if God is "in all things," not all "things" are equally conducive to the divine encounter. Thus, he still sets up the age-old dualism of good vs. evil, of hope vs. despair, of grace vs. sin. For Pope Francis, these anthropological and theological archetypes are symbolized by "time" and "space": change and fluidity open possibilities for liberation, but static and rigid dispositions chain us to our sinful condition.

This is a fascinating depiction, because it is a direct reversal of how classical cultures would have understood space and time. As Harold Innis makes clear in his media ecological works,<sup>7</sup> cultures—except perhaps our own—tend to be defined by a bias towards time *or* a bias towards space. But a bias towards time—achieved through technologies that allow for a sense of permanence—implies the belief in the constancy and unchangingness of culture; in the trust of its people that what has been achieved must be safeguarded for posterity. Cultures are inherently "conservative" and change is always perceived as a threat to stability. Indeed, the least stable cultures are those who ignored the power of time choosing instead to spread their wings in space. Conquering space, in itself possible through technologies like the stirrup, was a definite mark of "heroism," of the warrior-conqueror who dared to go beyond what was established. Alexander is "Great" because of his mastery of space. But, the spread of spatial power would be short-lived without putting political, educational and religious strategies in place to "tame" time. In ancient cultures, understanding the mystery of time was a matter of survival and those who had access to this knowledge, usually priests as guardians of

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<sup>7</sup> See Harold Innis, *Empire and Communications*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1950 and *The Bias of Communication*, University of Toronto Press, 1951.

the supernatural workings of the cosmos, would also be the custodians of culture. As guardians of the status quo they “wound up the cosmic clock by an elaborate ritual reenactment or recitation of the original process of creation.”<sup>8</sup>

Yet, since time could be controlled through ritual and techniques for remembering, as Marshall McLuhan intuitively in his first published book, *The Mechanical Bride*: “For tribal man [sic.] space was the uncontrollable mystery.”<sup>9</sup> Just as it had been for the hunter and gatherer tribes from whom they descended, for the earliest city-bound, civilized human, “space” and the “frontier” remained the object of fascination. But as the literate human progressively conquered space and annihilated frontiers, as we become “secular” and out-of-touch with the cosmic mysteries of time, as inheritors of the modern era, digital men and women retrieve a tribal sensibility, but “for technological man [sic.] it is time that occupies the same role”<sup>10</sup> of uncontrollable mystery.

Pope Bergoglio seems to not only concur with this insight, but to harness it most effectively. If the “modern” (hyper)literate human believed in the harnessing of space and time to open us up to “progress,” in Bergoglio’s mythical universe, it is not “progress” that is prized. Rather it is “processes” (what systems/complexity theorists in our days would call “emergence”)<sup>11</sup> that are deemed as having priority over “space” and the “certainties” it brings with it (what Bergoglio associates with “power”).

Moreover, Pope Francis does not just present his narrative as anthropological, but rather as theological. Pope Francis’ notion of “space” and “time” thus seems to be more properly “scriptural.” His “time” seems ordered by salvation history and this, our time, is really God’s time, the unfolding of God’s Reign. Hence, why God encounters us where we are and God waits for us for as long as it takes. Nevertheless, God cannot be pinned down. God is God-for-us, but, in God’s absolute transcendence palpable in immanence, God is a “God of surprises” who is discovered in fluid, liberating, pregnant-

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<sup>8</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, Critical Edition edited by Terrence Gordon, Gingko Press, 2003, 210.

<sup>9</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *The Mechanical Bride: Folklore of Industrial Man*, Vanguard Press, 1951, 85.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> See: Markus Christen and Laura Rebecca Franklin, “The Concept of Emergence in Complexity Science: Finding Coherence between Theory and Practice,” [www.ini.uzh.ch/admin/extras/doc\\_get.php?id=41950](http://www.ini.uzh.ch/admin/extras/doc_get.php?id=41950) (accessed July 28, 2016).

with-possibilities “time.” God is not to be encumbered by the human hunger for power, control or illusions of certainty. God is the true protagonist of the theatre of cosmic Time or salvation history. Man and woman who are open to conversion and willing to trust in God’s “time” that heals and nurtures can—and will—encounter God. But the rest of us, crystallized in our certainties and power struggles, fail even to recognize him.

Fascinatingly, it is precisely this dichotomy that is at work in the latest instantiation of the first postulate “time is greater than space.” In paragraph 3 of the recent apostolic exhortation on love in the family, *Amoris laetitia*,<sup>12</sup> “time is greater than space” is presented as the interpretative key to the entire document and, more significantly, to Chapter 8 that proposes the pastoral strategy of “Accompanying, discerning and integrating weakness.”

3. Since “time is greater than space”, I would make it clear that not all discussions of doctrinal, moral or pastoral issues need to be settled by interventions of the magisterium. Unity of teaching and practice is certainly necessary in the Church, but **this does not preclude various ways of interpreting some aspects of that teaching or drawing certain consequences from it.** This will always be the case as the Spirit guides us towards the entire truth (cf. *Jn* 16:13), until he leads us fully into the mystery of Christ and enables us to see all things as he does.

Here, “time is greater than space” is taken not “mythically” but as a principle—though since this is Bergoglio, with his penchant for the symbolic and analogical, we have to be careful that we do not “crystallize” his own “principle” too much! In fact, in this instance, Pope Francis applies his own principle in two ways. First, the obvious pastoral manner that we see in Chapter 8, where he insists that the strategy of accompaniment, discernment and integrating weakness is about being with the repentant in the messiness of time as attentiveness to the movements of the soul increasingly opens us up to receive God’s grace. Simultaneously however, all of us, the entire Church, hierarchy and all, (and indeed, for Bergoglio perhaps especially the hierarchy) is in the same boat of always needing to be on our knees and open to the barely perceptible divine Breeze that encounters us in concrete, shifting pastoral circumstances. No church teaching or pastoral attitude can be crystallized, because the risk is that it becomes fossilized. To be a shepherd for the flock is to be willing to embrace time by initiating processes responsibly—which also means, to be attuned to God’s calling and presence in

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<sup>12</sup> [https://w2.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20160319\\_amoris-laetitia\\_en.pdf](https://w2.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20160319_amoris-laetitia_en.pdf)

time, in the concreteness of the flock's reality to inform our tradition and established wisdom. More radically, it also means that to be church is not to be beyond time—or, more to the point, immune to the spiritual dangers of “space.” Sin exists and threatens even the church. Indeed, to reduce tradition to certainty is to be in the grips of the greatest sin—the disordered desire for power.

This is further elaborated in the third and most important presentation of “time is greater than space,” and the one that concerns us the most, since I believe it depicts most clearly Pope Francis' ecclesiology for a digital age. *Evangelii gaudium*,<sup>13</sup> Pope Francis' programmatic apostolic exhortation, presents the “first postulate” as key “principle” for all human personal and socio-political flourishing and therefore—insofar as the church is in the world—also for the church's pastoral work. I quote the entire segment between para. 222-225, while offering brief reflections along the way:

222. A constant tension exists between fullness and limitation. Fullness evokes the desire for complete possession, while limitation is a wall set before us. Broadly speaking, **“time” has to do with fullness as an expression of the horizon which constantly opens before us, while each individual moment has to do with limitation as an expression of enclosure.** People live poised between each individual moment and the greater, brighter horizon of the utopian future as the final cause which draws us to itself. Here we see a first principle for progress in building a people: time is greater than space.

Here, Pope Francis shows clearly how he has taken the metaphor of “time” to its limits by associating it not just with flow and change, but with transcendence. Time evokes “fullness” and therefore the eternal, the infinite, understood not quantitatively (i.e. simply *more* of what we know) but qualitatively, (i.e. as mystery that expands our “horizon”). Yet, precisely through the implied association with the divine, “time” is also profoundly relational: just as we “desire” transcendence, so the ultimate beckons and invites us to itself. In the context of *Evangelii gaudium*, the very opening verse of the apostolic exhortation gives concrete form to the beckoning of ultimate transcendence: “The joy of the gospel fills the heart and lives of all who *encounter Jesus*.” The Christian's intimate relationship with Jesus is the essence of the Good News. Jesus himself is the one who, not only beckons in time, but penetrates in the flesh the messiness of our space and time.

Yet, as St. Thomas Aquinas teaches at the heart of his *Summa Theologiae* when he ponders the theological virtue of love, intimacy with Jesus is *caritas* that elevates us from “servants” into

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<sup>13</sup> [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20131124\\_evangelii-gaudium.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html)

“friends” of the Lord—friends who in gazing at each other, in mirroring each other, do not annihilate each other’s uniqueness, but rather rejoice in it. Becoming like Christ is not an eradication of the self, but its fullest discovery. At the same time, for the human under the mark of sin, that discovery is also the liberation from “space” that coincides with the death of the old self. Here the sphinxlike quality of “time” becomes evident. “Time” manifests—while it hides—what *could be*, even while we become increasingly conscious of how we are constricted by what *is* at any moment. “Time” fills us with hope and expectation, just as it makes us profoundly aware of sin, and remorseful in our self-denial. Our experience of Christ’s love is one of mercy, even as it is elevated to one of joy. “Time” is crucial to Christian living because it invites us to *transformation-conversion*.

Still, Pope Francis continues:

223. This principle [that time is greater than space] enables us to work slowly but surely, without being obsessed with immediate results. It helps us patiently to endure difficult and adverse situations, or inevitable changes in our plans. It invites us to accept the tension between fullness and limitation, and to give a priority to time.

This is where it becomes evident that for Pope Francis “time is greater than space” is not just a principle of conversion, but of pedagogy and *formation*. We must not just follow processes; we must initiate them. The teacher sows seeds in his or her pupil’s heart. The teacher does his or her utmost to tend the seeds, protect them, water them and nurture them. But when they grow, or how they grow—indeed, in our human experience, sometimes “if” they grow—is not for the teacher to see. It is, however, for the Christian to hope—and indeed to trust—that God, the Divine Teacher who accompanies us in time never abandons his flock. The virtue of courage as perseverance is essential when we start losing heart. But ultimately, it is only grace and the theological virtues—faith, hope, charity—that allow us “to give a priority to time.” This remains true, since even if scriptural time breaks forth into the world, our context remains the world always tempted to constrain “time.”

When the Ancients pondered time they did it for the sake of cultural stability in the face of spatial chaos. Their winding of the cosmic clock through religious ritual, allowed for the birth of the age of civilization. But as cities (and therefore technology) become more sophisticated, the desire to “stop” time, to hold it and contain it goes beyond mere survival. It is about establishing and holding onto dominance. This is nowhere as evident as in the cusp between the rapid acceleration and then



reversal of technologies that constrain time that enable, and indeed are at the core of the myth of progress. The problem with “progress” is precisely that it does not allow for the truly new, but satisfies itself with more (much, much more) of the same. Progress is conditioned by the static powers of space/power. Electricity is the tipping point of the control of time: measures of time have become so infinitely small that it seems as if they annihilate time. Thus we are now in the process of reversing technological processes of the mastery over time that have unfolded through millennia. Nevertheless, we remain conditioned by a modern technocratic mindset and the contemporary manifestation of hubris and power is precisely how our control of time has reduced it to the “immediate” instant-like manifestation of human prowess. Ironically, this very reduction of time chains us even more tightly to “space”—even if, in our case, it is increasingly “augmented” (virtual-physical hybrid) space. Pope Francis writes:

One of the faults which we occasionally observe in sociopolitical activity is that **spaces and power are preferred to time and processes.** Giving priority to space means madly attempting to keep everything together in the present, trying to possess all the spaces of power and of self-assertion; it is to crystallize processes and presume to hold them back. Giving priority to time means being concerned about initiating processes rather than possessing spaces. Time governs spaces, illumines them and makes them links in a constantly expanding chain, with no possibility of return. **What we need, then, is to give priority to actions which generate new processes in society and engage other persons and groups who can develop them to the point where they bear fruit in significant historical events.** Without anxiety, but with clear convictions and tenacity.

Two points are worth mentioning here: “space” is metaphor for control, for power, for the hubris that assumes that we already “have it all together” and we do not need God at all. Space is about “possessing,” withholding within, being enchained by the self I know, rather than the one God beckons me to be. It assumes that I do not need to discern again, to truly seek to be constantly re-attuned to the voice of conscience that always invites us to desire God above all else. As Pope Francis notes in verse 1 of *Evangelii gaudium*, “With Christ joy is *constantly born anew*.” But space denies precisely this “anew”. It believes in the constant that I create. It assumes we already have the right answers and solutions—technical, social or pastoral. The metaphor of space implies all the effects of the original sinfulness of making ourselves “gods.”

Hence, the second point: Pope Francis offers a strategy that is simultaneously culturally “subversive” and “affirmative.” It is subversive insofar as it seeks to annihilate the assumption that we

have it all together. Precisely by “generating new processes” we destabilize the *status quo*; we undermine its assumption of static certainty. The “static,” or even its next-of-kin, the “immediate technical solution,” is precisely the denial of the flourishing potential of “time”.

At the same time, however, what is most striking about our age is the palpable power of *emergence*. We know that “static” is dead because we exist in an era of *change*. So what the Pope is proposing can hardly be deemed earth shattering: rather, it seems to reflect and affirm a general feeling that already exists in digital culture. The real question about processes cannot just be whether we generate them or not—because in many respects we cannot *not* generate them.

The Pope continues:

224. Sometimes I wonder if there are people in today’s world who are really concerned about generating processes of people-building, as opposed to obtaining immediate results which yield easy, quick short-term political gains, but do not enhance human fullness. History will perhaps judge the latter with the criterion set forth by Romano Guardini: **“The only measure for properly evaluating an age is to ask to what extent it fosters the development and attainment of a full and authentically meaningful human existence, in accordance with the peculiar character and the capacities of that age”**.<sup>14</sup>

This is where things truly get interesting for the theologian seeking an ecclesiology in a digital age. Romano Guardini is, of course, a favourite of Pope Francis. He planned to write his doctoral dissertation on Guardini, but instead he is quoted profusely in the very heart of Pope Francis encyclical *Laudato si*.<sup>15</sup> In Chapter 3 of *Laudato si* and following Guardini, Pope Francis makes the compelling argument that the heart of our broken ecological condition is a mis-construal of what it means to be human. Instead of being open to “time,” or to “integral human development,” we become constrained by “space” through buying into the logic of technique that reduces our lifestyle to the slavery of technocracy. The Pope, of course, is not saying that “technologizing” is evil. How could it be if to technologize is inherently human? Rather, the Pope’s argument is that becoming constricted by the mindset of technique (the “immediate” space-bound “solution”); allowing technique to dictate human life, is inherently dehumanizing. To paraphrase a popular meme: “People are made to be loved and things to be used. The chaos in this world is because we use people and love things.”

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<sup>14</sup> Quoting *Das Ende der Neuzeit*, Würzburg, 1965, 30-31.

<sup>15</sup> [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150524\\_enciclica-laudato-si.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html)

Guardini's interpretation of modernity is not unlike the one offered by the "media ecology" tradition: the lament that through allowing technology to give shape to human life, we repudiate our responsibility to use technology wisely to instantiate possibilities for the flourishing of human life. As Guardini says, we will be judged for not promoting human flourishing "in accordance with the *peculiar character and the capacities* of [our] age." This is a crucial statement. There is not *one definitive human way* of becoming truly human, but different paths to the same ultimate flourishing. What is certain is the "end"—becoming like Christ—but the "means" continue to evolve with the ages. Precisely because Christ has already graced the world with salvation, our digital age also opens the possibility for new manifestations of God's glory. Hence, why in every age, in every culture, *the onus is on the church to recognize and promote those emerging "divinizing" processes and to sow seeds for a pedagogy to transcendence.*

The conclusion of this section in *Evangelii gaudium*, that unpacks what it means to live according to the pedagogical principle that "time is greater than space," explores precisely this responsibility of the church in our days. For Pope Francis this responsibility is the primary mission of the church in digital times: evangelization.

225. This criterion also applies to evangelization, which calls for **attention to the bigger picture, openness to suitable processes and concern for the long run**. The Lord himself, during his earthly life, often warned his disciples that there were things they could not yet understand and that they would have to await the Holy Spirit (cf. Jn 16:12-13). The parable of the weeds among the wheat (cf. Mt 13:24-30) graphically illustrates an important aspect of evangelization: the enemy can intrude upon the kingdom and sow harm, but ultimately he is defeated by the goodness of the wheat.

Pope Francis makes it clear that the pastoral stance he is promoting is not simply a "technical" solution to specific pastoral issues that make us miss the forest for the trees. Rather, what he is proposing is a vision of what it means to be church in our times. Here divine pedagogy and ecclesial mission become a true "ecclesiology," in accordance with the programmatic prelude in the opening paragraph of *Evangelii gaudium*:

The joy of the gospel fills the heart and lives of all who **encounter Jesus**. Those who accept his offer of salvation are set free from sin, sorrow, inner emptiness and loneliness. With Christ joy is constantly born anew. In this Exhortation I wish to encourage the Christian faithful to **embark upon a new chapter of evangelization marked by this joy**, while pointing out new paths for the Church's journey in years to come.

The enigmatic expression “time is greater than space” finds its fullest meaning when contextualized in this ecclesiology as a three-fold “*evangelization of witness of personal encounter (with Christ)*.” The Pope is emphasizing it as a strategy for the church today cognizant of the fact that our experience of the world has become one of connectivity, immediacy and proximity, and therefore where the most obvious stance is of deep personal involvement. One can no longer simply be a nominal Christian. One must be personally transformed through an encounter with Christ. This implies that as personally transformed, I will also become a “bearer of Christ,” a witness.

Fascinatingly, however, what is “original” in this papacy (that is, by literally going back to the “origins”) is that, if in the early church, born in a context of violence, the imaginary of “martyrdom” tended to become witness-unto-death, Pope Francis provocatively suggests that today’s witness must be first and foremost the original witness of liberation, of complete “joy.” The news of Christ conquering death to bring our salvation is “good” indeed. It is so “good” that its most dazzling manifestation is human divinization. Pope Francis spells out that to be church today implies bearing the light of absolute joy and fulfillment to manifest to the world, even if we do so in difficult circumstances tarnished by sin, where all we can witness are glimpses of who we are called to become.

And that, of course, is the point: “glimpses.” Dazzling or weak, any light in the world emanates from Christ and will ultimately conquer darkness. Ecclesiology as witness of soteriology and divinization is not simply immediate, but developmental, pedagogical. We grow in joy as we grow in holiness under divine tutelage as mediated in and through the community of Christians. The process of growth, of transformation is described through the metaphor that “time is greater than space.”

Undoubtedly, Pope Francis is presenting a theo-anthropologically robust and truly hopeful vision for the church in our days. As a pastoral pedagogical principle, “time is greater than space” reflects the best of our Christian tradition. The entire tradition of Christian formation, especially as expressed beautifully in its monastic spirit, is about dying to the world, to rise again with Christ, *in the world*. It is about the separation of the wheat from the chaff, even the wheat from the chaff in my own heart. I deny my self in “space” as I embrace my true self in “time.” Doing so allows me to live the parallel existence that is the very essence of being a witness of Christ: *being in the world, but not of the world*.

The issue I dare raise, however, is whether this traditional Christian pedagogy and anthropology remains as credible today. I push my question further: a tradition developed in a literate milieu, whose very essence was the possibility of extracting a self from a tribe, a “true” self, from a “false” self, a law of nature from multiple happenings (including those that contradicted it), a publicity from a privacy, an interiority from an exteriority, a future from a present and a past, a city of God from the “world”... do all those “distinctions” continue to make sense in a digital ecology? Can we truly claim that eschatological “time is greater than space” makes any sense in an age where “spacetime is a continuum” and experiences of “time” and “space” are construed as mere slices, lines, random points in a static “block universe”, where life narratives are simply self-created and can be reduced to simulacra or illusions?

Is Pope Francis’ deliberate pastoral strategy and—I dare say—an ecclesiology of “mediation of divine tutelage,” incredibly bold or foolhardy? I believe that much depends on how “time” and “space” are *communicated*—or indeed, function as “communicative events”—in a digital milieu. So far, we have unpacked Pope Francis’ own interpretation of the aphorism, which has led us to the conclusion that his ultimate aim is an ecclesiology of authentic “*evangelization of witness of personal encounter (with Christ)*.” But how does the world receive the great Bergoglio postulate, “Time is greater than space”? What is the effect it generates?

## **Part 2: “Time is greater than space” – *but is it really?***

In a digital age of immediacy, of proximity, of the absolute technical dominance of both space and time to the extent that both appear to be annihilated, Pope Francis presents the world with a pastoral program, indeed an ecclesiology, where “time is greater than space”. His claim is that the heart of Christian witness is a becoming that implies a rich, scriptural sense of time in contrast to a mundane enslaving “space.” Yet, in our experience space is certainly not enslaving. How could it be when, for the first time ever in human experience, I can be everywhere at the same time? If anything, our experience teaches us that it is precisely time that is a burden. We seem to have no time, at the same time that “time” itself appears suspended, even nostalgic, leaping backwards and forwards with no clear direction. All past seems to have become part of an eternal present, while the future... do we

even consider a future as our motto increasingly becomes “live (in) the moment”? As theologically rich as it might be, Pope’s first postulate feels as if it is completely foreign to our reality. Then how is it supposed to speak to the flock? Is Pope Francis guilty of the one sin that he tirelessly teaches the shepherds to not commit: not speaking the language of the people?

As was hinted at in the earlier section, the experience of “time” is culture-bound because it is intimately intertwined with the mediating environment created by distinct technologies. Indeed, the perception of time undergoes radical metamorphosis under different technological conditions. Time in oral cultures was cosmological sacred time. In his chapter in *Understanding Media* on “Clocks: the scent of time,”<sup>16</sup> Marshall McLuhan gives the example of Hopi Native Americans to offer us a hint of what oral time pre-dating western literate culture might have felt like:

Time for them is not a uniform succession or duration, but a *pluralism of many things co-existing*. ‘It is what happens when the corn matures or a sheep grows up... It is the natural process that takes place while living substance acts out its life drama.’ *Therefore, as many kinds of time exist for them as there are kinds of life.*<sup>17</sup>

Yet, for these past two and a half millennia and under the pressure of alphabetic literacy, western time increasingly became linear abstract time, separate from actual happenings. Of course, in our daily life, time is not just experienced as linear or abstract. Augustine’s thick sense of time as “duration” contrasts sharply with time as mere “flow,” just as *kairos* is infinitely richer than *chronos*. We still “remember” vividly; we still experience the in-breaking of the transcendent in the immanent. But these become extraordinary experiences of time, and for that reason, the exception that proves the rule of the perceived “flatness” of ordinary time. From the daily rhythm of monastic life to the invention of the mechanical clock, in the western world, “abstract time ... led men [sic] to eat, not when they were hungry, but when it was ‘time to eat.’”<sup>18</sup>

Such a mechanistic conception of time becomes the tipping point propelling the Gutenberg era and the dawn of a truly “secular” age. The mechanization of time extends aggressively to the mechanization and organization of space-nature, and to the separation of the subject from his or her

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<sup>16</sup> “Scent” because of time’s intimate relation with memory, and memory being intimately tied to the sense of smell.

<sup>17</sup> *Understanding Media*, 201, my emphasis.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, 209 (author’s emphasis).

environment—as chapter three of *Laudato si* describes so well. In this hyper-literate environment, the Christian eschatological sense of time reaches almost breaking point: even believers drift between immanentism and Deism and most of us just give in to the secular temptation of atheism. The “sacredness” of time seems to have disappeared altogether.

Yet, paradoxically, it is the very acceleration of our control of mechanical time and space that leads to their reversal. “Today, after more than a century of electric technology, we have extended our central nervous system itself in a global embrace, abolishing both space and time as far as our planet is concerned.”<sup>19</sup> As electricity replaces alphabetic literacy as ground of culture, it retrieves oral-like sensibilities. Thus “[the Hopi experience of time] also, is the kind of time-sense held by the modern physicist and scientist. *They no longer try to contain events in time, but think of each thing as making its own time and its own space.*”<sup>20</sup>

This does not deny that there are crucial differences between the oral perception of time and our electric, even digital perception of time. For the oral tribe, the world was permeated by the sacred. For us, *we* become the sacred. An environment mediated by electric technologies is conducive to a perception of spacetime as elastic and inherently subjective. For our tribal ancestors, time was rich happenings and events that gave meaning to *their* existence. In this sense, for our tribal ancestors, time was like a womb. But for us, time is profoundly ambiguous—precisely because its meaning depends on what *we* make of it. We have no time at the same time that we have all time. We can remember everything and forget nothing at the same time that we are increasingly forgetful because we fail to be mindful. Our digital time remains “linear” abstract time that is metaphorically stretched to its limits, “filled” beyond its capacity, and re-segmented and sequentialized according to our whims. The over-abundance of time mirrors the over-abundance of space. Just as I become omnipresent, and my (digital) existence can extend beyond the limits of my physical mortality, spacetime literally becomes what each one of us makes of it.

This new conception of spacetime makes it practically impossible to conceive, let alone live, a properly “Christian” relation with the world. As we assume that we are one with the world and the

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 5.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 200, my emphasis.

world is an extension of us, all Christian talk of being a *Homo duplex*—“*in* the world but not *of* the world”—evaporates to meaninglessness, because the objective, the detached, the “person-(and therefore individual)-in-relationship” risks evaporating to oblivion. Under our conditions, there is little hope of escaping my “space-bound” self just as “time” is what ties me to a self-created meaning among random events that scream for my attention. We lament the end of “privacy,” but more serious still is the annihilation of interiority without which there can be no authentic *Christian* consciousness. If in a literate age our challenge was to maintain a balance between interiority and exteriority, individuality and community, in a digital age, it is the possibility of dichotomy and objectivity that tends to disappear. Under conditions of ubiquitous connectivity and pervasive proximity, can I maintain enough distance from the world, enough “objectivity” to be my *self*... indeed to witness Christ who lives in me?

Throughout his life, and especially closer to his death, this was the primary concern of media ecologist Marshall McLuhan, as evident from his personal papers now at the National Archives Canada in Ottawa. A convert to Catholicism, inspired by St. Thomas Aquinas and his “theory of communication,” McLuhan was particularly concerned that under “electric conditions,” (this was the 1970s) the new human was “discarnate,” “angelic,” their spirituality—including new theologies emerging in the Roman Catholic Church—tending to Gnosticism.<sup>21</sup> All this implied the loss of objectivity, of spatial and temporal boundaries—at least as construed in “visual” terms. In our digital context, even the discarnate human is undergoing reversal: as we increasingly become digital cyborgs through the reliance on handhelds, wearables and implants through which we interface with the environment—even more so through smart technologies where the environment itself increasingly responds intelligently to *my* needs—essentially we are taking on new embodiments that are seamlessly intertwined with the entire *physical* realm, be it real, virtual or augmented. If under electric conditions, matter was superseded, under digital conditions, my spirit-reason-consciousness is superseded to retrieve a new experience of *spiritual matter*. All “nature” has become an extension, not just of human flesh, but of human intelligence-spirit. Through smart technology and A.I. in particular, matter will

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<sup>21</sup> Nadia Delicata, “‘The Talk He Never Gave’: Reflections on Marshall McLuhan’s 1979 Talk ‘Discarnate Man and the Incarnate Church,’” *URAM* 34, nos. 3-4 (2015): 231-256.



increasingly attend, understand, decide, act, remember, learn. In other words, through A.I. matter is “humanized” and as it becomes more “human” like me, what will distinguish it from me?<sup>22</sup>

Through the emergence of intelligent systems, systemic all-inclusive reflection becomes a moral obligation.<sup>23</sup> Yet it also becomes much more difficult precisely because true attunement to the environment assumes the dual simultaneous posture of active immersion *and* distancing. The exercise of prudence assumes awareness of both figure and ground simultaneously, and indeed of how I am both consumed by the ground while still transcending it as figure. Yet if the dominant technocratic paradigm emerging from modernity emphasized distance and individuation, the dominant technocratic paradigm in our times tends to annihilate distance and individuation. Either stance fails to allow for the proper moral objectivity that, as Bernard Lonergan puts it, emerges only from “authentic subjectivity.”

This shift is even more challenging for a Christian ethos since it eradicates the philosophical foundation of a Christian anthropology, in itself developed through and wedded to a literate anthropology of personhood that carves a balance between the excesses of tribalism and individualism. If such an anthropology is true, and the “person” reflects an authentic manifestation of human flourishing and not a mere artificial invention<sup>24</sup>—then we need strategies to not only protect humanity

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<sup>22</sup> The proper spiritualization of matter is a topic that Sergius Bulgakov touches upon briefly in his third volume of his *magnum opus* on divine-humanity. For Bulgakov, the spiritualization of matter that happens through human work is ultimately *leitourgia* and can only be understood in the context of the Holy Spirit’s *kenosis* in his descent in the world where the Spirit brings new creation through human hands. The full spiritualization of matter will ultimately be revealed in the *parousia*. See *The Bride of the Lamb*, Eerdmans, 2001, 417-428.

<sup>23</sup> Nadia Delicata, “Natural Law in a Digital Age,” *Journal of Moral Theology* 4 no.1 (2015): 1-24.

<sup>24</sup> In his interviews with Pierre Babin, Edward Wakin and Hubert Hoskins in particular, McLuhan tantalizingly suggests that, just like the Hebrew heritage in which Jesus Christ was born, the Greco-Roman context in which Christianity flourished was not a coincidence but divinely-willed. This belief would assume that the Greco-Roman, literate categories in which the gospel has thus far been interpreted also reflect some truths about human flourishing that need to be preserved, even as humanity moves on to a new phase of its development. Christianity might need to be re-interpreted in a digital context, but this does not mean that in the process it throws away its entire tradition that is intimately wedded to “western” culture. This is a delicate point for the inculturation of the gospel: for while the gospel is universal and transcends culture, its interpretation is always culturally mediated.

The interviews are reproduced in: Marshall McLuhan, Eric McLuhan, Jacek Szklarek, *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion and Media* (Stoddart, 1999), Part 2, “The Church’s Understanding of Media.”

from the sensorial imbalance of digital effects, but to properly educate, to “awaken” those immersed in the tribe to discover a true interiority that is nurtured to personhood.

### **Part 3: “Time is greater than space” – embodying an “ecclesiology of counter-environment”**

From his doctoral dissertation and in a series of recent articles, McLuhan scholar Andrew Chrystall<sup>25</sup> is giving us a rare glimpse of the late Marshall McLuhan’s corpus of unpublished material and personal papers. From this study, Chrystall is constructing an image of the private “Herbert Marshall McLuhan” that in many respects contrasts sharply with the public persona of the “the media guru” “Marshall McLuhan” of the 1960s and 70s. I also tend to agree with Chrystall that this sharp contrast, the very creation of the public persona, was the real work of McLuhan, who at heart understood himself as, first and foremost a Catholic and secondly, an educator. As a Catholic and educator he was deeply concerned that “civilization” as painstakingly constructed through centuries of Greco-Roman and Christianized influence was in crisis. Unless we do something and something drastic, the achievements of a literate culture could become meaningless. For McLuhan, these human achievements were reflected in the literary richness of classical culture and in the great theologians of the Church as interpreters of the “two books” of nature and scripture. But especially from the late nineteenth century onwards, the onslaught on the senses of new electric media, challenged our perceptions afresh. For McLuhan it was the true “artist” who now had the privilege (or rather solemn duty) to read reality. Indeed, they could be described as “true”, precisely because through being attuned to the environment, their works captured symbolically the truth manifested in our midst, that

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<sup>25</sup> Andrew Chrystall, “We need more imposters!” *Explorations in Media Ecology* 14 nos. 3-4 (2015): 221-236; “McLuhan’s dialogue with the Church,” *Explorations in Media Ecology* 13 no. 2 (2014): 123-138; “Project 69: Retrieving the ‘Spirit’ of McLuhan’s pedagogic enterprises” *International Journal of McLuhan Studies*. 2 (2012): 85-99; “After the global village” *Canadian Journal of Media Studies* 9 no.1 (2011): 1-32; *The new American vortex: Explorations of McLuhan* (Ph.D. Dissertation, Massey University, 2008).

In this article, I am following mostly the material emerging in the latest two articles that deal specifically with McLuhan’s appropriation of the Menippean stance (“We need more imposters!”) and with McLuhan’s commitment to the church (“McLuhan’s dialogue with the Church”). Both articles are available for download at Dr. Chrystall’s academia.edu personal page.

the masses, suffering from sensory overload and narcosis, were missing. In this sense, the true “artist” retrieved the ancient Hebrew role of the “prophet.”

McLuhan’s depiction of the true artist, however, resonates not just with the prophet of old, but also with the nuanced presentation of integral human development that Pope Francis presents in *Laudato si* Chapter 4 to counteract the “dominant technocratic paradigm.” Where McLuhan might, perhaps, differ from Francis (though of course, this is debatable) is on the extent of the dehumanizing effects of new technologies. For McLuhan, technology is dauntingly powerful, to the extent that resistance against its dehumanizing effects had to be perfectly calculated to destabilize and reconfigure just the right cultural processes. The church in particular could not afford to take technological effects lightly: not just because as a “literate” institution it was threatened under the new media conditions. Rather, because in its essence it exists to be the witness to authentic human flourishing, and therefore the last true bastion to safeguard against new dehumanizing (tribal) effects. To fulfill this purpose of defense and (re)formation under digital conditions, McLuhan reasoned that the church’s stance in the world had to be “counter-cultural”—or to be more exact, “counter-environmental.”<sup>26</sup>

We tend to associate a counter-cultural stance with the very first “type” presented in Niebuhr’s famous typological study, *Christ and Culture*,<sup>27</sup> of the church actively *against* culture. Contrasted by the opposite tendency of reducing the gospel to cultural categories, the classic exemplar of the counter-cultural stance is, of course, the African theologian Tertullian. But we tend to forget that Tertullian himself became a Montanist. Taken to an extreme, the stance of being *against culture* implies being fundamentally anti-Christian precisely because the Christian must always be *in the world* and not deny it. On the contrary, however, we also tend to forget that the stance of being *against* culture is fundamentally scriptural. The community of the Fourth Evangelist depicts most vividly this tension with the world. But, for Niebuhr, the Gospel of John does not only present Christ *against* culture. More significantly, the Fourth Gospel presents the quintessentially Christian posture of Christ *transforming* culture. Paradoxically, to be the yeast that allows the dough to rise, the Christian must be

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<sup>26</sup> In his article, “McLuhan’s dialogue with the Church,” Andrew Chrystall uses the McLuhan term “anti-environment.” However, McLuhan himself used “counter-environment” and “anti-environment” interchangeably. Because of the parallel with “counter-cultural”, I’m opting to use the first term.

<sup>27</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition (Torchbooks, 2001).

sufficiently detached from culture so as to properly discern the dynamic presence of God's spirit—and its contrary—already present there. Yet that detachment must be an interior spiritual detachment not a refusal to belong in the culture. The properly Christian stance is of not being *of* the world, even while one is in it.

This posture of being *against* culture while actively engaged to *transform* is also profoundly Ignatian and “Bergoglian.” It can also be captured succinctly through the McLuhan metaphor of “counter-environment” that reflects precisely the effects of the prophetic work of the “true artist.” In fact, what the true artist accomplishes is to create a “counter-environment” that wakes us up from the narcotic effects of our “environment” to see the processes in our culture anew. As we become aware of “what is going on”, we are also empowered to sow the seeds and harness all potential towards authentic cultural development.

The metaphor of “counter-environment” assumes a systemic grasp and critical evaluation of the “invisible” environment. It assumes that one can “read the signs of the times” transparently. McLuhan’s media ecological approach is, in part, just that. The “laws of media” that function a bit like Pope Francis’ four postulates (of which “time is greater than space is the first”) reflects that grammarian spirit of seeking to understand the inter-relation among all phenomena. Yet, as Andrew Chrystall argues, McLuhan’s inmost concern was never the interpretation of culture, but rather its transformation. McLuhan’s oeuvre might appear to be a “study of media” or even of media culture. But in reality, it is an attempt to resist “electric” media effects and to conserve the “individualizing” achievements of literate culture. As such, his work was mostly rhetorical—even if he was intensely aware that under electric conditions and an increasingly “tribal” environment, established “literate,” concept-based forms of persuasion (deliberative, forensic and epideictic rhetoric) were simply not enough. To awaken the tribe from their mass slumber, one had to resort to something more drastic to subvert technocratic effects. The focus could no longer be merely the ‘message’ but rather, the audience itself to be massaged into awakening. Indeed, for effective communication-transformation, one had to put on their audience, engage them in mimesis, and jolt them to experience reality anew. In other words, use the techniques of the oral bard—but in reverse.

In fact, on the tipping point between a hyper literate culture and an electric culture, McLuhan's problem was not unlike Plato's lament in *The Republic* against the hypnotizing effects on the populace of the bard. As Eric Havelock<sup>28</sup> argues, the music of the bard was the most sophisticated communication technology in an oral culture. The effect of the bard's education was to massage the group to share a common "tribal" identity. As a man of the theatre Plato understood this all too well, and as a "literate man", he also realized that as long as the bard existed, the ideal of "love of wisdom" achieved through the individual contemplation of abstract forms would be unattainable.

In fact, Plato never really succeeded to awaken the masses, but McLuhan, himself confronted by the new tribal drum of the radio and television screen, was determined to do otherwise. Thus, he spent years studying the literate output of those who, in his opinion, had succeeded in the quest of waking up their audience, especially under emerging electric conditions: true "artists" in the tradition of Menippean or Cynic satire. The lessons he learnt from—T.S. Eliot, James Joyce, Wyndham Lewis, Dostoevsky and even the Christian mystical tradition, in particular as embodied in the "holy fool"—he appropriated for himself to create an alter ego: the "trickster" or "learned fool" that was the persona "Marshall McLuhan." He did this, not just to protect himself and be effective in his role as communicator-educator-mimetic fool, but more significantly, as a Christian. Indeed, he believed that the properly Christian stance under "electric conditions" could only be that of the "subversive impostor," who like a Trojan horse, or carefully administered medicine, would attack the poisonous powers of technocracy, not directly or violently, but subtly, from within.

Following the lead of his father Marshall, Eric McLuhan wrote his doctoral work on one of the most difficult literary compositions of the twentieth century, the Irish novelist James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*.<sup>29</sup> Eric McLuhan's contribution was to interpret the *Wake* and its most obscure elements as Menippean satire. More recently, he published his research and insights on Menippean satire, tracing both its historical lineage to the Cynics (and Menippus himself) as well as pushing the agenda for a retrieval of robust Menippism in our times. More significantly, the book attempts to move forward the literary critical discussion on the "genre" beyond Northrop Frye's and even Mikhail

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<sup>28</sup> Eric A. Havelock, *Preface to Plato* (Harvard University Press, 1982).

<sup>29</sup> Published as: *The Role of Thunder in Finnegans Wake*, University of Toronto Press, 1997.

Bakhtin's more elaborate presentation in the twentieth century. While their descriptions of the genre might have been useful, both Frye and Bakhtin merely look at the *content* of the satire describing its features. Yet, as Eric McLuhan argues:

Given the multiplicity of tactics that Menippists have used over the centuries since Homer (who considerably antedates Menippus), descriptive approaches and formulas are too cumbersome to be workable. There is the further complication that many other authors over the centuries have employed 'Menippean' tactics, such as mixing verse and prose, without making their work satire.<sup>30</sup>

In other words, it is not describing the overt features of Menippean satire that will help us understand it. Rather, as Eric McLuhan argues, it is observing what it does. "All Menippean satires are "experiences first and foremost and cerebral last."<sup>31</sup> What defines them is not the method employed or the kind of content used (literary or otherwise), but the experience that they effect on the intended audience. That effect is "to restore balance to perception." In the tradition of Cynic philosophy (Menippus himself was a Cynic philosopher who lived in the third century BC), Menippean satirists:

combat delusion and illusion and pretentiousness and intellectual boneheadedness of every stripe. The Cynics declared war on robotism; their target was—and is—any robot, any somnambulist individual or group, that crossed their paths. They will swipe any technique, resort to any extreme, to jolt the target (the man-in-the-street reader) into wakefulness, to restore a sense of proportion, and to limber up the senses.<sup>32</sup>

It follows that "any work that produces the *effect* of a Menippean satire *is* a Menippean satire"<sup>33</sup> — even if the effect is created spontaneously and the communicator is not even aware that what they have achieved is in imitation of a long-held rhetorical tradition. That tradition can be described as having one aim: of balancing, by counter-acting, the tribalistic effects of "group-think," in order to allow the individual and his or her unique experience to re-emerge and be re-appropriated. Yet, while the effect of "jolting" the audience can be achieved spontaneously, there are still techniques that can be studied, imitated and employed to generate the effect intentionally. This is precisely what James Joyce accomplishes in *Finnegans Wake* or what H. Marshall McLuhan sought to do through the

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<sup>30</sup> Eric McLuhan, *Cynic Satire*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015, xvii.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, xvi.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, xv-xvi.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

creation of “Marshall McLuhan” the public persona. Eric McLuhan captures the essence of these techniques through pinpointing their one common feature: “violating rhetorical decorum.”

In the Greco-Roman literate tradition, *decorum* is what captured the rules—spoken or otherwise—of propriety. Elevated or serious communication (that is, important “content”) demanded a mode of communicating it (through the words used, the high style, the tone of voice and self-presentation of the communicator, the very grandeur of the setting etc.) that reflected the prominence of the communication. The “medium is the message” and you cannot expect a solemn message to be taken seriously if it is communicated through a crass or puerile medium.<sup>34</sup> Yet, mediating the message well—that is, creating the appropriate environment for its proper reception by the audience, required skill. This was, in fact, the essence of the rhetorician’s art:

Decorum meant the proper attuning of words and matter and occasion, regulated with regard to the effect desired. ... In rhetoric, the style of any expression or utterance had to be adjusted—usually done on the fly—to align the subject and situation with the sensibilities of the audience. ... The chief means of controlling these adjustments were style and delivery, the third and fifth divisions of rhetoric, both governed by decorum (appropriateness). The rules of decorum constitute the ancient rhetors’ theory of communication. *It was generally considered the chief virtue of style to be translucent and subliminal (even occasionally sublime). Always, style provides the ‘way of seeing’ the subject by organizing aright the perceptions of the audience. It would greatly impede efficacy were the style of an utterance inadvertently to become opaque, to intrude, as an object of attention between audience and subject.*<sup>35</sup>

Yet, that is precisely what the Menippean satirist—Cynic, prophet, holy fool or true artist—does to “jolt” the audience to awareness of how its sensibilities are being dulled by cultural expectations. Through violating decorum one breaks the subliminal effects of decorous communication, to enable the audience to become aware of how it is being “massaged” into becoming, precisely by dulling its perceptions and therefore suspending its critical functions. As the rules of

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<sup>34</sup> This is perhaps the aspect of “social media” that is most fascinating: there seems to be the (mistaken?) belief that online decorum can be suspended. Or rather, that because the media are still “new,” we are still in the process of developing norms of propriety for online interaction.

The question is, whether this is true—i.e. that offline decorum cannot be easily translatable to online contexts. Or whether the issue is, in fact, deeper still. Could it be that it is the very tribalistic and agonistic tendencies retrieved under electric/digital conditions that make it less likely to be “polite” online? Is it that becoming part of a tribe seems to give us permission to suspend our moral compass? Could it be that it is precisely this re-negotiation of personal identity that happens through social media that makes us more prone to connect “impersonally” (i.e. without honoring the “person”) and therefore violently?

<sup>35</sup> *Cynic Satire*, 61, my emphasis.

decorum are purposefully broken—through using low style for serious matters, through exaggeration, through bizarre aphorisms... or any other means that produce similar “Menippean” effects—the mesmerizing effect of established norms and culturally acceptable behaviors is broken. The audience—and its individual members—is forced to understand the new jarring experience. The very jarring experience and effort to seek understanding retrieves critical engagement and therefore subjectivity/individuality.<sup>36</sup>

In this sense, Menippean satire acts precisely as “medicine” against narcosis/robotism:

All satire has therapeutic effect: in Menippean satire, the reader himself (sic) is the patient. The therapy is administered in the process of his (sic) learning to read the satire, and has as its objective retuned and revived perception. The satire itself is the medicine, which the reader imbibes in the process of reading, that is, by accommodating himself (sic) to the demands of the style. Hence the irrelevance of the 'content' in the ordinary sense of the term (story, etc.): *the user is the content*.<sup>37</sup>

It is also worth noting how none of this is foreign to the Catholic tradition. Even Thomas Aquinas argued in much the same way when he described the role of the teacher—a role that he elevated even higher than that of the Greek sage. For Aquinas, “the wise can no longer rest in the contemplation of truth, but must perfect the art of transmitting it; they are henceforth bound, in the words of the Dominican motto, ‘to hand on to others what is contemplated.’”<sup>38</sup> This implies that “Teaching is an activity that aims solely at the good of the student’s intellect. The end (*finis operis*) of pedagogy—which is an art—is not found in the development of the instructor, but *in fostering the development of the student’s natural cognitive powers*.”<sup>39</sup> However—and this is key—initiating the process that would allow the student to flourish according to his or her inherent abilities implies correcting or “healing” what is impeding their development. For Aquinas, “One teaches a pupil much in the same way a doctor heals a patient; *both assist nature and succeed only to the extent that they aid a power or faculty in attaining its natural finality*. Since the rational soul is in ‘active potency’ to knowledge, *teaching should strengthen the intellect and remove impediments to its inherent*

<sup>36</sup> This is not unlike the effect of the Socratic method as ably described by Havelock in *Preface to Plato*,

<sup>37</sup> *Cynic Satire*, 149, my emphasis.

<sup>38</sup> Matthew Rose, “Can virtue be taught? Thomistic answers to a Socratic question” *The Thomist* 77 (2013): 229-60 (239).

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*, 246, my emphasis.



*directedness to truth.*”<sup>40</sup> Since all knowing begins with the right balance among the senses, healing perception—which is precisely what Menippean satirists seek to do—can be understood as a foremost pedagogical intent.

It follows that not only does the brilliance of the Menippean technique lie in the fact that it “works” (perceptually) by “not working” (conceptually). But also that in doing so it heals what impedes our natural human development allowing the “student”, or newfound “individual” in culture, to grow in their ability to reason rightly and thus to act virtuously. Since, in the Catholic tradition, grace perfect nature, it is therefore not surprising that in our times, even Pope Francis would be speaking of “initiating processes” that allow for authentic human development. What perhaps remains hidden—but, as I have been trying to suggest, is nonetheless at work in his teachings—is that the Pope is not merely teaching conceptually; he is, first and foremost *seeking to heal perceptually*.

The technique of the Menippean satirist and the “holy fool” is to become a “mirror;” or rather, to penetrate the system that imprisons the masses in “space,” and through raising oneself as “mirror”, to break the spell of narcosis to finally allow the mass to begin to *experience* themselves as unique individuals. In this sense, Menippean satire reflects Pope Francis’ own pedagogy as presented in the dictum “time is greater than space.” For the full pedagogical effect of Menippean satire is not immediate. After all, the holy fool is not an “immediate technical solution.” Rather, “jolting” the audience only allows it to wake up. But if the audience is truly awake, then it will feel compelled to undergo the long process of growth to reach its God-intended fulfillment.

Even more interestingly, as a technique of simultaneity—the fool wears and massages the audience to immediate transformation—Menippean satire can also be likened to what Eric McLuhan describes as the quintessential “Catholic theory of communication” encapsulated in its sacramental theology.<sup>41</sup> In the Catholic tradition, the sacraments have immediate effect, but in itself, it is an effect that initiates a crucial life-long process. Likewise, as one wakes up and recognizes technocratic effects, one will never see the world in the same way again. And yet, at the same time, one must re-learn to

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid, my emphasis.

<sup>41</sup> Eric McLuhan, *The Sensus Communis, Synesthesia, and the Soul: An Odyssey* (BPS Books, 2015), Appendix 7 “A Catholic Theory of Communication.”

see the world in its new nuanced subtleties. Once radical conversion happens, there is no turning back: it is a slow painful journey of breaking from the mass and its “certainties” to become one’s own true self.

Knowingly or not, Pope Francis—or, the persona of “Pope Francis”—has become for the world such a “holy fool” in the tradition of the Menippean satirist—and indeed of Christ himself, who as Rene Girard has persuasively argued, was the ultimate Holy Fool, who in his death and resurrection revealed to the world its imprisonment in systems of sin and violent scapegoating. With Pope Francis, the signs might be subtler, but his acting as a “counter-environment” is nonetheless perceptible everywhere through the effects he has on his audience, who in his role as Vicar of Christ, is the whole world. We admire him and he puzzles us. But—and this is key—the world cannot ignore him or tune him off. Pope Francis constantly breaks the “rules” of what we had learnt to associate with “papal decorum.” He constantly reinvents himself as true servant of Christ. He tweets with us, we take selfies with him, he shares his favorite images on *Instagram*, he even speaks in a language we can relate to, even if his mosaic-like message is not something we can quite grasp, since—and this is key, if he is a true imitator of Christ’s own “Menippean-like” teaching—its point is precisely *to grasp us*. For the guardians of the old status quo, of theological concepts and moral certainties, he is more shocking still, since he becomes the “arch-enemy”, the “impostor”, the one who most dramatically challenges our assumptions by embodying the very change we feel compelled to resist.

The Menippean effect of Pope Francis is exemplified—though certainly not limited to—his first postulate “time is greater than space.” Through the postulate, Pope Francis is not merely teaching anthropological or theological “concepts,” but effecting “perceptual” transformation, precisely to sow the seeds of new processes.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Sandro Magister, in his article “The Knots of the Pastor Bergoglio,” writes: “As pope he is above all a man of action, of pastoral action. Those who have known him up close and have been friends with him for years—like the twenty interviewed for the book by Alejandro Bermúdez—see in him *exceptional qualities of command and noteworthy strategical abilities. None of his actions, none of his words, is ever left to chance. And his priority is the pastoral care of the ‘people’ entrusted to him, who since he has become pope have been extended to the whole world*” (Oct 29, 2013, <http://chiesa.espresso.repubblica.it/articolo/1350632?eng=y>, my emphasis ).

In the great Menippean tradition, “time is greater than space” works by attacking our perceptual narcosis, and spiritual mediocrity. On one hand, it presents itself as a matter of course. “Of course, we have time... the entire future is opening in front of us...” But in so doing it ridicules our “rear-view mirror” concept of progress, and of how, in the name of progress, we are now in a whirlwind of senseless technocratically-driven change that is itself change-less. Progress has simply eaten, distorted and annihilated time and our authentic hope for flourishing. Likewise, through evoking a new mythical universe it makes us retune to the environment—the “space”—we have created as our “prison”.

Simultaneously, however, “time is greater than space” also bewilders the theologically literate, the guardians of the ecclesiastical status quo, who are tempted to be disheartened, or to lose hope in the face of our technocratic condition of violence. To the “theological establishment” the Pope also imbibes medicine: by elevating the joy of the gospel in a cultural situation that often seems bleak, in his wisdom, the Pope reveals to the faithful “of little faith” the contradiction of our assumptions. Dare we as church not only to *believe* truly, but to witness joyfully the “good news”, and thus to imitate Pope Francis by becoming a “counter-environment” for the world? Dare we be fully immersed *in* the world, and still consciously appropriate the identity of being only Christ’s?

### **Final thought**

“Simon son of John, do you love me?” ... “Tend my sheep” (Jn 21:16).

Jesus is asking you and me—Christians who claim to be his intimate friends—to tend his world. I believe that Marshall McLuhan was right in pointing out that the most strategic way we can tend sheep under digital conditions is to become a “counter-environment”: holy fools that the world might admire or mock—but who ultimately must be crucified in the world to rise again with Christ overjoyed because victorious over death.

I think it is also fair to argue that Pope Francis himself exemplifies this true Christian posture of the holy fool in his pastoral approach. I hope that his Menippean posture is clarified through my unpacking of the third sense of one of his many aphorisms and communicative events: “time is greater than space.” There is little doubt that, as Pope Francis is teaching, ecclesiology in our times must be a

three-fold “evangelization of witness of personal encounter (with Christ).” But as Pope Francis is also fully aware, the real pastoral issue for the church under digital conditions is not to spell out a “cerebral” theology, but to live authentically in a world that threatens to absorb—and annihilate—all differences.

Still, Pope Francis is offering to the world not simply the Christian hope of a lifelong pedagogy or the anthropological challenge of being shocked to a new birth, but the invitation to imitate his example and become, like him, a holy fool for Christ to bring about a renewed Christian consciousness in a digital world. Dare we embrace the challenge?