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## Theological Reflection on Digital Culture and Social Media

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# Theological Reflection on Digital Culture and Social Media

## Editor's Introduction

This issue of *COMMUNICATION RESEARCH TRENDS* both departs from its usual review of communication research and returns to a long-standing practice. The essays that make up this issue come largely from scholars of theology, not communication. And, rather than reviewing the trends in their particular areas in long-form essays or meta-analyses, the authors themselves sketch out trends for further work. Each of them participated in a 2013 conference sponsored by the Pontifical Council for Social Communication and the Communication Department of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops aimed at encouraging more research in and theological reflection on the growing world of social media and digital culture.

Almost from its beginnings, *COMMUNICATION RESEARCH TRENDS* has regularly featured reviews of research in media and religion. Founded by the Jesuit-sponsored Centre for the Study of Communication and Culture (CSCC), *TRENDS* sought to inform its readers—many with church affiliations in its early days—about how trends in communication research might affect the churches. By the early 1980s the CSCC responded to requests from Catholic and Protestant churches to promote research on theology and communication. For many years, it sponsored conferences on aspects of this dialogue and published papers (see Granfield, 1994; Rossi & Soukup, 1994; May, 1995; White, 1995; Soukup, 1996). In addition, for its first 10 years, *TRENDS* published supplements on religious communication and in the years following, issues devoted to aspects of religion and communication (Biernatzki, 1991; Biernatzki, 1995; Soukup, 2002; Sunwolf, 2004, Lindvall, 2004, 2005; Campbell, 2006; White, 2007; Sierra Gutiérrez, 2008; Cho, 2011; McAnany, 2012).

This issue continues that tradition but, as noted, looks at the work of those involved in theology as they wrestle with how the digital communication world affects the ways that people—scholars like themselves,

religious practitioners, and members of churches—think theologically. Following St. Anselm of Canterbury's motto—"faith seeking understanding"—as a basic definition of theology, theological scholars apply a variety of tools to this understanding; in addition, they look seriously at the contexts for both belief and understanding. In the 1960s, Ong (1969) had identified communication as a key context for theology and pointed out how the practices of communication had shaped Western theology. He predicted an increasing awareness of contemporary communication's impact on theology as well as enhanced networks of theologians, linked by improvements in communication technologies. Today Ong's expectations for theology's future have begun to appear with the digital tools that surround us.

Many have noted that the digital realm and the social media world it has reinvented have had and will continue to have a profound effect on all of us (summarized in the sources you will find listed in the essays and bibliographies in this issue). But churches in particular should ask how these changes in the communication world will affect believers, church authority, community, religious identity, ritual, and the practices of religion. The communication researchers whose work Campbell (2013) brings together, from whom these categories derive, have begun to provide research on these questions, but, as she notes, this is just a beginning. In addition to looking to the work of communication research, the churches themselves—and the theological scholars—should also ask about the impact of new communication practices on theology itself. Changing communication will have an effect with, at the very least, different people finding a voice online, a greater access to a greater variety of information, and shifting ways of processing that information. While the Church has traveled this road before—with, for example, the impact of the printing press, which increased the availability of theological source materi-

als, added to the number of those practicing theology, validated the reputations of thinkers through the successful sales of their books, and broadened the ways that theology took place (Eisenstein, 1979, pp. 303–450)—the digital world has vastly greater reach and potentially greater consequences. And so, contemporary theological scholars have a powerful motivation to attend to this digital revolution.

To give a sense of their ongoing conversations, we publish here some of the papers or excerpts from papers that illustrate the range of topics and approaches. While space considerations prevent publication of all of the papers, these provide a good introduction to the ideas and conversations among theological scholars who have begun to regularly take communication into account, either as an object of theological reflection or as a factor that influences people's understanding of faith. Despite their differences in starting point or focus, each of the papers points to effects of social media on the process and practice of theology.

In the first essay, Matthias Scharer applies his ongoing research in “the theological culture” of Communicative Theology to digital communication. Grounded in interpersonal and group communication, Communicative Theology explores the process of theology in its most human form. Scharer asks what happens as people change their means of interacting. Obviously, the digital world makes a difference, but what kind of a difference is that for theology?

Mary Hess approaches the question from another starting point: that of what she terms the new culture of learning. Digital culture will affect communities of faith by changing how people learn. Learning in this new culture describes not only what occurs in a grammar school, high school, or university classroom, but also what occurs at the parish and family levels and at the personal individual level as people reflect on their faith. She structures her account as a dialogue with Douglas Thomas and John Seeley Brown's 2011 book, *A New Culture of Learning: Cultivating the Imagination for a World of Constant Change*. In his studies of Renaissance education, Ong (1958) had pointed out how an earlier education reform changed how people think, as well as the kinds of topics they chose to think about. Hess' paper similarly suggests that how people learn theology will have an impact on the kinds of theology emerging in the churches.

Film remains one of the most written about sites of encounter between faith and culture—and an area whose emphasis on the image and on storytelling has

shaped digital culture. Sheila Nayar, a film scholar, challenges some of the accepted theory of the “religious” film by applying a media ecology methodology of closely examining the qualities of the medium of film and the communication preparations of the audiences. In her view, the oral inflection of many religious films shapes their theology and the ways in which people incorporate the experience of film into their lives. Her argument applies to religious discourse beyond film and suggests a different starting point for digital culture. In this, her work offers theologians new points for reflection.

José Galvan also interrogates the tradition of film and religion, but from the perspective of theological practice. Film, for him, remains a privileged cultural point of contact, and it offers theology starting points rooted not in the transcendental philosophical categories of “the good” or “the true,” but in “the beautiful.” While contemporary culture may struggle with abstract issues of truth, it resonates, he argues, with beauty. And so, Galvan offers 10 starting points for a theological conversation with film. In this case, too, the theological conversation with film will have relevance for the larger questions of how theology might best interact with digital culture.

Ecclesiology, or the study of the Church, forms another theological discipline affected by the social practices of the digital world. The role and the exercise of authority emerge as key elements in this discussion. Antonio Spadaro, S.J., suggests parallels between a Christian vision and “hacker culture.” Like Galvan, he suggests beauty as a potential common point. But, he also draws from hacker culture to raise the issue of authority. For churches and communities of faith, which tend to cultivate centralized, hierarchical models of authority, the Internet presents a powerful challenge in its open systems, non-hierarchical, decentralized idea of authority. If such a model defines the digital and social media worlds where people spend more and more of their time, how will those people react to more traditional models of the authority? Ultimately, this becomes both an ethical issue and a theological one for Christianity.

Others at the meeting offered examples of how people actually “do theology” in a digital culture. Those participating in such theological enterprises encompass people well outside of academia or church hierarchy. But that does not make their theological experience without meaning. One representative of these papers on “parish theology” comes from Eileen

Crowley who proposes ways that the visual culture promoted by many online sites can provide material for a “*visio divina*” (as a parallel to the monastic tradition of *lectio divina*). She offers here an introduction to a course on photography as a spiritual practice and suggests ways in which this practice can enrich the daily theological reflections at the parish level. Other papers considered digital storytelling in religious education or the appreciation of religious art.

#### *About the contributors*

Matthias Scharer, from the University of Innsbruck in Austria, teaches and conducts research at the theology faculty which is part of the public university. He has served as a professor of catechetics, religious education, and didactics of religion since 1996.

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Fr. Antonio Spadaro, S.J., is the editor in chief at *La Civiltà Cattolica*; he holds a doctorate in theology from the Pontificia Università Gregoriana and convenes the “Cyber-Theologia” web site. His recent publications include *Cyberteologia. Pensare il cristianesimo al tempo della rete* (Milano, Vita e Pensiero, 2012) and *Web 2.0 Reti di relazione* (Milano, Paoline, 2010).

Eileen Crowley is an associate professor of liturgy and worship at the Catholic Theological Union in Chicago.

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# Living Communication in a Digital Media Context: Meanings (Criteria) from the Perspective of Communicative Theology

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## *Introduction*

My main perspective in research and teaching is “the theological culture” of Communicative Theology [CT], as the subtitle of the American version of the first volume of the series on communicative theology called this approach (Scharer & Hilberath, 2008). This essay continues work by Hilberath (2012) and Hess (2010). In her article Hess assumes that CT could be a “key element” in a theological understanding of digital media communication. By the end of this essay I hope you will see the contribution of CT to a human understanding of digital communication in Web 2.0. This essay will proceed in four steps:

- First, a very brief introduction in CT related to digital media communication,
- Secondly, clarification of the concept of “living communication” and its original context,
- Followed by situating the digital media world as an ambivalent context (Globe) in late modern communication,
- And finally as a summary some criteria for human use of digital media in the context of CT.

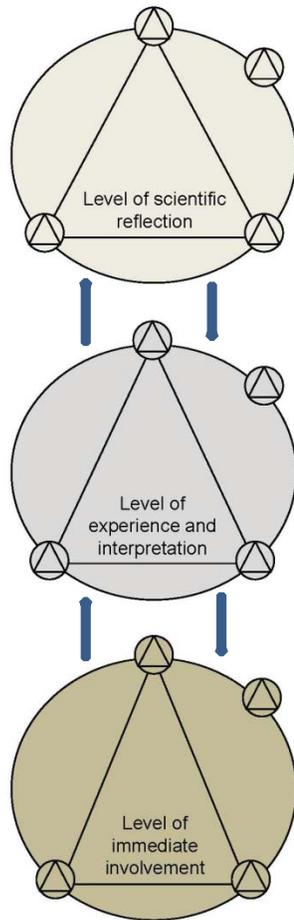
### *1. Brief introduction to CT in relation to digital media communication*

One of the axioms of CT is to be attentive to experiences of people in their everyday communication. I shall do so by being aware of digital-media experiences of my five and a half year-old granddaughter, Catherine. My granddaughter has attended kindergarten. She is currently making her first autodidactic attempts at writing words and reading. She communicates quite naturally through digital media. These are widely available in her parents’ house. Catherine Skypes with her aunt in Colombia. She surfs for Wonderland movies on the Internet and YouTube. She

makes use of relevant apps on the iPhone, by recognizing the icons. In this, she succeeds much faster and naturally than myself, her 67 year-old grandfather. According to Prenski, Catherine is one of the “digital natives” while I am a “digital immigrant” (2001a, 2001b). The way in which my granddaughter communicates digitally and how I practice it does not differ mainly in scale, but in quality. Although Prenski’s distinction between digital natives and digital immigrants is rather simplistic, for Catherine digital media is a natural and not a newly added part of her communication world. The “literacy” in Catherine’s world reality is experienced initially through images and not through reading and writing.

One could ask the question, what is the reason to start a presentation on digital media communication with an example of a five-year old child and her grandfather? The reason is due to the communicative-theological approach. In a communicative culture of theologizing we oscillate between the level of immediate involvement, the level of experience and primary interpretation, and the level of scientific reflection, as Figure 1 on page 7 illustrates.

On the level of experience and interpretation one is conscious that for some children in the northern parts of the world, the everyday use of digital media is naturally experienced before or parallel to learning the Scriptures. We are aware that Catherine is growing up in a relatively well-off family and within a fully equipped social media family home, which for a large part of children in the world, is not the case. The obvious use of digital media by my five-year-old granddaughter raises awareness that the impact of inter-media communication at the age of five in any case is different from the people who do not grow naturally in the context of the world of the Internet—namely the digital immigrants.



**Figure 1**

Approaching this as a Practical Theologian on the level of reflective research I question the impact of new technical tools on human communication. My specific competence is not that of a media researcher. I instead try to learn and gain knowledge from communication and media research. If one of my doctoral students undertakes empirical research in the field of digital media communication, she/he has to respect both the empirical and media specific guidelines as well as the theological. For studies in the field of media it is important to mention that the theological perspective is not well founded in a specific field of media use in a church or religious context. Everything relevant to living with respect to salvation in the face of de facto disastrous conditions challenges the theological questions.

Learning from communication and media research in the perspective of religious studies and sociology of knowledge perspective I refer to Krüger

(2012) *The Media Religion*. In this extensive study Krüger works out that religion-related Internet research is characterized as normative. But for him “great sociopolitical or theoretical metaphors and trend diagnoses such as liberty and equality are questionable, more likely to propagate ideals rather than to describe real conditions per se.” It could be that also Pope Benedict XVI followed such a trend diagnosis when he noted in a statement on the 43rd World Communication Day.

While the speed with which the new technologies have evolved in terms of their efficiency and reliability is rightly a source of wonder, their popularity with users should not surprise us, as they respond to a fundamental desire of people to communicate and to relate to each other. This desire for communication and friendship is rooted in our very nature as human beings and cannot be adequately understood as a response to technical innovations. In the light of the biblical message, it should be seen primarily as a reflection of our participation in the communicative and unifying Love of God, who desires to make of all humanity one family. When we find ourselves drawn towards other people, when we want to know more about them and make ourselves known to them, we are responding to God’s call—a call that is imprinted in our nature as beings created in the image and likeness of God, the God of communication and communion. (2013, ¶3)

The relatively undifferentiated view of Pope Benedict XVI on the digital arena is not surprising if one refers to Cardinal Ratzinger’s speech on catechesis in France in 1983. There he attacks exegesis and also catechetics massively. The catechetics / religious education he mainly attacks because it has led to a “hypertrophy” of the method over the content of faith. Ratzinger cannot recognize that the process, means, and medium of communication must undergo a theological critique as well as the “truth of faith” related to the dogmatic content (Ratzinger, 1983).

Hess (2010) commends the statement of the Pope: “The Pope’s reminder of the essentially communicative nature of our relationship with God, and indeed of God within Godself, is also a key element of a river within theology that is being called “communicative theology.” I am very grateful to Hess for developing CT with Web 2.0. She identifies three “key elements of religious identity construction, of religious formation, which are changing in the wake of the impact of new

digital tools: authority, authenticity, agency". In this essay I ask—as a consequence of Krüger's study—what the CT-Perspective could contribute to a differentiated view of digital media communication.

The recent studies of Krüger suggest we have to move beyond the general paradigms such as McLuhan and the Toronto School of Communication who postulated: "The medium is the message." "The talk of the 'Internet' as one medium with a specific effect or message is not just made" (Krüger, 2012, p. 443). The development of the very different meanings of digital communications cannot generally happen, but only to the specific life-world context of individual users. On this basis, we ask: How capable is the perspective of CT with its concentration on communicative processes in highlighting the very different meanings of digital media communications in the specific life-word context of individual users? Can we find criteria?

## 2. "Living Communication" in Theme Centered Interaction (TCI) and Communicative Theology (CT)

"Communicative theology is theology done in and from a living process of communication" (Scharer & Hilberath, 2003, p. 15). This is the very first sentence in our first volume on CT. When we speak about "living processes" we address living communication processes. With the term "living communication" we relate to Cohn's concept of "living learning," which is in paradox with "dead learning." Ruth Cohn, born in 1912 in Berlin, emigrated from the Nazi terror initially to Switzerland, and then to the U.S. Her understanding of "living learning" is the self-responsible step of the seduction of inhumanity. "Dead learning" takes a very limited or often just a sham communication: "something," a task, a learning object, a content, a piece of tradition is a quasi-neutral object, as matters without personal reference without considering the dynamics in (learning) groups and independent of contexts in which learning processes will communicate. "Dead learning" Cohn suspects mainly occurs at universities and schools. Dry knowledge as an anonymous product, isolated from its background, without personal reference, far from any real social context and without anthropological and ethical basis, is characteristic of dead learning. Not only in learning but in any human communication, single-line transfer distinguishes it from the multi-dimensional information and increasingly intimate human communication. Therefore, it makes sense not only to speak of living and dead learning, but

equally to distinguish "living communication" from "dead communication" (Hilberath & Scharer, 2012, pp. 63–141).

With this differentiation, communication is not regarded simply as a neutral interpersonal phenomenon, which can be operated by any medium. In "living communication" criteria with regard to the meaning of communication are important. As such, we may also find it in other relevant communication theories like Habermas' theory of communicative action (1985). Habermas makes a distinction between instrumental and strategic action, on the one hand, and communicative action, on the other. They are distinguished from each other by the type of rationality and the goal to which each lays claim: In the first case, it is a matter of instrumental decree; in the second, of communicative understanding. According to Habermas the systematic theologian Peter Hünemann speaks of communicative acts that every group needs for its own preservation:

Among the many of communicative actions are a few that are constitutive for a particular group. In and through the performance of these actions the group comes into being and preserves itself. Without these communicative actions there would be no group. These communicative actions become metaphors of living together. It is only through these metaphors that such a form of live can come into being. Only in an ever-renewed acting out of this metaphor of life does it continue to exist. (1977, p. 55).

In recent years we have carried out extensive research on Buber's (1978, 1997), Levinas' (1986), and Ricoeur's (2006) perspectives on communication, which, unfortunately, can't be presented in this short essay. However, to summarize, in all these perspectives we found anthropological, ethical, philosophical, and theological foundations for the understanding of communication, which could be also relevant for the meaning of communication with new communication technologies. In new research on social media we can also see a trend in anthropological questions like in Horst and Miller (2012). Here someone might object that digital media culture is following other codes such as those of interpersonal speech and alphabetic writing. In social media communication, cultural forms of information processing are more prominent than communication performance (see Hartmann, 2008, p. 102). But is this not just therein a problem for social media communication, which is deeply involved in the daily lives of people? How can we bring together interpersonal commu-

nication, alphabetic writing and digital communications that determine the daily lives of more and more people?

We therefore return to the understanding of living communication in TCI and summarize it: TCI combines an anthropological reasoned, values-based approach of human communication with the know-how to design practical communication processes with the intention of living learning. It includes the formal elements or dimensions which characterize any linguistic communication (see Breuer, 1974).

- The I of each and every participant as an autonomous-interdependent subject.
- The WE expressing the dynamics of groups/communities; it has not only instrumental significance.
- The IT as the thing or concern around which the interaction turns.
- The Globe representing the spatio-temporal and the social context, which encloses the first three dimensions and which is implicitly present in every process. Mode and media of communication as a globe become visible in terms of their overall relationship.

Cohn represents the interconnection of these dimensions by way of an equilateral triangle within a sphere (see Figure 2). This figure expresses not only that the dimensions belong together but also that they are of equal value. The symmetry and dynamic balance of all dimensions is the hallmark of TCI-Communication. TCI is neither a typical therapeutic approach dealing with the inner psychological problems of people, nor is it a purely group-dynamic process focusing only on what happens inside the group. Theme centering means that the “matter” of interaction is assigned the highest value. Cohn never tires of maintaining the inseparable interdependence between human and spiritual values in her specific methodological approach. Thus, she has always resisted attempts to reduce TCI to a mere technique for directing group processes, as TCI is sometimes used in Europe. (The new slogan to implement TCI is: “The Art of Leading.”) The value reference is most clearly expressed in the “axioms” of TCI, which formulate the “irreducible” of the TCI approach and contain “elements of faith” (Cohen, 1974, p. 150)

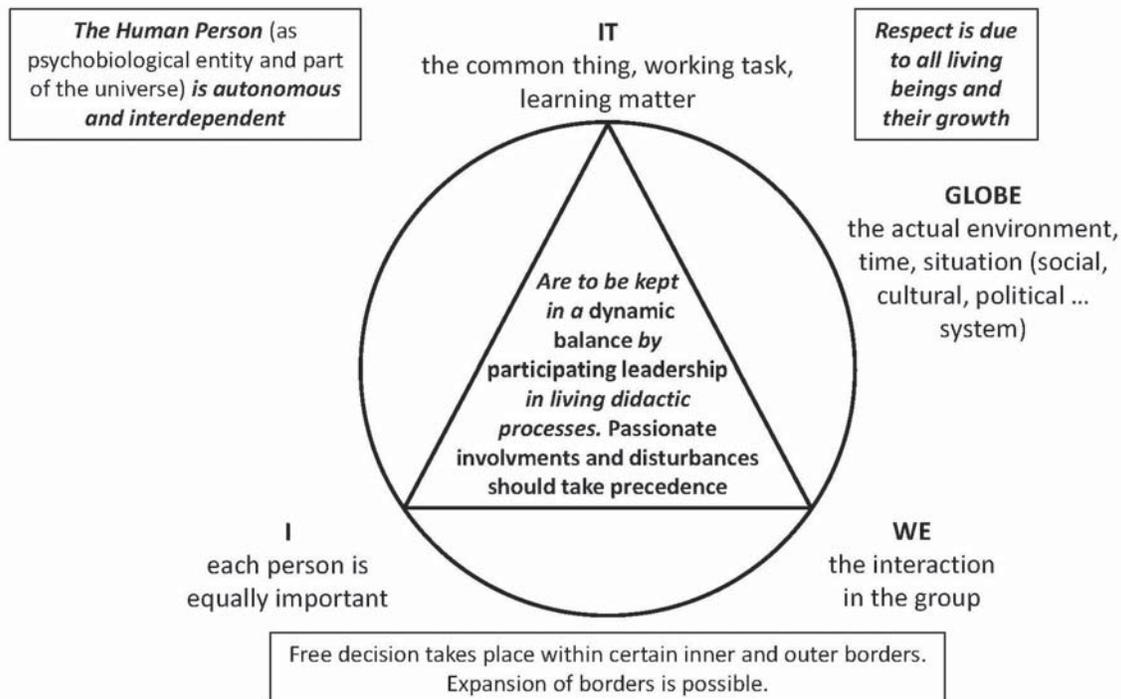


Figure 2

On the basis of TCI the usual formal aspects of communication (who communicates what, where, how, why—Breuer, 1974) have to be expanded on three more dimensions:

- On which anthropological and ethical basis (with what attitude),
- with which focus
- in which interaction ratio

is this communicated?

### 3. *The digital media cultures as an ambivalent context (Globe) in late modern communication*

Krüger (2012) has worked out how powerful simplistic interpretations of patterns of digital media are. This applies especially to the religious and theological area. “Both the hopes of personal self-folding . . . as well as the social utopias of the Internet—from Teilhard de Chardin’s noosphere, Whitehead’s process philosophy, and Lovelock’s Gaia theory, to the exegesis of Cobb and Pesce—are reflected in religious interpretation patterns as well as in the knowledge-guiding paradigms in religious studies or theology media research” (pp. 443–444).

How can we escape such simplistic interpretations? In the perspective of TCI and CT digital media cultures have become an essential part of the late modern Globe, in which people communicate. First we have to accept that this Globe is ambivalent. Second, in the ambivalence of late-modern communication context a distinction can be helpful, namely by relativity and absoluteness of human communication. The hope that, in the global virtual communication space, the liberation of humankind from conditional religious conflicts happens and leads to a world and trans-cultural domination-free communication, proves precarious after 9/11: On the one hand, those economic and cultural areas of the North, which stimulate the hope of limitless communication, aggressively eliminate the “unconnected” from their fair share of world resources and impose on them the situation of virtual illiteracy; on the other hand, terrorist systems use the virtual space to operate on a worldwide level.

The same ambivalence towards digital communication shows up extremely on the personal level. The well-known neuroscientist Manfred Spitzer (2012) warns of the effects of premature contact of children with digital media. Spitzer summarizes: “Digital media means that we use our brains less, or there is a reduction of efficiency over time. In young people, they also hinder the formation of the brain, so mental performance from the outset is under the possible level. This affects

not only our thinking, but also our will, our emotions, and especially our social behavior” (p. 322). Mayer-Schönberger (2013) complains that in the chaotic flood of data we miss the filter for the important.

In view of the ambiguous nature of digital media communication, this will help neither the theological position that see them “primarily as a reflection of our participation in the communicative and unifying Love of God, who desires to make of all humanity one family” (Hess, 2010, p. 141) yet positions what they condemn. The message of Pope Benedict XVI for the 47th World Communication Day sounds already very optimistic, but much more cautious in respect to ambivalence of digital media communication and social networks:

These spaces, when engaged in a wise and balanced way, help to foster forms of dialogue and debate which, if conducted respectfully and with concern for privacy, responsibility, and truthfulness, can reinforce the bonds of unity between individuals and effectively promote the harmony of the human family. The exchange of information can become true communication, links ripen into friendships, and connections facilitate communion. If the networks are called to realize this great potential, the people involved in them must make an effort to be authentic since, in these spaces, it is not only ideas and information that are shared, but ultimately our very selves. (2013, ¶2)

Digital media use should be replaced in the concrete life-world context of the individual user, which is constantly changing, Krüger works out. The concept of Cohn, which we are absorbing critically in CT, can help us to keep the variety of meanings of media communication open and not to be restricted by a generalized interpretation.

If we see social media as part of the Globe, it applies to other communication media such as reading and writing with digital media also being connected in the future. Kittler writes “it is . . . as one asleep on his novel and the next morning wakes up as illiterate among so many technical media; such dreams or nightmares probably belong rather to the effects of those deceptively linear historiography McLuhan backdated to Gutenberg’s invention of printing” (1988, p. 289). If we take Catherine’s experience as an example, we can see how digital media and reading and writing culture in the world of digital alphabets are mixed. This mix can lead children to Digital Dementia (Spitzer, 2012) if the use becomes unbalanced away from face to face

communication and these communicative actions becoming metaphors of living together. Because, as Hünemann said, “It is only through these metaphors that such a form of life can come into being” (1977, p. 55). But even brain researchers, who counter digital communications with extreme caution, say, “Those who have already developed their social skills on conventional routes (offline, face to face) will . . . take little damage through social networks and use them as phone, fax, or e-mail” (Spitzer, 2012, p. 128).

We get the specific insight of what it means to connect digital media with the Globe perspective by highlighting the theological significance of the Globe as we do in CT. Thinking and speaking of God does not take place in a void. It is unavoidably linked to the historical, socio-cultural, and ecclesial context. We have to accept that, in certain periods of church history, especially in Neo-Scholastic theology, one tried to transmit the theologically reflected faith of the church as a ready-made package. Now contextually this is seen to be part and parcel of any theology worthy of the name. What and how one speaks about and to God is unavoidably subject to historicity and context. Real theological work entails wrapping the (academic) discourse about God in a way of thinking and a language that is and remains linked to the context. The “world” as “Globe” is not merely something presupposed; it is also a task to be performed. “If you don’t attend to the Globe, you will devoured by it,” Cohn said. From a theological point of view, digital media communication is a “sign of the times.” If we accept or if we avoid digital media communication, we have to see it in the light of the Gospel. And this light according to insights of human research brings meaning and criteria for a human understanding of new media communication in the context of our communication world as an ever renewed acting out of the metaphor of life.

#### 4. *Meanings (Criteria) for human use of digital media within the perspective of TCI and CT—A summary*

To conclude, there will follow a reflection from the perspective of CT and TCI on human use of digital media communication.

1. Ruth C. Cohn’s distinction between “Dead Learning” characterized by absolute one of the four aspects of the triangle in the circle, mostly the IT, and “Living Learning” which takes all four Factors/Dimensions as equally important and in differentiating interaction, is also true for the distinc-

tion of living and dead communication: The transfer of huge amounts of unstructured data without reference to the individual and his or her community cannot be described as Living Communication.

2. The attention on the Dynamic Balance of the triangle in the circle doesn’t guarantee living communication automatically. Even TCI could work like a “match in a haystack” if you don’t pay attention to anthropological, ethical, and political axioms like: Every human person is autonomous and interdependent. Respect is due to all living beings and their growth. Free decisions take place within certain inner and outer borders; expansion of borders is possible. The use of techniques or tools in communication without anthropological, ethical, and political reflections could work against the intention that communicative actions by digital media also become metaphors of living together.

3. What facilitates or inhibits digital communication, the autonomous-interdependent subjectness of the users? We have to ask questions like these:

- How do we facilitate or inhibit the use of digital media flowing in transition between digital and direct communication?
- How appropriate is the digital communication to the intimacy of the topic about which it is communicated? Themes, formulated like in TCI, lead to a “senses” on “generative themes” with a big existential impact.
- How can the media communication smooth the flow between a virtual WE and an immediate WE?
- How generative or clichéd are the topics that will be communicated digitally?
- How far is freedom and responsibility encouraged?
- To what extent does digital communication help or hinder a global domination-free speech community as an ideal communicative action?

4. Globalized digital communication as a main aspect of Social Context and World Experience becomes an important “sign of the times” that we have to take seriously according to *Gaudium et Spes*. From this point of view we can’t understand the Gospel without interpreting and differentiating globalized Communication. Its ambivalence, its tendency to a totalitarian character of communication like a “small God” contradicts God’s mystery as well as God’s absolutely free self-revelation in creation, history and incarnation. The dictum of my colleague

Jozéf Niewiadomski, “*extra media nulla salus*” in reference to “*extra ekklesia nulla salus*” makes us aware that a religious force may be replaced through some media. It could be that the secular force with its technical possibilities is much more sublime and therefore dangerous.

5. When even Pope Benedict XVI himself invited the youth to approach YouCat with passion and perseverance, to “remain in dialogue” with the faith by speaking with friends, forming study networks, and exchanging ideas on the Internet, it seems that even the Pope forgot the ambivalent character of the medium and that not every object of faith is accessible to everyone at every given time. The transmission of faith needs the intimate space of encounter in family, group, or community.

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# A New Culture of Learning: Implications of Digital Culture for Communities of Faith

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“A new culture of learning”—a bold title for an essay of this sort, but one borrowed from the title of a book published by two luminaries who work in the field of learning more generally, Douglas Thomas and John Seely Brown (2011). Yet I think this title aptly captures what we can see all around us, if we look closely, and thus I feel free to borrow it. There are shifts underway in how learning happens in the 21st century. We, as educators working in Catholic communities, in a globalized world, need to be attentive to those shifts if we want to design learning experiences that are effective and constructive in that midst of that shift.

This essay will begin by laying out the elements of this new culture of learning, drawing heavily on the work of those researchers connected with the MacArthur Foundation’s “new digital literacies” projects, and which Thomas and Brown so well summarize, particularly Mizuko (2009) and Jenkins (2006). The overall project is accessible via the web at <http://tinyurl.com/3vw6xn>. I will then contextualize that work more fully in Catholic contexts and make a few tentative proposals for our continued development.

Before I go any further, I need to be clear about my own situatedness. I am a Roman Catholic layperson who teaches in an Evangelical Lutheran Church in America [ELCA] seminary in the United States. Each of those labels already narrows and constrains the lenses I bring to bear on this situation. At the same time, I have been working in the fields of media education and religious education for more than 20 years, and during that time have traveled to multiple contexts around the world learning from people who are studying the intersections of media, religion, and digital cultures. From that point of view I hope to offer useful “hooks” into the relevant literatures and a frame for considering how these shifts that are being identified might emerge in other contexts and teaching environments. Please understand that what I offer here is meant to stimulate

discussion and experimentation, and is not intended to be definitive.

What is this “new culture of learning” we hear about? It is crucial to the argument that Thomas and Seely Brown are making to grasp that learning happens not simply on an explicit or intentional level, but also at the level of the implicit, or incidental, and even ultimately, the null, or taboo, levels. They begin their observations by using the metaphors of the information network, and the petri dish. That is, they point to the potentially limitless nature of the current information environment and argue that in order to support learning in such a space educators must design appropriately bounded spaces. Here the metaphor of the petri dish is particularly evocative because it speaks to the deliberately constructed nature of a biological culture, which necessitates creating an environment upon which the specific organism one hopes to grow depends for development; and the challenge of keeping such an environment, such a “culture,” appropriately rich and yet clearly bounded.

As Thomas and Brown point out, this culture is not about:

unchecked access to information and unbridled passion, however. Left to their own devices, there is no telling what students will do. If you give them a resource like the Internet and ask them to follow their passion, they will probably meander around finding bits and pieces of information that move them from topic to topic—and produce a very haphazard result. (p. 81)

As Thomas and Brown—and frankly, most other people who are attending to the challenges of teaching and learning with digital tools—note, we can no longer work in this environment, we can not adequately create such “petri dishes” if our approaches are teaching-based; instead they must be learning-based. The distinction Thomas and Brown make is increasingly common not only in the worlds of digital learning, online and distributed technologies, and so on, but also deep

within a variety of accrediting organizations and other institutions dedicated to assessing and supporting learning. A “teaching-based” approach assumes a stable base of information to be shared “about” the world, whereas a “learning-based” approach is focused on learning “through” engagement with the world (p. 37).

In my own context, for example, the recent shifts in the standards of the Association of Theological Schools are in precisely this direction. The focus of the ATS accreditation process requires schools seeking that accreditation to articulate clearly their learning outcomes, not simply at the level of individual student learning objectives in specific courses, but at the broader level of entire degree programs and the implicit as well as explicit learning of an institution. (See ATS, 2011, for details.)

So the first shift in a new culture of learning is an intentional shift from “teaching-based” to “learning-based” approaches. The second shift has to do with moving away from the debates over the “private and the public” which have so captivated our attention in regards to social media in particular, and to think about and embed in learning design, the “personal and the collective.” Thomas and Brown are particularly alert to the kinds of learning that are taking place in various gaming structures, especially those with social and participatory elements to their design. The example they explore at length is that of World of Warcraft. In that environment (and the other games like it), unlike in our more typical definition of community, people do not learn in order to belong but rather participate in order to learn.

Pause for a moment to think about that shift.

Collectives are not, as Thomas and Brown note, “simply new forms of public spaces.” Rather, “they are built and structured around participation and therefore carry a different sense of investment for those who engage in them. Collectives, unlike the larger notion of the public, are both contextual and situated, particularly with regard to engaging in specific actions” (p. 56).

Why does this matter? If we pick up on the implicit curriculum at work in these places, if we pay attention to what Thomas and Brown highlight as the “tacit” knowing that is occurring, we will recognize that an increasingly large number of people are “learning how to learn” in ways that stress their own passion, interest, and agency. Picking up on the work of Polanyi and others, Thomas and Brown note that tacit knowing is the kind of knowing that builds from constantly

changing experiences. Explicit knowing, on the other hand, tends to be that which has become stable and fixed over time. Here again you can pick up on the need for a shift from “teaching about” the world, to “learning through engagement with” the world. In a context in which there is a large body of fixed and stable knowledge, “teaching about” might be both functional and adequate. In a world, however, in which what constitutes “knowing” is constantly changing, rarely fixed, and deeply embedded in personal agency and experience, in that kind of world, one must “learn through engagement.” That is, we learn by doing, watching, experiencing.

In such a world the third element of the shift noted by Thomas and Brown is that of a move away from asking “what do we know?” to “what are the things we don’t know, and what can we ask about them?” (p. 83). This is a practice particularly evident in the midst of various gaming environments, where often the primary objective in a given “room” or “area” of a game is to explore the space and figure out what resources exist there, what surprises can be tapped, and so on.

Thomas and Brown begin to talk, in this part of their argument, about practices of “indwelling.” I imagine that many of us in the Catholic community might find our ears perking up at this word. Thomas and Brown define “indwelling” as the “set of practices we use and develop to find and make connections among the tacit dimensions of things. It is the set of experiences from which we are able to develop our hunches and sense of intuition” (p. 85). The more people play certain kinds of video games, for instance, the more they hone their ability to pick up on clues that lead to unlocking new resources, and the more they experiment with what they can “do” in a given place. Incidentally, there is much to be made in this argument about the importance of “place,” of situatedness and location, yet another resonance with contemporary theological education.

Thus far, there are three elements of the shift in the new culture of learning: (1) a move from “teaching-based” to “learning-based” approaches; (2) a shift from the public and private, to the personal and collective; and (3) a focus on tacit knowing which grows from inquiry-led approaches.

Perhaps the clearest statement Thomas and Brown make, is to note that “the new culture of learning is about the kind of tension that develops when students with an interest or passion they want to explore

are faced with a set of constraints that allow them to act only within given boundaries” (p. 81).

Let me turn, now, to explore some of the possible implications for Catholic communities. First, I think we need to ask: Is any of this really all that new? Formation in collectives that draws deeply on personal experience and which is alert to tacit knowing could be one way of describing the work of religious communities, such as the “collectives” of the School Sisters of Notre Dame or the Jesuits, to mention only two of the hundreds of religious orders that exist.

This culture of learning may be breaking down in congregational settings, where a community’s ability to socialize their young, let alone to initiate and form new members, was often dependent upon a larger cultural surround which is now often multi-faith in ways rarely appreciated in previous times. It may simply be, as Davidson (2011) notes, that our practices of attention have been disrupted enough by these emerging digital technologies to enable us to “see” what has indeed been going on all around us.

To return to Thomas and Brown’s definition, “the new culture of learning is about the kind of tension that develops when students with an interest or passion they want to explore are faced with a set of constraints that allow them to act only within given boundaries” (p. 81).

I want to ask a specifically theological question about this definition, and to do so I’ll draw on a famous quote of Frederick Buechner’s, who wrote of “vocation” being where “your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet” (1973, p. 95). Perhaps one of the most challenging aspects of the world we are moving into, at least for those of us who live within Christian communities—and I would venture to guess, rather than to assert, that there are similarities to be found in other faith communities—is that Christians believe human being to be something that is both a gift from God, and deeply broken. That is, to paraphrase a common assertion from the Lutheran seminary where I teach, we are “simultaneously saint and sinner.”

Thus when I consider Thomas and Brown’s work on a “new culture of learning,” I inevitably want to ask where that definition allows us to engage the brokenness, the sinfulness of human being. Where might we speak of God’s agency, not simply human agency? What draws us to faith in the midst of pain? I think that one of the potentially most difficult challenges posed by this “new culture of learning” to communities of faith has to do with the deep affirmation we carry that we are not alone, we are not isolated beings complete

in ourselves. It is not up to human beings, of our own individual accord, to control the world. We are not, in ourselves, singularly creative. We participate in creation, we participate in making the world whole, but we do not do this alone. To quote *Gaudium et Spes*, “The Word of God, through whom all things were made, became man and dwelt among us. . . . He reveals to us that ‘God is love’ and at the same time teaches that . . . the effort to establish a universal communion will not be in vain” (No. 38).

I think part of the very real and authentic skepticism that religious educators have brought to moving faith formation into digitally mediated, online spaces is that we recognize—although rarely publicly acknowledge—how difficult, limited, and sinful the learning can be even in those environments we believe we have shaped most carefully. Given our concerns about the brokenness of our current institutions, about the wounding of the world through global capitalist exploitation, about the breakdown in relationship we see all around us, it is not surprising that we would ask serious questions about moving the already difficult process of theological education into spaces that would appear to attenuate our relationality. As Pope Benedict 16th noted in his message for the 45th World Communications Day:

The new technologies allow people to meet each other beyond the confines of space and of their own culture, creating in this way an entirely new world of potential friendships. This is a great opportunity, but it also requires greater attention to and awareness of possible risks. Who is my “neighbor” in this new world? Does the danger exist that we may be less present to those whom we encounter in our everyday life? Is there a risk of being more distracted because our attention is fragmented and absorbed in a world “other” than the one in which we live? Do we have time to reflect critically on our choices and to foster human relationships which are truly deep and lasting? It is important always to remember that virtual contact cannot and must not take the place of direct human contact with people at every level of our lives. (Benedict XVI, 2011, ¶5)

I believe, however, and have argued extensively in other contexts, that digital spaces are no less relational than so-called “in-person” spaces (Hess, 2005, 2008, 2010, 2011a, 2011b). The challenge is to attend to the tacit knowing that is being drawn on in a given

space. So, for example, when I find myself as a woman feeling deeply discounted and “dis-embodied” by the gender dynamics in a face-to-face academic setting, I need to critique and engage them. Similarly, when colleagues argue that digital environments allow us to be pulled beyond our racialization and the systemic racism which confers white privilege upon me, I want to see the proof (see Nakamura, 2002; boyd, 2008, and <http://www.danah.org/papers/>).

Thus there are elements of critique and awareness that religious educators do—and must—bring to this new culture of learning. But are there other ways in which we might engage this analysis?

I would point to five strengths that appear within communities of faith when viewed through the Thomas and Brown lens. Keeping in mind that I am drawing these strengths from my particular location, and thus suggest them as evocative rather than definitive, I would note, first, that Catholic communities are largely tending a fairly esoteric body of knowledge. Thomas and Brown write of how compelling the pursuit of esoteric knowledge is within gaming environments. There are scholars such as Detwiler (2010), who use that analysis to suggest ways in which we might make our esoteric knowledge more inviting and intriguing to people who have grown up learning through gaming. His description of structuring learning the Bible so that students might “level up” in particular ways is both compelling and fun. We have centuries of tradition and practices upon which to draw, and enormous storehouses of complex and sophisticated theological reflection and liturgical wisdom to share.

The second element I would note is that where Thomas and Brown talk about the limitless nature of information in a networked society, I would ask us to think about our own wisdom within communities of faith for engaging and managing approaches to the infinite. That is, as Rahner points out, it is our recognition of our own limits that points to the limitless. It is in recognizing our own finitude that we become conscious of the infinity of a transcendent God. We have, within Christian community alone—there are myriad approaches in other faith traditions—a deep sense of the humility necessary for conversation about infinity. As Edwards (2002) has written, we have a “characteristically sensitive approach to boundary conditions where we know reason is prone to err badly” (p. 4). “Limitless” access to information is not, in and of itself, access to wisdom. Yet wisdom is what has been cultivated within religious traditions over eons.

The third and fourth elements I would point to as strengths that I see within communities of faith for engaging this new culture of learning, grow out of our deep commitment to what Palmer (1993) has termed the “whole sight” of knowing with both one’s heart and one’s mind (p. xxiii). We acknowledge that there is a necessity to know in this “whole sight” way, and we have much to share from our own work with that commitment. We have drawn from our tacit knowing, our own experiences of seeing, doing, and being to shape practices that lead to wisdom. These practices compel us to witness to the limitations of reason as well as to the limitations of emotion. We have centuries of practices that have been shaped to allow human beings to hone their integrative abilities. Schneiders (1986) is particularly evocative in her recognition of a Catholic understanding of spirituality:

spirituality is understood as the unique and personal response of individuals to all that calls them to integrity and transcendence. . . . [It] has something to do with the integration of all aspects of human life and experience.

. . . fundamentally, spirituality has to do with becoming a person in the fullest sense.

Spirituality is that attitude, that frame of mind which breaks the human person out of the isolating self. As it does that, it directs him or her to another relationship in whom one’s growth takes root and sustenance. (p. 264)

Intimately connected to these third and fourth elements would be what I would label the fifth, although perhaps these are so entangled that it’s hard to separate them? But the fifth element I would lift up is that communities of faith have long practice with bounded environments. Indeed in some ways I think that the growth of certain more clearly bounded religious communities emerges out of the larger need people experience for finding bounded environments in the midst of what can often feel like dramatically unbounded, unfounded, anti-institutional ways of being.

These five elements—esoteric knowledge, experience of finitude, commitment to integration, experience with tacit knowing, and practices of boundedness—are, however, all facing new challenges in our larger environments. These five elements which can contribute greatly to a new culture of learning, and which would appear to flourish in such a culture, are also newly at risk.

Consider, for instance, the ways in which the esoteric knowledges we tend are becoming rapidly inac-

cessible. Far too many theologians and catechists have refused to be present in digital spaces, have resisted making their work accessible in open source ways, have fought the development of online learning, and have generally argued that we ought not to be engaging digital technologies. I suppose that one element of what defines “esoteric” knowing is that it is “likely to be understood only by a small number of people with a specialized interest” (the definition that “pops up” when I query the dictionary on my MacBookPro), but if there are no ways to excite interest such that people are drawn into engagement and inquiry with that knowledge it will no longer be esoteric, but instead extinct. The M.Div. students at the seminary where I teach, for instance, are required to take both Greek and Hebrew. My colleagues, who are excellent scholars as well as creative teachers, have found ways to invite these students to use newly emerging digital tools such as Accordance to draw them into deeper study of the languages. These students are discovering a passion for inquiry that will serve them well with these languages even once they are beyond the bounded classroom environments of a seminary.

The second element, a recognition of our finitude which leads to awareness of the divine and of our need for humility in the face of the divine, is also fading rapidly. A larger sense of God’s agency and power is diminishing all around us. Scientific explanations have been picked up in the wider popular culture as explanations that leach out the wonder of creation, that settle agency on human beings alone. I’m not sure all of our scientists are comfortable with this. There are many who have written of the ways in which scientific method can lead into deeper wonder at the complexity and beauty of creation, ways in which scientific method forces open-ended humility (see, for example, Palmer & Zajonc, 2010). But that is not the stance most often presented in wider popular culture. Communities of faith, theologians, and lay catechists in particular, need to focus more directly on inviting engagement with the transcendence of God, and helping people to participate in—and thus learn—the practices which shape our belonging as humble humans in religious knowing.

The third and fourth elements, which have to do with a commitment to “whole sight,” and the practices of integration that shape it, are also facing keen challenges all around us. As Deck (2012) has noted: “Another way to express this idea is to say that the catechesis broke down and failed to successfully make the

connection between information (the content of faith) and performance (behavior), and between belonging to the Church and believing what it teaches” (p. 4). I have written elsewhere about the ways our practices of attention are being shaped in digital environments (2011). I would point, here, to the movement emerging within Christian religious education, which focuses on practices that are deeply constitutive of Christian identity but not specifically liturgical or creedal. The resource or issue here is developing daily practices, ways of engaging in a relationship with Jesus connected to the church in daily life. A good introduction would be Bass (2010). There are resources being developed in local parish contexts throughout the U.S., some of which are being shared via the web and digital apps, some of which are simply too contextual to share broadly.

Perhaps the most difficult challenge to our strengths, however, is that which is being posed to our bounded environments. In the United States, at least in the Catholic community, we have tended to understand our boundedness through the structures of parish and diocese. But these structures are crumbling all around us, and it is not yet clear how they will be revived, or what will replace them. If we truly believe that the church is intimately missional in its being, and if we also affirm that the people of God are the church, then we must respect that God is doing something with us even in the moments and places that seem most unbounded. How might we do this?

In theological education, at least in my institution, we have begun to focus more directly on helping our students to practice what Cormode (2006) has called “homiletical” or “gardening” forms of leadership, which tend directly to meaning-making, and in doing so help to shape the communicative practices of a community. Such communicative practices can be embedded in social media just as much as they can be embedded in the structure of an institution, although they will take different shape in different environments. Here is a place in which the practice of communicative theology is particularly pertinent and helpful.

Communicative theology is a:

method where the source of its assertions can be identified . . . there is a critical correlation between content and form in communicative theology, that is highly relevant to context as well...

Theology is a critical reflection on and understanding of the communication event . . . there are processes of communication that draw on the

skills of everyone, where expertise remote from real life has no place, but where people cooperate in striving to find a theological practice that answers the needs of the community . . .

Communicative theology can be understood as a process that directs its ‘gaze’—in the sense of theological hermeneutics—toward the communication event. . . . [It is] shared and participatory . . . (Scharer & Hilberath, 2008, pp. 20–23)

There are some important implications to such a process, among them:

moving from “assent to truth” to entrusting oneself to God’s “communicatio” and “communio” (p. 75)

There is a dynamic process engaged in theme-centered interaction that moves from the I, the We, and the It to form a triangle encompassed in a Globe. . . . [T]he individual subjects—the “I” factor—participate in the We and are oriented toward faith (“It”) as their response to the communication of God in the ambivalent situation marked by the Globe. . . . [T]he authentic theological places where God shows God’s self to human beings in history include not only their biographies but also their interaction and communication . . . (p. 147)

Thus the processes shaped towards eliciting and identifying this revelation must of necessity be open, communicative, and oriented towards the borders, the edges, the spaces in which disturbance, perplexity, and conflict arise. (pp. 155–156)

There is far more that could—and should—be said about the processes of communicative theology. While these theologians are articulating a very specific way of doing theology that relies on theme-centered interaction, their underlying assumptions have resonance with a number of differing theologies over the years and around the globe. The practice of communicative theology may well be one method by which we can listen carefully for what God might be doing in our midst—and listening is a key component of discipling and missional leadership.

Strengths—and challenges to those strengths—live all around us in catechesis and theological engagement. Yet I have not even touched on the specific suggestions that Thomas and Brown (2011) and others are making for how to help educators move into and draw on what they are calling the new culture of learning. They argue, for instance, for three distinct yet overlapping frames for

redesigning learning: *homo sapiens*, *homo faber*, and *homo ludens*, or “humans who know, humans who make (things), and humans who play” (p. 90).

In the space of “humans who know,” Thomas and Brown want very much to emphasize the place-based nature of that knowing. *Where* are we knowing, and how is that sense of place shaping our knowing? I think this is a question that has permeated theological education for at least the last several decades, and Jennings (2010) provides further compelling substance to that inquiry. The advent of digital technologies, and the ability to use those technologies to make theological education accessible to people far beyond specific, seminary-based, locations has been a huge challenge to theological education—and a wonderful opportunity at the same time. What can we learn from these experiments for our Catholic schools, our parishes and our lay catechists?

Thomas and Brown talk at length about the issue of *homo faber*, and I have done so as well in other contexts (2008, 2010, 2011), because media educators learned long ago that one of the best ways to help students learn something effective about media was to help them to create in a specific medium. Yet I think it is worth noting, in this essay, that we ought to be asking, “what are we making?” Are we making disciples? Are we making communities? Are we making collectives? Are we making lay catechists? Perhaps we are “making” all of these, or many of these, at once. But I’m not sure how often or how clearly we articulate this element of our educational environment.

I certainly believe that there are elements to our “making” that have been profoundly problematic. In the ELCA context, for instance, in the national *Book of Faith* project, we are learning that some of what has been taught in seminaries—the implicit curriculum of teaching the Bible, for instance—has “made” scholars, but not made teachers who could go out and help other people to learn the Bible in ways that are effective and constructive. Indeed, we are discovering that some of how we have taught biblical studies has led to pastors “teaching” their parishioners that they must have an expert in attendance any time they open up their Bible. (Schussler-Fiorenza, 2009, and Martin, 2008, have observed this more systematically in their own books.)

The third form of knowing that Thomas and Brown point to—that of *homo ludens*—is at the heart of their book, particularly given all of the MacArthur Foundation research upon which they have drawn. But what kinds of play are religious educators engaged in?

I think we could potentially draw on multiple forms of play, everything from the sacred play of liturgy to the formal play of theater of the oppressed. But I'm not sure how often we give ourselves permission to engage in play, even in carefully constructed "educational" play. The work of Huizinga (2008) and others points to the very serious nature of play, and the crucial ways in which learning takes shape in environments of play. One element of play, of course, is the making of mistakes, and learning from failure. I doubt that making mistakes and learning from them is much in evidence in the seminary in which I teach, and anecdotal conversations with my colleagues in theological education suggest a similar pattern elsewhere. Jenkins and colleagues (2006) have identified a set of learning outcomes they believe that citizens of the 21st century need to achieve. Play, understood as the "capacity to experiment with one's surroundings as a form of problem-solving" is at the top of their list (p. 22).

Here again is a place in which I would note the work of communicative theologians as a resource. There is much that can be learned within the structured "play" of liturgy as well.

As I move through the work of Thomas and Brown, and indeed the work of all those upon whom that book rests, I am struck repeatedly by its resonance with the discussion of theological educator David Tiede, who has been writing for years about the notion of a seminary as three-fold—academy, abbey, and apostolate (as described by Aleshire, 2008, p. 126). A seminary as an academy, in all the rich complexity of the "academy" as understood at the "American Academy of Religion," is no doubt the form with which we are most familiar. Some of us may also have some experience with the "abbey," particularly those of us who live within vowed religious communities. I suspect the notion of an "apostolate" is much less familiar to many. Yet in the Christian community at least, the earliest followers of Jesus did not form an academy or an abbey—they were an apostolate, a community of apostles sharing their learning and experiences by engaging other learners and other experiences.

If we are serious about a "new evangelization," if we are committed to understanding our church as missional to its core, then we must begin to look for what God is already doing with us. The "new culture of learning" opens up new arenas of action for us, whole new contexts in which we might engage learning, and in doing so share and learn with others both close at

home and far away. I want to close by quoting Thomas and Brown at length, for their emphasis on play is one that opens up new room for us to see God at work in our midst:

The almost unlimited resources provided by the information network serve as a set of nutrients, constantly selected and incorporated into the bounded environment of the petri dish, which provides the impetus for experimentation, play, and learning. Accordingly, the culture that emerges, the new culture of learning, is a culture of collective inquiry that harnesses the resources of the network and transforms them into nutrients within the petri dish environment, turning it into a space of play and experimentation.

That moment of fusion between unlimited resources and a bounded environment creates a space that does not simply allow for imagination, it requires it. Only when we care about experimentation, play, and questions more than efficiency, outcomes, and answers do we have a space that is truly open to the imagination.

And where imaginations play, learning happens. (p. 118)

I believe that religious education is entering a new era of evangelization, one of enormous potential for growth and engagement—but only if we truly allow our imaginations to be at work, and to play with the Spirit as she breathes amongst us.

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# Rethinking the “Genuinely” Religious Film: A Brief Introduction to *The Sacred and the Cinema*

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For decades now, scholars in the field of religion and film have worked toward determining and defining just what constitutes a “genuinely” religious film. Though different labels may be employed to categorize such motion pictures—e.g., transcendental in style, sacramental in style—critics are more or less in agreement when it comes to which films successfully convey a manifestation of the sacred, or what Mircea Eliade terms *hierophany*.

As for these critics, they include Amedée Ayfre (1960), who wrote *Le cinéma et la foi Chrétienne* and Henri Agel (1961), *Le cinéma et le sacré*, Paul Schrader (1972), *Transcendental Style in Film*, and Peter Fraser (1998), *Images of the Passion: The Sacramental Mode in Film*. If their works seem fairly dated, that is because of the somewhat unfashionable nature today of discussing film in this vein; or, perhaps, it is more that there has been no real progression in terms of qualifying an authentic manifestation of the sacred onscreen. Of interest is what these authors essentially agree upon, which is that “genuine” cinematic hierophany emerges from the expression of *the Holy itself*—as distinct from an overly externalized expression or illustration of *holy feelings*. In other words, “authentic” hierophany is never presumed to arise from a spectator’s engagement with burning bushes or through watching onscreen disciples gazing rapturously at their god.

Paul Schrader, for instance, in discussing the style of film-making he characterizes as transcendental, privileges the following: a lack of external ostentation (no lightning bolts carving out the 10 commandments, no grand dances or orgiastic scenes in Herod’s palace);

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a general nonexpressiveness (no looks of shock or awe or quivering lips connoting being touched by the divine); and a shunning of what director Robert Bresson called “screens” (clues that inform a viewer what to inspect or how to feel) (1972, p. 64). Such films, rather, hinge on two very particular and noteworthy norms, *stasis* and *silence*—norms which readers of this paper may quickly and willingly associate with prayer.

What are some noteworthy examples of these transcendently-styled films? According to Schrader, not to mention the collective wisdom of the aforementioned authors, one film shines prototypically through: Robert Bresson’s *Diary of a Country Priest* (1951). But there are many others, such as Yasujiro Ozu’s Japanese classic *Late Spring* (1949); the Bengali *Pather Panchali* (1955), directed by Satyajit Ray; and Andrey Tarkovsky’s *Andrei Rublev* (1969). These films do not necessarily take religion or spirituality explicitly as their theme; but they are lauded for their mutual evocation of the sacred through their particular deployment of silence, stillness, lack of expressiveness, and so forth.

Authors who laud such “genuinely” religious films make their case in part by distinguishing these films from others that we might, for the sake of creative parallelism, call “disingenuously” religious. These latter films, perhaps obviously, tend to be overly expressive and overabundant in their means—or “over the top” as the idiom goes. They evoke their messages not through silence or stillness, but through spectacle, through display, and often through staging very artificial moments of incarnation. Such evocations may include miracles that rely on “gimmicky” optical effects or on the sort of relatively crude materializations of the sacred that one associates with “smoke and mirrors” or with dizzily repeating zoom-ins of a camera on a deity’s statue, for the sake of authenticating that deity’s spiritual presence.

Such a corporeality of the divine, such a display of holy feelings, makes these films—at least to the transcendently-minded critic—representative of nothing more than an escapist metaphor.

And what might the prototype for this competing species be?

When it comes to the literature decrying the “inauthentically” sacred in cinema, the film most vilified is indisputably Cecil B. DeMille’s *The Ten Commandments* (1956). This is not to suggest that other films do not qualify. In fact, many, if not most, of the films that belong to the Hollywood genre of the biblical spectacular could be said to meet the criteria, as do the mythological and devotional genres of the Hindi popular film industry, which likewise put into operation hyperbolic expressivity and artificial moments of incarnation.

There is, for instance, the hit devotional film *Jai Santoshi Maa* (1975), which centers on the goddess Santoshi Maa and her relationship with a particular devotee. At one point in the film, several co-goddesses conspiring against Santoshi Maa set out to inject misery into the life of Santoshi Maa’s devotee. They do so by endangering her husband’s life in a storm. But because of the devotee’s unbreakable fidelity to Santoshi Maa, the goddess intercedes to save the husband—and by way, no less, of a spectacular special-effects rescue that conjures memories of *Aquaman* fused with *I Dream of Jeanie*. My intention is not to mock the film, however, nor to suggest that *Jai Santoshi Maa* ought to be dismissed or derided because of its capitulation to spectacle and to the miraculously manifest. In fact, I want to suggest rather boldly that its contents and form, just as *The Ten Commandments’* contents and form, might well *manifest the sacred most deeply for some spectators*—and more deeply than a film like Bresson’s *Diary of a Country Priest* ever could. Consider, after all, that this low-budget film incited spectators to shower coins, rice, and petals at the goddess’ image onscreen.

On a personal note, I vividly remember attending a screening of a mythological film that was just as rife with the spectacularity that *Jai Santoshi Maa* exhibits. That film’s title was *Hanuman Vijay* (1974), and it was a *Ramayana*-based chronicle of how Hanuman saves Rama and Laxman from being sacrificed by a powerful sorcerer who has lodged them both in the netherworld. I saw the film as a child in New Delhi, in the company of my grandmother who had migrated with her children, one of them my father, from the Punjab after

Partition in 1947. In spite of the similarly crude materiality of that movie’s miracles; in spite of its bold colors (fuchsias, lavenders, golds) and its kinetic camera work, which was often intended to amplify *tender* displays of devotion; in spite even of the film’s Méliès-like special effects (spinning chakras, Rama’s profile flashing strobe-like in the moon), it is *my grandmother* I remember most vividly. For, throughout the film, she—never educated, never able to read or write—mumbled her devotions and did *namaste* (greetings) whenever that monkey-god appeared onscreen. These were not pro forma utterances or gestures, for there was something truly beatific in her expression—immersion and delight, and a strange inner light (histrionic as that may sound).

How could an old—and, by everyone’s accounts, including mine, *wise*—woman like my grandmother have responded in such naive and childlike fashion to a Hindu mythological? I couldn’t help wondering, even decades later, what she had been spiritually seeing—and religiously feeling and responding to—that I had not. Part of the answer seemed simple, of course: she was a devout Hindu, a believer and part of a lived Hindu tradition; I, on the other hand, was none of these things. But something about that answer felt incomplete, perhaps because my own mother was also a devout believer, albeit Roman Catholic, and I had never witnessed such behavior in her. Perhaps it was a difference, then, in the ways the world’s faiths are expressed, a product no less of belief than of enculturation. On the other hand, how to explain that other Hindus whom I came to know later on—often educated ones—did *not* engage in my grandmother’s fashion with Hindu mythologicals and were in fact quite embarrassed by the indigenous genre (a genre for “the masses” instead of “the classes,” as one woman put it to me years later)? I could not help feeling there was something more, something else underpinning my grandmother’s response to *Hanuman Vijay* and perhaps, too, to her engagement with storytelling in toto; and, since, in this case it was *religious* storytelling, to that partly inexplicable, somewhat ineffable thing we call *the sacred*.

No doubt my grandmother would have called my reasons for carrying around that memory “*karam*,” the Punjabi word for fate, given how fundamental that movie-going experience was to be to my eventual discernment that religious depictions in film—and especially spiritual transcendence as experienced *through* film—are significantly contoured by those films’ (and

their spectators' and their critics') relationship to the *written word*. That is, Eliadean hierophanies are, in the context of film narrative, bound up quite significantly—not to mention, transnationally—with particular ways of knowing that maintain roots in orality or that have been historically permitted and/or induced by a culture invested in alphabetic literacy.

What legitimizes a purported hierophany in a movie, I am suggesting, or even a film's overarching transcendental style, may say as much about a viewer's epistemic location vis-à-vis orality and literacy as it does any particular Hindu (or Christian, or Muslim, or nontheistic) notion of religiosity. Here, then, lies the purpose of my recently published book *The Sacred and the Cinema*, which is to demonstrate how orality and alphabetic literacy both generatively and affectively contour filmic communion with the holy, as well as to explain, in a more particularized fashion, the etiological reasons for such differently-charged modes of spiritual expression. In this way, *The Sacred and the Cinema* cannot help but reconfigure our understanding of what constitutes a "genuinely" religious film.

But instead of providing here a written tour of the contents of that book—which includes, incidentally, a history of the sacred as a field of study, as well as a history of *the sacred and the cinema* as a field of study—I would like to hone in primarily on the popular critical notion that the sacred is most authentically manifest in film via *stillness* and, perhaps even more vitally, via *silence*, and to problematize the notion that stillness and silence are the legitimate route to hierophany, at least when it comes to visual narrative. But to get there, I first need to attend briefly to those epistemically oral norms of visual narrative. What I am intentionally suggesting by my use of the word "oral" here is that the interpenetrated set of norms that shaped Homeric epic, for instance, or the *Mahabharata* did not disappear with the onset of writing. Rather, if one looks at the sorts of popular cultural forms that were intended for, and that historically reached non-literate audiences, one will find a very similar set of norms in operation. That supposedly "disingenuous" hierophany reflected in and/or experienced as a result of *The Ten Commandments* or *Jai Santoshi Maa*, I would aver, is more likely due to the film's being significantly contoured by an oral way of knowing—just as *Diary of a Country Priest* is contoured by more alphabetically literate ways of knowing. I am not suggesting a bimodal framework here,

however. In fact, when I refer to certain norms as "literately inflected," I am referring to the sorts of higher cognitive activities and processes that stem from what scholars who work on cognition and instruction refer to as *high literacy*, which is itself different from the more elementary ability to read and write. Indeed, it makes one wonder: Could this be the reason the norms that film theorists repeatedly signpost as fundamental to genuine onscreen hierophany are never part and parcel of visual narrative that is fundamentally orally inflected? In other words, such theorists have unwittingly, if perhaps understandably, fallen prey to what Walter J. Ong refers to as an "unconscious chirographic and typographic bias" (1980, p. 145). By this I mean that their choice of films reflects their own position apropos literacy no less than the quality of the films themselves.

In order to justify my claim that the norms driving the transcendental style are literately inflected, I need first to address how an oral way of knowing might be translated to the screen, that is, how its norms are either tailored to, or unwittingly emerge from, a story intended for film-viewing (as distinct from story intended to be *heard*). My paradigmatic disinterring of these norms, I ought to add as a footnote of sorts, was the result of my long-term study of Hindi *masala* (spice-mix) formula films from the latter half of the 20th century. Some of the more notable "orally inflected" norms evident in these films include high repetition and the recycling of information; the privileging of formula; an agonistic tone (including high levels of violence and melodrama); and a preference for spectacle. One also finds in this epistemic realm a tendency toward clichés and unambiguous, surface-only meaning (which, to some degree, fosters a Manichean world view). This is a narrative world that is also "we"-inflected rather than "I"-inflected, something that surely accounts not only for its non-psychological orientation, but also its telescoping of the past and the present and its inevitable preservation of the status quo—best evident, perhaps, in an eschewal of open-endedness. Apologies for running roughshod over these, but some of the reasons for why these are fundamentally "oral" will become more convincingly apparent, I hope, when I discuss those select literately inflected characteristics that have bearing on a film's form and style.

Although the actual book handles an entire interpenetrated array of norms with ties to high literacy, I would like, as aforementioned, particularly to address

silence and stasis, as well as two other norms that are pivotally concomitant with these. The first is a preoccupation with the banal/the spare/the ordinary (because such qualities are seen as representative of the real); and the second is a belief-cum-certainty that spectatorial isolation is the route to an authentic experience of the divine.

Let us begin with the banal/the spare/the ordinary as real.

According to critics, films that are transcendent or sacramental achieve that value by intentionally abjuring the spectacular. Their directors foreground those qualities which are instead believed—at least since the time of the Italian neorealist movement in the 1940s—to be the major viable route to reflecting *the real*. These qualities include the intentionally plain, the mundane, and the decidedly unspectacular. Cinematic focus is to be on ordinary sights, on the small and surfacely inconsequential, such that a spectator might well expend 60 minutes of film-time watching a working-class Italian search through the streets of Rome for his stolen bicycle. Why? Because a route that intentionally makes itself banal, spare, and ordinary avoids the easy and cheap arousal of holy feelings. One does not mistake holy feelings for the Holy itself. What is mystical and meaningful arises rather out of the mundane, or from a merging with the rhythms of everyday life. As the director Bresson once tried to explain it, “The more life is what it is—ordinary, simple, without pronouncing the word of God—the more I see the presence of God in that” (qtd. in Quandt, 2003, p. 21).

But why would this privileging of the everyday be specifically literately inflected? In short, homing in on the banal thwarts the fulsomeness that is an essential property of oral storytelling. Communal reflection—which an oral way of knowing presupposes since all stories pass by word of mouth—requires that characters and their journeys be “kinesthetically, aurally, and emotively spectacular” (Nayar, 2008, p. 147). Though realism may be phenomenologically rich to Bresson and the like, and though many a film scholar may contend that the sacred is only evoked by a lack of external affectation, realism robs the oral viewer of those institutionalized cues which are seminal to said viewer’s engaging productively with visual narrative. In other words, the very “clues” or “story guides” which Bresson derided—the clichéd zoom-ins that tell us a character is being communicated to by a goddess; the bright white light and voice of

God—are present for good reason in orally inflected narrative. Without them, a story can no longer function as a vehicle for the transmission of a social memory. We might even propose that, without them, one is left with an absence rather than with a heightened presence of the divine.

And so, an attraction to both spectacle and an outward orientation may not speak exclusively to a viewer’s proclivity for escapism or to his or her unwillingness to concede to the banality that is life. For cultures whose stories—and hence whose experiences of the self—are transmitted by way of utterance, externally directed modes of storytelling may be the most efficient way to ensure transmission of the sacred. Modes of hierophany in this realm are, thus, not necessarily less sincere; it is, more, that permitting a film’s foreground to merge with its background would make the storytelling—which is here intended as an activity to preserve collective memory—a very risky activity.

The norms perhaps most frequently cited as indispensable to a film’s effectual expression of transcendence are quietude and quiescence. Because “complete stasis or frozen motion is the trademark of religious art in every culture,” that is why, so Schrader argues, stasis is essential to the representation of the Wholly Other on the screen (1988, p. 49). He draws specific attention to the way directors like Ozu direct “silences and voids” (p. 28) and focus at length on an image of, say, a static mountain or a vase in a dimly lit room. Similarly, in Bresson, we find frozen scenes and inexpressive faces which invite, even demand, a sort of spectatorial veneration. Through these means, argues Schrader, images or scenes become veritable still-lives that connote Oneness and, ergo, lead to our experiencing a “second reality”—or what Michael Bird describes as a depth of being (1982). Only through stopping and contemplating—through slowing down the pace and allowing the viewer to step into the film, to walk through its images—can we find “an expression of something unified, permanent, transcendent” (Schrader, 1988, p. 51). In this way, as Pipolo observes, Time itself becomes a formal figure; or, in the words of Tarkovsky, through “the elimination of what is known as ‘expressiveness,’” precise scrutiny of life passes “into sublime artistic imagery” (1986, p. 95).

Alas, the above critics erroneously presuppose that film narrative ought sensorily to mirror what happens when a believer in a mode of private contemplation encounters an icon. Their long-term investment in

the acts and practices of reading has predisposed them to believe that narrative (as story) is something with which one engages in solitude; hence their understandable, if flawed, equating of cinematic silence and stillness with that which can be “read” in plastic arts and architecture. When hierophany is part of visual narrative, however, other contingencies ensue. How else to explain that moments of quiescence and quietude are negligible in orally inflected films—even films teeming with ascetics, saints, miracles, and spiritually charged convocations with the divine? Such films’ avoidance of silence and stillness is well-founded, though, given that silence and stillness mark a dearth (and the death) of institutionalized cues. In the epistemically oral arena, it is the image in combination with sound that drives transcendence, whether that sound be in the form of songs, or bells, or the voice of God, or even in or as kinetically “loud” camera work. *Darshan*—a Hindu term that describes the reciprocal act of seeing and being seen by the divine—is desirably glorified and heightened through physical, visible, and material expressions of acclaim.

Films by the likes of Bresson may sacrifice this sensual and externally stimulated celebration of a collective faith; but for the orally inclined viewer, a visual/aural image’s stopping may indicate the end of the utterance, thus leaving the viewer with nowhere existentially to go. Austerity may render a text impenetrable for orally inflected spectators, in other words—or, at the least, may provoke in those spectators a sense of a text’s dismissibility. A legitimately oral text cannot afford what is essentially an esoteric (or etymologically “inner”) surface. That kind of inner economy calls for—indeed, mandates—a noetic detachment of the individual from the group. Only the viewer grounded in the “safety” of stories that are preserved in writing can afford to relinquish “a single ready-made orientation to life” (Goody & Watt, 1968, p. 63) and to take—or even want to take—this sort of private journey.

Certainly this prompts an interesting question: What, then, really distinguishes a transcendental amplification of reality from the conspicuous consumption of the Hollywood biblical epic or Hindu mythological? Is there, at heart, only a normative difference between the scopophilic pleasure induced by the materially sumptuous and that induced by the materially banal? If Bresson’s surfaces are taken to possess, or are treated as possessing, an “inner economy” said to emerge from “the obsessive quality of Bresson’s photography itself”

(Andrew, 1984, p. 125), that presumptively demands that a spectator actively negotiate filmic images in order to extract their “inner” meaning. But what does that mean and how is that done—and why would that process be anathema to the oral spectator?

To answer that, I would like to turn to how the activation of divine intervention—that is, how a spectator is presumably touched by the divine—transpires in stylistically transcendent films. One of the ways this purportedly takes place is through a viewer’s concentration on a “whatness of things.” A chair is not there because somebody is going to sit in it but because our task, as spectators, is to contemplate its chair-ness. Supposedly, we gaze more profoundly in this way—not at the chair per se, but at what lies beneath it and, hence, at mundane reality. We penetrate the surface of things by gazing profoundly at the surface of things. That, so these scholars say, is what leads to the experience becoming transcendent, to our moving beyond surface reality to something deeper. That is also why these things must be non-significant—because significant images are considered a distraction. Only through stripping away artifice can something more essential underneath be revealed.

Again, we might turn to Bresson, who phrased it this way: “As far as I can, I eliminate anything which may distract from the interior drama. For me, the cinema is an exploration within. Within the mind, the camera can do anything” (qtd. in Schrader, 1998, p. 65). Or consider Peter Fraser’s description of Bresson’s *modus operandi*, how Bresson uses

synecdochic and metonymic seductions that link images and sequences . . . The image may be the bowed head of a priest or the bowed figure of Michael the pickpocket, the feet of Seraphita or the feet of Joan of Arc; the open door and window of *Une femme douce*, or the vacated hillside of *Mouchette*—in each case, the symbol is packed. (Fraser, 1998, p. 19)

But, here, we must ask: What are we contemplating? What are we looking at—or for? What does this silence mean? Such activity, at least in connection with narrative (as distinct, once again, from prayer), calls for a kind of abstract intellectual game-playing, wherein one is required to excavate an image for what it really means. What this problematically engenders is an ever-widening gap between signifier and signified. A chair that is not a chair is—well, what is it then? And who says? Such an image’s “meaning” relies on a

spectator—and, indeed, presupposes a spectatorial desire for—handling escalating levels of ambiguity. The spectator of a Bresson film is thereby asked to read *into* the text, to “read between its lines” (surely there is good reason for that metaphor’s basis in writing). But this imperils the safe transmission of knowledge; and it is for this very reason that one will not find irony or symbolism (as distinct from totemism) or any other such overly subtle connotative modes of communication in heavily orally-inflected films. Only in the literately-inflected arena can the Wholly Other be produced by (in a regrettably apt pun) a Hole-y Other. An ironic stance functions on the basis of a spectator having cognitively to quarry for something that is not there, thus mandating a complex, private exercise of deduction and inference, which goes against the grain of the concrete, situational thinking endemic to oral individuals (Luria, 1976, p. 54). Even if those individuals were forewarned of irony’s rhetorical presence, they would probably perceive it as purposeless and undesirable, as an itinerant and, hence, noetically precarious form of “play.”

There is another good reason why, in the oral realm, the Wholly Other is produced and experienced out of the pre-known: clichés, totems, platitudes, and other type of formulae. For, these bind a spectator with her community—including not only the realm of her ancestors, but also, quite vitally, that of her gods. In a culture where the self is highly informed by one’s interaction with others, what purpose or value can there be in being intentionally isolated and abandoned both from people in the present and the accumulated wisdom of the past? How could that sort of isolation lead anyone closer to the sacred? In fact, Bresson’s kind of movie making may well appear highly *anti-social* to the orally-inflected viewer. If the viewer is both abandoned and abandoning her group—including her ancestors and her people’s gods—how could that lead to any meaningful or worthwhile experience of the sacred?

By no means am I suggesting that the filmic experience of hierophany is determined exclusively on the basis of oral-to-alphabetically literate ways of knowing that shape storytelling. Nevertheless, I do think that the introduction of these epistemes to the discussion of onscreen manifestations of the sacred encourage our re-evaluating more inclusively the relationship of the sacred to cinema. For instance, we might ask if it is possible that degrees of literacy breed varieties of religious experience. In fact, for this

very reason, in *The Sacred and the Cinema*, I revisit and, in some sense, correct Eliade who, in *The Sacred and Profane*, unwittingly conflates orally inflected modes of engagement of the sacred with “primitive” societies. Obviously, based on what I am suggesting, such collapsing of ways of knowing with entire peoples deserves nuancing—if for no other reason than to reinvigorate many of Eliade’s otherwise valuable insights. Similarly, it appears safe to theorize that the inward turn which scholars have typically identified with the novel is really more broadly related to literacy itself, given that such inward turns are not evident in orally inflected, entirely modern, albeit 20th- and 21st-century manifestations of the sacred onscreen. In this case, Eliade’s identification of an inner cosmos with “civilized societies” is also something of a misidentification.

Finally, these epistemes offer a new, pluralistic, non-elitist way of questioning aesthetic quality and appropriateness apropos the sacred. That is, we are now in a position to undo some of the chirographic bias that still exists in the sub-discipline of religion and film narrative. At the same time, these epistemes also alert us to the need to be sensitive to differently inflected behaviors and attitudes when it comes to prayer, to liturgy, and to other modes through which we engage with the sacred—as future scholarship may one day show.

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# The Importance of the Cinema in the Dialogue Between Theology and Post-modernity: 10 Stages of a Journey

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## A. First premise

Many current cultural factors and the internal dynamics of post-modernity, both very much related to information and communication technologies, seem to indicate that the *pulchrum* [beauty] will continue to have a relative predominance over the *verum* [truth] and the *bonum* [good].

In fact, the *verum* and the *bonum* of the ideas carried by the information and communication technologies tend to be basically entrusted to their “form of appearance,” to their *pulchrum*. To this must be added that post-modernity still manifests a strong deficit of metaphysical thought resulting in a lack of ethical foundation, that makes the *verum* too arduous, and the *bonum* too difficult to achieve.

Note, however, that this predominance is only relative, because a real human experience is only possible if all three aspects are integrated in the awareness of the transcendental dimension of the human being; none of the three transcendentals [truth, goodness, beauty] can be whole without the others. In any case, it is clear that Beauty is today the preferential gateway.

## B. Second premise

At the same time, post-modernity seems to displace the object of theology toward “pre-theological” elements, as a consequence of the need for dialogue between the anthropological requirements of post-modernity and the responses to central anthropological questions contained in Christian revelation. The role of postmodern theology increasingly becomes that of convincing post-modernity that the faith is worthwhile.

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This paper draws on the content of a recent book authored in collaboration with Daniela Delfini and Enrique Fuster, *Verso Dio nel cinema. Viaggio in dieci tappe* (Cinisello Balsamo: San Paolo, 2013). Each of the stages also lists relevant films.

To do this theology will have to deal with the dimensions of God more closely influencing the vision that human beings have of themselves, as beings related to the world, to others, to God. That is, theology needs to put the task of theologians in relation to the strong religious tendency that characterizes the postmodern human. Because modernity has attempted to replace God with science, and religion with the technique, it tried to find ways of redemption immanent to the world, based upon techno-science and economy. But these ways have appeared incapable of securing the existential future of humanity, and new paths of salvation must be sought beyond immanence.

My proposal is that the classic treatise of the divine attributes is a good interface in this dialogue, as it puts the characteristics of God’s being in relation with inherent human limitations. But, as follows from the first premise, the intellectual conceptualization produced by the classical doctrine of the attributes is difficult to understand in post-modernity: a conceptual vehicle bound to the *pulchrum* is required.

## C. Consequence and starting point

Given these two assumptions, it is easy to highlight elements capable of conveying the dialogue between theology and post-modernity in the artistic production of films. Art is always a privileged way of openness to transcendence; cinema, the latest art and the art of modernity, has become a privileged witness of the drama of the humanity without religion and, being also the art most linked with information and communication technologies, of the postmodern openness to religion. The dramatic structure of a quality film is almost always a kind of hero’s journey towards targets that have, for better or worse, a significant impact on the destiny of the protagonist. Such targets offer a precise vision of the author about the great

themes of human existence, including those that lead to Transcendence and to God.

As can be seen from the title of the essay, the main idea is not to speak about God in the proper sense, but to analyze the journey toward God, and thus locate the path that the artist, sometimes unknowingly, covers towards the Absolute. The main idea is to study how the cinema has contributed in its short history to highlight the great religious themes that put humanity in relation with God; to do this, an external schema must be applied to the analysis of the films.

The intention is not to apply a “pre-made” scheme, but to study how the anthropological dimension of the divine attributes can be applied to the contents of the films. A feasible schema to analyze the anthropological dimension of the divine attributes is given by the fact that it is possible to get to them first of all from the limited condition of humanity, seen as a “negative” condition pointing to a “positive” one. Only in a second moment it is possible to consider the idea of God in a positive way, and in this way the universal religious constants take place as the concrete form of being in dialogue with the Absolute. Without the previous negative point of view, no human being would put the question of God, at least in the natural order. But also when supernatural Revelation occurs, the foundation of the “negative way” of attributes is needed to establish the possibility of a “human” word about God. If the human person must experience the divine Love just as divine, he/she must be able to distinguish God from the limits of worldliness in which individuals experience God.

Therefore, I proposed the following scheme to guide this essay: (a) the reasons that push us to come out of the darkness and seek the light of the Absolute (Stages 1 to 5); (b) the key elements that are common to all religious experiences (Stages 6 to 9); (c) the refusal to undertake the passage from (a) to (b), as a result of human freedom (Stage 6); and (d) the point of arrival, unmeasured by the space-time limit, in which we reach definitive communion with the divinity (Stage 10).

## The Stages

### *Stage 1: In the land of darkness*

The human person lives an awareness of his/her own limitations, as an existential revelation of a “beyond the limit.” The idea of darkness is reminiscent of light, as doubt recalls certainty. The first statement

of fact is to feel lost. Movies are often a witness of this human awareness of the limit, the unfinished condition of the human being, the non-meaning of existence. These observations are already a consideration of the human person as someone who “can not be just that.” The human being experiences suffering as paradoxical, so as to feel the need to represent this paradox in the works of art and, especially, in the cinema.

Why is cinema a privileged witness of this condition of darkness? Because it is a form of art linked in a chronological sense to the 20th century. The other arts have also suffered from the anthropological crisis of modernity and expressed, in different modalities and tones, the condition of humanity enclosed in its immanence: cubism or the 12-tone system provide examples of art that represents only the look of the person curved in on him/herself without a sense of bond with reality. The techno-scientific paradigm, with the reduction of rationality to mathematical reason, places art in the outer edge of the frame of meaning. Art thus tends to represent the human person deprived of the sense of his/her existence in the world.

### *Stage 2: The land beyond the horizon*

The person, limited by space and the temporality, cannot be given in a completely positive rendering: For him/her to pursue the full realization of his/her humanity remains an impossible dream, unachievable within our horizons. A complete positivity is over and above human energies: It is divine. But only if such a positiveness exists are we able to give a structure of meaning to our sense of being lost. To experience the negative is therefore already a manifestation of transcendence, and it manifests the possibility of grasping the positive and of striving for it.

We, human beings, are able to reveal the true nature of the limit, opening it to “what is beyond”: the unveiling of the limit leads to the understanding of “what is beyond” as a call and as the destination of human existence.

It is unlikely that the artist remains for a long time in the land of darkness: The characteristic of his overall view of reality is just the ability to see inside the concrete coordinates of time and space, something that goes beyond, which is a specific “piece” of time and space (the work of art as “formed matter”); the artist is a witness of eternity. In fact, real art, in time, “has no time” because it is of all time, its space, while closing it within specific limits, does not stop it from constantly seeking dialogue with those who benefit from it.

The cinema, Tarkovsky said, is sculpting in time. It is not surprising, therefore, that much of the cinematographic artistic production tells about the journey to the land beyond the horizon.

### *Stage 3: The problem of pain*

This stage, and the two subsequent ones, closely link to the previous one, trying to clarify the various connotations in which humanity undertakes the journey to the other side. These connotations may be as many as there are the questions arising from the limited condition of humanity. Nevertheless, a long tradition condenses them into three basic elements: pain, guilt, and death.

The problem of pain and human suffering shows unequivocally our impotence towards ourselves, others, and the world. The experience of pain puts us face to face with our inability to rule the limits of being, but we experience this condition as not connatural to our true being, as something that we should be able to overcome, although we realize that we do not have the resources to be successful.

In this way, suffering becomes a means of escaping our impotence and of opening ourselves to the creative Omnipotence.

Art is a privileged form in speaking about pain. What can hardly be contained in the rational word, undoubtedly finds a better semantic context in the artistic word. How many pages of reasoning should be read to grasp what we can instantly understand contemplating the anguished “Scream” of Munch, or Mary at the foot of the cross of the Calvary in the painting of Van der Weyden? Cinema has more resources than painting or other visual arts of descending into the human spirit, of diving deep into the sea of suffering.

### *Stage 4: The sense of guilt and the freed freedom*

As in the problem of pain, at the origin of the sense of guilt there is the awareness of human limitation; in the context of space-time the limit is defined as self-awareness of finitude, which we discussed in the previous section; in the ethical context, instead, this awareness of the limit is expressed as self-reproach.

When the human tendency to happiness arises, through the intellect, in contact with reality, it freely moves in search of being actualized. In this intellect-will interface, the ambit of human freedom, the very possibility of error in the intellect presenting a concrete good as a real good, and the weakness of the will in its tendency toward good, result in the presence of moral-

ly wrong actions. The free agent perceives the wrong actions as faults (sins), hence the feelings of guilt.

Feeling guilty requires an ethical reference, the recognition of an ethical order that is beyond oneself. An “autonomous” ethical order does not justify the sense of guilt since human freedom is fallible.

Human persons know that alone they are incapable of giving a definitive answer to the question of guilt. From an anthropological viewpoint, the peace that occurs as a result of justification must be understood upon the background of guilt and the subsequent opening to God for forgiveness. Consequently, the experience of peace, which is the fruit of forgiveness, must be placed in relation to the cancellation of guilt itself. Justification and guilt are closely linked: The justification of the guilty is a concrete human experience of forgiveness, which is given only on a specific and previous idea of God who forgives; only Infinite Freedom can forgive sins.

The first stage is the act of self-accusation in which humanity recognizes its existence as a culprit. Without this perception, the following stages are meaningless; no human person would feel the need to turn to an instance of forgiveness. Hence the enormous anthropological significance that cinema can have in its ability to show the human person plagued by guilt, in search, perhaps unconsciously, of divine forgiveness.

### *Stage 5: The desire for eternity*

Suffering and guilt cannot be satisfied with a temporal response: Death, in fact, is the most radical of the problems of the creature, inasmuch as its reality and inevitability render futile any solution which depends upon time. Perhaps for this reason this is one of the most characteristic elements of natural religiosity, and also of every culture, which in a certain sense exist to provide a positive response at the exit of temporality. In short, one of the things that most concern humans is how to ensure a “good death.”

Mortality, per se, is a consequence of the physical structure of the human being. But then death should be a normal element; it should not pose a question of meaning, as seems to universally occur. And so it would, in fact, if mankind had only an intra-cosmic teleology, closed to transcendence. But we are not only body.

The Pauline contrast between the “Spirit” and the “flesh” also includes the contrast between “life” and “death.” This is a serious problem, and concerning it one must say at once that materialism, as a system of thought, in all its forms,

means the acceptance of death as the definitive end of human existence. Everything that is material is corruptible, and therefore the human body (insofar as it is “animal”) is mortal. If man in his essence is only “flesh,” death remains for him an impassable frontier and limit. Hence one can understand how it can be said that human life is nothing but an “existence in order to die.” (John Paul II, 1986, n. 57)

The reference to a “beyond death” is a necessary response, since for humans to die can never be considered as the bringing to completion of human possibilities, that, at the existential level, will always remain limited, even if human existence were prolonged indefinitely. The fullness of humanity cannot be reached simply by adding time.

#### *Stage 6: The scream of blasphemy*

Humankind, thus, is open to transcendence through pain, guilt, and death. But the answer is not automatic: the person is always free to not respond or respond negatively. Indeed, the context of natural religiosity is not able to provide apodictic answers. Aware of the human capacity to prove the existence of God, Thomas Aquinas said, however, that without supernatural revelation, few people would come to the knowledge of the natural truths about God; they would have done so with enormous difficulties; and, in any case, because of the weakness of the human intellect, they would not be able to affirm the accuracy of their reasoning.

To speak of God means always to speak with inappropriate words. Essential elements of the idea of God, such as God’s personal character or God’s providence, may be difficult to reconcile with the intellectual need to assert God’s absolute ontological transcendence. In this context the great problems of life, summed up in the idea of evil, pose the most serious obstacle to respond transcendently to requests for meaning. The reality of evil in all its facets will always be the strongest argument against the divine: If God does not exist, everything is permitted.

Art can be a privileged witness of the opening to God and also of the refusal of the human spirit to accept an answer that manifests itself as too arduous. Cinema can be considered the art of the 20th century, the century in which humanity has questioned the idea of God with a force never reached before. Never as in the two preceding centuries has atheism had arrived at being a real culture: Science, technology, the unrestrainable process of history, the idea of progress . . . have taken the place of God.

But, as Nietzsche shows, the person who decides to remove God is a person who condemns him/herself to meaninglessness and nihilism: It is the drama of atheistic humanism (de Lubac, 1949). Here, too, movies, in a non-superficial way, can manifest this closure, becoming a privileged expression of the human drama, finding by contrast their place in this journey towards God.

#### *Stage 7: In dialogue*

Every religious response is the result of a free act, a choice. Due to this choice (which certainly can be very conditioned by cultural factors or memberships), the person is open to dialogue with the divinity. The forms of this dialogue may be very different, since they depend upon the consistency of the idea of God connected with the specific religious paradigm involved, but every religion has a liturgy.

The religious person experiences as a fundamental moral obligation, both internally and externally, that of honoring the divinity, of worshiping, of ordering his/her life in such a way as to be acceptable; this requires not only a personal participation in the divine worship, but also a stable disposition of listening, that allows one to orient all his/her actions to the divine will. It seems obvious that this task of worship cannot be a marginal aspect of the life of the believer; rather, it is the central axis, which determines the global orientation of his/her existence. The dialogue with God influences the dialogue with oneself, with others, with the world.

Besides the liturgical word, which receives its significant capacity from the divinity, only the language of art seems to be able to sustain this dialogue, which is so difficult to achieve for the rational word. In fact, the strong link between art and liturgy, art and prayer is historically evident. Not all forms of art, however, have had a place in the liturgy, at least up to the present moment, and this is the case of cinema, even if there are already some attempts for the liturgical use of video art. But the ability to occupy a liturgical space, like that of the visual arts or music, does not depend on cinema: only those who are “called” may have a role in the liturgy. In spite of this, cinematographic art can be a vehicle more than adequate to represent this fundamental aspect of religion, which consists in the orientation of the human symbolic ability, internal or external, public or private, to God.

#### *Stage 8: Children of God*

Every religion implies a new form of self-understanding: to believe in God also means accepting a per-

ception of ourselves and of our being coherent with our faith. The “founding story” of every religion speaks about God, but also speaks about us. In other words, the very foundation of the religious life invokes a awareness of who God is and who we are in front of God, including our consequent role in the universe.

Every religion, therefore, has a “dogma,” a body of doctrine accruing from a better clarification of the Other that is the deity; after all, believing in someone is always believing something from the same someone, or believing something that the same someone reveals to us. Most likely the paradigm that finds the most support in different religions, about the new idea that humanity has of itself according to the knowledge of divinity, is divine fatherhood, in which the person is seen in the founding condition of being a child of God.

Movies are not theological treatises. We can not wait, at least in the vast majority of cases, for a specific content on the ontological level on the nature of divinity or our condition of believers. But movies can offer a privileged testimony of how the human being is placed in front of these religious contents, how he/she lives and experiences them; the argument of the films, therefore, will refer indirectly to the different modes in which the divine and the human roles are manifested. Connotations of origin, promotion, guidance, education, punishment . . . attitudes of the paternal figure that manifest in different colors, our radical dependency; filial replies of reliance, respect, acceptance, devotion: All these have undoubtedly ample space in the artistic production of movies.

### *Stage 9: Doing the will of God*

A characteristic of the human being, which distinguishes it from the rest of the known beings, is the moral conscience, regardless of the content that can be given to this expression. Only humans pose the problem of the ethical value of their actions, which amounts to saying that freedom is oriented towards the good, not evil (regardless, even here, of what “good” and “evil” mean). The openness to religious thought, which we considered in the previous two stages, involves not only the obligation of a human action that manifests the recognition of the divinity (liturgy), but also a very special strengthening of this ethical dimension: Every religion has a morality.

The strong link between good and beauty, so masterfully presented by Plato, portends that art, perhaps the freer action of the human being, can also be a great witness to the ethical nature of humankind. And this, not only in the ability to show the inherent beauty of a

freedom oriented towards the good, but also in the very significant ability of the aesthetic word to emphasize, by contrast, the negativity of the lapsed freedom.

In this stage we consider some films inspired by the beauty of well-oriented freedom; since freedom is radically relational, it is helpful to divide the stage into three subgroups, concerning ethical behavior as being with oneself, as being with others, as being in the world.

**Being with oneself.** A key feature of the religious person is that of having to “self-build,” achieving fullness and an “added value” of one’s being that is classically represented with the idea of virtue. The virtuous person is the one whose conscience clearly indicates the good; his/her act is, at any price, consistent with the path indicated by the moral conscience. The cinema is the witness of men and women who, in very different ways, have manifested the greatness of the human being.

**Being with others.** There is no human self-realization which does not manifest itself, sooner or later, implicitly or explicitly, as a going out of oneself to be for others. Any personal virtue, one could say, is really such only when the perfection of good to which it leads the person who possesses it, is manifested as “useful” to the neighbor. The religious person is necessarily a social person, a person in communion with others. The work of art is essentially an act of communication that creates interpersonal encounters beyond time and space. It is not surprising, therefore, to find in the cinema many effective testimonies on the moral virtues of women and men who live for others: love, justice, generosity, dedication.

**Being in the world.** In being for others the human person involves his/her entire spiritual and material reality. This dual unity of humans is a constant religious assertion, in a manner obviously very different in diverse religions. Even when the duality manifests, as often happens in the most archaic religions (but not only) an opposition between spirit and matter, which may even come to a contradictory polarity between good and evil, the task of the religious person involves the purification of (or “from,” under the worst cases) the material reality: A religious attitude toward the world is always present. Every action of humanity in history becomes an opportunity for an encounter with God, an event of religious relevance for the revelation of the divine creation and occasion for the worship of the Creator. Thus religion gives a new meaning to any human effort directed towards the material reality, be it artistic, or technical, or scientific, or ecological.

### *Stage 10: Journey's End*

Paul VI, in a speech on May 6, 1967, pointed out how cinematographic art has a “magical ability to catch a glimpse of the light field behind the mystery of human life,” and how this skill is able to transform into a moral commitment by showing people the way to a full life. And there is no better way to encourage men and women to take this route, than let them to see the beauty of the goal, where “God is for us” (Romans 8:31) and “neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature can separate us from the love of God” (8:37). In the Christian faith the Father himself illuminates with the Incarnation of the Son of our last abode of glory, of which the Eucharist is a pledge. Art, although not able to reach this sublime materialization of Eternity in history, prepares the human spirit to discern in matter, become transparent, the ultimate truth of things. The

nature of cinema, Tarkovsky said, is sculpting in time; ultimately, the carved image makes that time become eternal life.

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# “Hacker” Ethics and Christian Vision

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## *Who are the hackers?*

The term *hacker* has entered common usage because newspapers and television, as well as films and novels, have widely associated it with an ample sequence of phenomena such as the violation of secrets, codes, and passwords, and of protected IT systems, etc., Although the media has imposed this image on the hackers, in reality the so-called “IT pirates” have another name: cracker. The term hacker actually identifies a much more complex and constructive figure: “hackers build things, crackers break them” (Raymond, 2001, ¶10). This definition comes from Eric Raymond, the current editor of Jargon File, a sort of “dictionary for hackers.”

Levy (1984) proposed what he called the “seven commandments of the personal computer revolution.” Levy essentially set down a series of attitudes that had matured years earlier—in the 1960s and 1970s—when a generation of young people with a passion for computers emerged in San Francisco’s Bay Area, the early hackers.

- (1) Access to computers should be unlimited and total.
- (2) Always yield to the Hands-On Imperative!
- (3) All information should be free.
- (4) **Mistrust authority—promote decentralization.**
- (5) Hackers should be judged by their hacking.
- (6) **You can create art and beauty on a computer.**
- (7) Computers can change your life for the better.

I’d like here to take inspiration from the fourth and the sixth commandments which are about authority and the meaning of creativity in order to understand if and how the hacker ethics could be insightful (and also compatible) with the Christian vision, the Christian *weltanschauung*.

## *Authority: The cathedral and the bazaar*

Levy’s vision is founded on playful and creative decentralization and on an authority engendered by shared and decentralized knowledge. The classic exam-

ple is represented by Wikipedia. Shirky (2010) reflects on this sort of “cognitive surplus,” in a phrase taken from the title of a famous book of his. He believes this surplus distinguishes itself as an emergent and vital force, capable of gathering a delocalized and fragmented knowledge and of aggregating it to something new. This sharing does not answer to any “center” nor to any “authority.” It is a sort of biological process of growth and extension.

In “The Cathedral and the Bazaar,” Raymond (2000) contrasts two research models. The first is the “cathedral” mode in which the program is developed by a limited number of experts on the basis of a hierarchical partitioning. The second is the “bazaar” mode where development is decentralized and there is no rigorous division of tasks. The cathedral thus becomes a metaphor of a system where roles are clear-cut, defined, and hierarchical. The bazaar, on the other hand, is the metaphor of an open system.

Himanen (2001) takes up this distinction, relying on other metaphors, the “academia” and the “monastery” (pp. 63–81). Once again, a religious reference. The academic model is platonic in origin and stems from a collective research process based on exchange and self-regulation. The monastic model thus appears to be closed and hierarchical, involving only a limited number of people where the target to be achieved is defined once for all.

## *The logic of faith: Network or communion?*

At this point, a question must be asked: Isn’t the hacker ethic on a collision course with the Catholic *mens* [mind] and its vision of authority and tradition? Are collaborative action and a principle of authority in an intrinsically radical opposition?

Why have we to put these questions? Because with the diffusion of social networks the “bazaar” model is today becoming a mentality. The notion is spreading that sharing on a wide scale is key in the production and dissemination of ideas and knowledge. The success of modern technology available on the Net, which is made up of the web 2.0 “ecosystem,” is

changing our social scenario. In particular, we note that the Net entails the connection of resources, time, and ideas to be shared “generously” and “anarchically.” The Christian faith is called insistently to relate to this kind of *forma mentis* [mind set]. The participation in the digital environment in a natural way is not indifferent to the way in which people live their own spirituality and lives of faith. So it requires a new form of “apologetics” that cannot but develop from the changed categories of comprehension of the world and access to knowledge.

One of the critical points of the hacker and open source vision lies in the intrinsic limit of all sharing. The network model, which reflects this dimension most radically, is the so called peer-to-peer (P2P) model that possesses no hierarchical nodes such as clients and servers, but a number of open nodes connected to other nodes of the network which transmit and receive and vice versa.

In other words, the peer-to-peer logic is based on the fact that I do not receive something in its entirety from a single source, a *depositum*. In more general terms: I share what I have at the very moment when I receive it. But I do not receive a content in its entirety: I receive it in a process which makes of me a node on a shared network of exchange, and which in turn makes me “richer,” so to speak, when I “give the gift” that I have received at the moment of doing so.

If this logic of sharing is considered on a theological level, then we understand that it is problematic because the nature of the Church and the dynamics of the Christian Revelation seem to follow a client-server model which is just the opposite of the P2P. They are not the product of a horizontal exchange, which could be defined more precisely as an ongoing “barter,” but the opening to an inexhaustible Grace.

It passes through human mediation and “ministers” of worship; it is communicated through embodied mediations. The logic of Grace instead creates face-to-face “links,” as is typical of the logic of the gift, something which is alien to the logic of the peer-to-peer, which in itself is a logic of connection and of exchange, not of communion. And a “face” can never be reduced to a mere “peer,” a node. Here lies the challenge for Christian believers: The Net as a place of “connection” must become a place of “communion.”

We risk reaching a radical incompatibility between the “logic” of theology and that of the Net. The risk of *forma mentis* of the hacker kind is to lead to an understanding of the communion as being a con-

nection and the gift as a gratuity because the spotlight focuses on those who “take,” but not those who “receive.” The *gratia gratis data* [grace freely given] instead cannot be “taken” but can be “received.” The Revelation’s knowledge order is peculiar: “Man cannot reach it by means of his own strength.” It is instead “by an entirely free decision” that “God has revealed himself and given himself to man” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 50). It’s a gift.

Ecclesiology, in turn, cannot be reduced to a sociology of ecclesial relations: “The Church is in history, but at the same time she transcends it. It is only ‘with the eyes of faith’ that one can see her in her visible reality and at the same time in her spiritual reality as bearer of divine life” (*Catechism*, n. 770). The Church is not, and will never be, simply a “cognitive society,” while grace is a notion far different from information. These are the reflections that the Catholic vision of authority poses in a critical manner to hacker culture.

### *The “surplus” of the Spirit and creativity*

In short, in the challenge that hacker mentality is starting to pose to theology and faith, **what must be preserved is the human ability for transcendence**, for a gift that cannot be lessened, for a grace that “goes through” the system of relations which is never exclusively the outcome of a connection or a sharing, no matter how extensive and generous. In other terms: It is necessary to remind contemporary humanity that life and its meaning cannot be entirely and definitely explained in a horizontal network, but that humanity continues to aspire to transcendence.

But having said that, it would be necessary to say also that the hacker community doesn’t reject all forms of authority. Raymond himself writes, in fact, that being anti-authoritarian does not mean “fighting all authority” (2001, ¶27). A hacker inspired governance can thus help to better understand the basic assumptions and the effects of a “distributed authority” (Mozilla, n.d., ¶1).

A critical exchange, serious and not complacent, with the hacker spirit may help us understand that the transcendent foundation of faith sets in motion a process that is open, creative, collaborative, and collegial. Appealing to creativity, in addition, can help understand how “the Spirit edifies, animates, and sanctifies the Church” (*Catechism*, n. 145), living within its body, animating it from within. How?

As the digital society is not understandable only through the broadcasted contents, but primarily

through the relationships, so the Church: The sharing of contents takes place within relationships. The Church is called to go deeper into the exercise of authority. Witnessing the Gospel is not a matter of “broadcasting” contents, but of “sharing” them in a context of relationships. Maybe we shouldn’t talk about “media” anymore. We should talk about “connective texture.”

What Shirky defines as surplus does occur in the ecclesial framework. Nevertheless the outcome of the effort of believers is not exclusively immanent. It is, rather, a surplus that sanctifies the action of the Spirit, that revitalizes the members of the mystical body. Christ in fact “participated with his Spirit, which, alone and identical in the head and bodily members, vivifies, unites, the entire body, making it more dynamic” (*Lumen Gentium*, n. 7). The dynamic element of the Church, that which makes it more than just the sum of its parts, is the Holy Spirit.

### *The playful effort of creation*

Is there a place in the hacker theory where the transcendental dimension could be found quite easily? I think we could find it in the hacker’s vision of the meaning of the human life. Himanen (2001) develops a reflection that, starting from these assumptions, also comes into direct contact with theology. As can be read in a key paragraph in the book, the basic issue of the hacker ethic is in fact “the meaning of life.”

Himanen articulates a profound criticism of the Protestant ethical approach, intended in Weber’s “capitalistic” sense (1958), which imposes what he defines as “the Friday-ization of Sunday.” His attack is mainly directed against a certain way to understand life as being totally overbalanced on the optimization of work, dictated by the clock, by performance and by efficiency. It is a vision that rather than being idealized is instead and clearly theological in origin. As can be read in a key paragraph in the book, the basic issue is in fact “the meaning of life”: “One might say that Christianity’s original answer to the question ‘What is the purpose of life?’ was: the purpose of life is Sunday” (Himanen, 2001, p. 13).

Reflecting on Augustine, writing about Genesis against the Manicheans, but also on Dante and other Christian classical writers, Himanen observes that Reformation shifted life’s center of gravity from Sunday to Friday (p. 16). The hacker ethic aims to affirm that “the purpose of life is closer to Sunday than to Friday” (p. 18). It is not difficult to grasp the intuition of a “life blessed” in the genetic code of the hack-

er’s vision of life, the intuition that the human being is called to lead an “other” life, to fully realize his/her humanity.

Obviously the hacker is not a person who indulges idleness and inclines to doing sweet nothing. On the contrary, the hacker is very active; he pursues his passions, and there is creative effort and knowledge without end in his life. Yet he is aware that his humanity is not realized within the framework of rigidly organized time, but within the flexible rhythm of a creativity that must, once again, become the measure of a truly human work, one which best corresponds to the nature of man.

### *The Saturday of the global village*

The place in the hacker theory where the transcendental dimension occurs with ease is the radical appeal to the fact that the Shabbat, the Saturday (the Sunday, in Christian terms) is humanity’s real “home,” our true existential dimension. The Jewish Saturday or Christian Sunday, of course, must not be reduced to “rest.” Yet the Sunday of the hacker is not simply a “holiday”: There lives within it an implicit reference to God, as the creative origin of the world. Here we recognize a fruitful seed of transcendence.

Creation is in a position to give to the hacker vision of the world and of humanity just that transcendental “vanishing point” without which that vision may end up in a colorful but nevertheless blind alley. Himanen quotes the words of Justin Martyr: “Sunday is the day on which we all hold our common assembly, because it is the first day on which God, having wrought a change in the darkness and matter, made the world; and Jesus Christ our Savior on the same day rose from the dead” (2001, p. 150).

It is at this point that Himanen asks a question that he discovers in St. Augustine: “Why did God create the world?” He continues: “The hacker’s answer to Augustine’s question is that God, as a perfect being, did not need to do anything at all, but he wanted to create” (p. 151). In the story of the free and irreducible creative action of God, the hacker recognizes the image of his existence: “Genesis can be seen as a tale of the kind of activity that occurs on creativity’s own terms. In it, talents are used imaginatively. It reflects the joy one feels when one surprises and surpasses oneself” (p. 151). Pittman, one of the first hacker “philosophers,” in his manifesto, “Deus ex machina, or the true computerist,” attempts to give an idea of what a true hacker feels during his creative process: “I as a Christian thought I could feel something of the satisfaction that

God must have felt when He created the world” (qtd. in Himanen, 2001, p. 151). Presenting himself as “a Christian and Technologist,” Pittman interprets this action as an emotional participation in God’s creative work (Pittman, 2008, ¶1).

If the hacker biblical model of creativity is not deprived of its deeper theological value it is then in a position to maintain a memory of a beginning that is the outcome of a creative act of God. In this vision, hacker ethic may even have a prophetic resonance in today’s world, which is totally committed to the logic of profit, to remind us that the “human hearts are yearning for a world where love endures, where gifts are shared” (Benedict XVI, 2008, n. 6).

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# Digital Media Art-Making in Small Group Faith Formation: An Occasion for Experiencing *Communio* in Today's Participatory Cultures

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In today's "participatory cultures" amateur photography has exploded. "Participatory cultures," a term coined by Jenkins (2009), refers to "a culture with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby experienced participants pass along knowledge to novices. In a participatory culture, members also believe their contributions matter and feel some degree of social connection with one another (at the least, members care about others' opinion of what they have created" (p. xi). . . .

Because of camera phones, digital media art-making and sharing—of photos and video—has become an integral, taken-for-granted, daily practice for people who want to communicate with friends and family. A vivid example of this phenomenon occurred when the newly elected Pope Francis came out to the St. Peter's Square balcony to greet the waiting crowds. Hundreds if not thousands of people instinctively lifted up their camera phones, e-tablets, and digital cameras to capture that historic moment and share it (Zhang, 2013). On average, Facebook users upload 350 million images each day. For 2012, that resulted in 240 billion images being shared (Smith, 2013). . . .

Although uploading images online, via email and multiple social networking sites, is a common practice, so is sharing images when people are physically together. Who has not seen someone simply handing a smartphone to another for that person to see images stored on their "camera roll." Either way, online or face-to-face, people use digital images to weave their web of relations and to create their community of people who care about their lives.

Dioceses and parishes have yet to realize the potential of this phenomenon for helping people con-

nect with the faith and the faith community and to weave their web of relations in a way that leads them to our Triune God. How many dioceses and parishes have a space on their websites where parishioners' own photos are featured? . . . Even though this phenomenal explosion of visual creativity and popular image-sharing has been progressing exponentially over the last decade, the churches seem hardly to have noticed. To put it bluntly, they are missing the boat. . . .

I see the potential for image-making and image-sharing in small group settings as having the potential to become a regular spiritual practice within a faith community. As anyone who has grandchildren will report, photography can potentially be of interest to almost every age-group, down to the three-year-old who already is "snapping" images on her parents' smartphone or on her own toy version of it. Doing photography with a group can be attractive to active as well as to marginally active church members. . . .

What's more, when the baptized gather in small groups in the context of prayer and deep respectful sharing of their photographs, they can experience not only community, but also *communio*, the phenomenon of the Spirit creating the "Gifted We." Scharer and Hilbereth (2008) describe beautifully this advent of the "We" that can occur in a group process done in a faith context. In leading workshops and seminars, they have watched with gratitude and awe as the "We" emerges among a group of individuals who may never have known each other before. Within such groups, "'Successful' communication is not something 'made' but something 'given'; it is a gift given by the Other, who is relationship and who spiritually indwells in each of us" (p. 45). As Hilbereth and Scharer report, the dynamics and outcome of the sharing within a gathered circle of the baptized can be a powerful and meaning-filled experience of church:

[G]roup experience is something that belongs to the core of our faith, the experience of God's gift calling so many different people to the disciple-

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This essay comes from a longer presentation to the conference on social media and theology.

ship of Jesus Christ and giving them life in his Spirit. Precisely because this gift is not of our making, because we can't control it, it liberates and enriches us. We are gift for one another; therein is rooted the free character of the We that constitutes church. (p. 94).

In this essay, . . . I report on my research into how one form of digital media art-making—digital photography—can become a spiritual practice for the baptized, and even for those thinking about becoming baptized. (I have experimented with other media art possibilities, as well, such as digital storytelling which can combine first-person narration with photographs, sounds, music, graphics, and video to create a video digital story that can be shared online and face-to-face.) I will make the case for why digital media art-making and sharing could, and even should, naturally become an integral spiritual practice of a church that calls itself sacramental.

### *What is at stake?*

The world is permeated by the grace of God. . . . The world is constantly and ceaselessly possessed by grace from its innermost roots, from the innermost personal center of the spiritual subject. It is constantly and ceaselessly sustained and moved by God's self-bestowal even prior to the question (admittedly crucial) of how creaturely freedom reacts to this "engracing" of the world . . . the question, in other words, of whether creaturely freedom accepts the grace. . . . Whether the world gives the impression . . . of being imbued with grace in this way, or whether it constantly seems to give the lie to this state of being permeated by God's grace which it has, this in no sense alters the fact that it is so. (Rahner, 1973, pp. 166ff.)

While the world may be grace-drenched as Rahner claims, how might people today stop long enough to notice? "We hardly take a long look at anything these days. In our day-to-day lives we often move at such a hurried pace that the best we can do is tender a brief glance" (Cannato, 2006, p. 12). Rahner (1977) gave this warning about our inability to stop and notice. Christians of our day "will either be a 'mystic,' one who has experienced 'something,' or (we) will cease to be anything at all" (p. 15).

The churches today need to foster spiritual practices that help the baptized develop the capacity to tender the world more than a brief glance—to experience the world "engraced," as sacrament. . . . The Roman Catholic liturgical rites presume that participants come

to our worship services with the capacity to experience "something." To experience that "something," though, somewhere along the way worshipers need to have mentors and guides who help them realize, as St. Ignatius of Loyola taught, that we are all capable of "finding God in all things." There is a mutual correlation between our spiritual awareness while we are "inside" liturgy and our spiritual awareness "outside" of it. Strengthen one, strengthen the other. Hughes (2013), explains what is at stake:

Alas, in the 40-plus years since the council fathers conceived a renewed sacramental life, and despite the vision of an engaging sacramental spirituality found in the introduction to the individual rites, we have not yet clearly forged the bonds between rites and life. *We haven't learned to make the connections.* We have rolled out the reformed sacramental rites. In fact, we can do them very well. But we did not sufficiently ground them in the larger sacramental reality of our daily lives. We may enact the rites very well, but we miss the meaning altogether. Ultimately, until we can make the connections between the stuff of our daily life and the sacramental life of the community of believers, the implementation of the liturgical reform will remain sadly truncated . . .

How do we learn to make the connections? How do we learn to see with "sacramental glasses"? How do we learn to pay attention? (pp. 60–61, emphasis added).

DeLisio (2007) proposes that we help the baptized develop "sacramental imaginations": "A human faculty by which we are enabled to see, experience, interpret, trust, hope, envision and expect that the Creator is eternally for, with, and within the cosmos, and that everything in the cosmos bears the sacramental presence and promise of God" (p. 269). For what Hughes calls "sacramental living" we need sacramental imaginations. Just as Christians are "made, not born," as Tertullian pointed out, their sacramental imaginations are a human faculty that needs nurturing. "There is nothing profane here below for those who know how to see," wrote Rahner's fellow Jesuit Teilhard de Chardin (1960, p. 66). Ah, but there's the rub . . . "for those who *know how to see.*" Baptism does not automatically instill a sacramental imagination. Garon points to the dilemma the church faces when members have no "sacramental glasses":

From soap bubbles to galaxies, and even beyond, everything everywhere is alive with

meaning. . . . But not everyone discerns the finer, more elusive whisperings of nature. Such discernment requires a willingness to take the road less traveled, to slow down and listen attentively, to read with good judgment, to reflect in wonder on life and its meanings. In a day and age when we address the visibles of this world with much fervor, all is not well between ourselves and the invisibles. (p. 1)

So how do the baptized learn to see the “invisible” in the visible? How do we learn this sacramental way of seeing all of life? Building on the work of Rahner, Teilhard de Chardin, and other theologians ancient and contemporary, DeLisio proposes that we take on liturgical and spiritual practices that will enhance and stretch our sacramental imaginations in liturgy and life. Photography can be one of the spiritual practices that can enhance our sacramental imaginations.

#### *Why do photography as a spiritual practice?*

Whether we are talking about the “Fine Arts” or “art with a small ‘a,’” art in general builds “effective bridges to the experiences of revelatory wonder” (González-Andrieu, 2013, p. 117). “Creative works engender wonder in us because they effectively pass along someone else’s experiences of wonder in a way that approximates that experience” (p. 43). Among the billions of images shared via the Internet, surely some of them qualify in this way. . . . When done in a contemplative manner, photography can sharpen our vision in more ways than just improved physical seeing. Valters Paintner, a spiritual director and photographer, explains that the act of doing photography can open “the eyes of the heart”:

Our human capacity to perceive is limited because God’s full glory is too radiant for us to bear fully.

Yet the graced eye can glimpse beauty everywhere, seeing the divine at work in the hidden depths of things. It is so easy to let our senses be dulled and to settle for the ordinary. Often, life seems to be just what it offers on the surface; as Ecclesiastes puts it, “there is nothing new under the sun” (1:9). The technology, speed, and busyness so prized by our Western culture foster a habit of blindness. For all the bustle, a dreary sameness comes to mark the places where we live. We forget that there is a vast depth beneath the apparent surfaces of things.

The eye of aesthetic spirituality sees more than other eyes. Art in general, and photography in particular, helps to facilitate this awakening

by granting us epiphanies through its transfigurations of the ordinary. We come to know more than what appears within our line of vision. (2013, p. 13).

Our image-making devices may or may not enhance our human capacity to perceive, depending on how we use them. The creative act of making a photo can potentially lead to our experiencing epiphanies, as Paintner indicates, and to our sharing that experience of wonder with others. When we use our image-making devices in this way we are engaging in “focal practices.” Using categories offered by Albert Borgmann, a philosopher of technology, Gaillardetz (2007) writes of the difference between a “device” that is a technological convenience and a “focal thing” that invites us into engaging “focal practices” with others:

These “practices” are often routine ways in which we engage the larger world in our daily lives. They are activities we undertake in order to obtain a desired good, but, and this is crucial, in some sense the goods we desire are internal to the practice—they cannot be separated. These practices, while often pedestrian, generally demand the cultivation of some basic discipline or skills, a certain degree of attentiveness, and they can be judged by some accepted standard of excellence. (p. 6)

Gaillardetz urges us to take on “focal practices” that will invite us to spend ourselves with and for others. “Focal things” can lead us to “focal practices” that can result in “focal living,” what Gaillardetz calls a manifestation of “communion” (p. 9). In the sharing that “focal practices” typically call for, these practices can enhance our relationships with each other and the rest of creation. Inseparable from their particular context, “focal things” and their related “focal practices” lead to “a multitextured, multilayered web of relationships with the larger world” (p. 3). “Focal things” provide a focus around which people interact. “Focal things” invite people to participate in “focal practices.” These practices require skills, ones intentionally honed and shared within a community. They tend to bring people together, by necessity and by choice. Through such “focal practices,” Gaillardetz says, we can transform our days and our relationships. Doing photography as a spiritual practice with a small group can become a “focal practice” that enhances and strengthens our web of relationships. This kind of readily available artistic practice can invite us to be at play in the Spirit, and this individual playing as a spir-

itual practice can then be shared with others in Spirit-filled experiences of *communio* in church-sponsored small groups.

Borgmann (2003) would likely count camera phones among the technological devices that have changed the cultural paradigm of how we live together, a shift in practices of daily life that he says requires a counterpractice: “Since technology as a way of life is so pervasive, so well entrenched, and so concealed in its quotidianity, Christians must meet the rule of technology with a deliberate and regular counterpractice” (p. 94). Paradoxically, a technological device in the hands of so many—a camera phone—can be part of a Christian counterpractice to the “rule of technology.” Phillips, a photographer, describes what is possible:

The whole world changes for me when I walk through it with my camera. On days when I walk for the sake of walking, with no camera in hand, my mind is besieged with random thoughts, breaking like waves on the shore of my being. I am pushed and pulled by the surge of them, like a strand of kelp below the sea, always moving in the ebb and flow.

On days when I walk for the sake of seeing, the act of looking consumes my consciousness. The mind quiets down, giving way to the eyes, and the world enters through the silent portals. What thoughts occur in that timeless movement seem not to come from outside myself, but to surface from a place deep within, rising from a soul in search of expression. (2000, p. 73)

. . . Valters Paintner and Beckman (2010) recommend photography as one of many possible visual arts through which the churches can invite people to deepen their spiritual lives. In looking through the lens of a camera or at the screen of a camera phone, Valters Paintner notes:

We may find that beauty is truly shimmering everywhere, moving our hearts even in the midst of decay or destruction. This is the power of the lens—to help us make space in our field of vision for things regardless of their perceived aesthetic value, so we might discover a deeper landscape, full of unexpected beauty. (2013, pp. 20–21)

### *Photography as spiritual practice*

. . . Intriguingly, the very same communication devices that may contribute to our being “alone together” (Turkle, 2011) have the potential to offer faith communities a new opportunity to bring people together to

create new webs of relationships in the matrix of a combination of physical face-to-face and virtual online presence.

. . . Small faith formation groups designed around the practice of photography could run for a different number of sessions or occur at different intervals throughout a season or year. At the very least, a group would need four sessions of at least one-and-a-half to two-hours duration, depending on the number of participants, in order to make sure everyone knew the basics of photography (that is, the elements of design and composition) and the fundamentals of participating in group spiritual reflection. Small groups might be formed around the practice of close-up, people, nature, landscape, or other categories of photography. They might meet once a month or for just one day. Even if a particular group will only be meeting for a specific number of times, nonetheless the experience is one that involves a creative process that needs to remain a creative process, not a program with a product:

In working with the expressive arts we are invited to place emphasis on the creative process over the creative product. We live in a very product-oriented culture. The way we spend our time may only seem valuable if we have something to show for it, if we are productive and “busy.” We often measure our own worth by how much we accomplish in a given time and how many goals we reach. In the expressive arts, however, much as in prayer, the focus is on the process of creativity and art-making itself rather than the creation of a beautiful product. Inevitably the art created will be beautiful as an authentic expression of the soul. The heart of the work, however, is to free ourselves from the expectations and goals that can keep us from entering deeply into our own creative longings and expressions. (Valters Paintner & Beckman, 2010, pp. 17–18)

An invitation to enter into the process of doing photography as a spiritual practice is an invitation to engage in creative expression. It is also an invitation to enter into a process that would fall into the broad category that Prechtel calls a “spiritual companionship group,” one of whose purposes is “to provide an environment that invites and affirms a contemplative awareness of the presence of God in our midst” (2012, p. 36).

### *What might a group process look like?*

. . . Because I saw the creation of media arts as a social practice—one that could be learned from others and that had community expectations and standards—I

proposed a highly inclusive process called communal co-creation of liturgical media art that would be open to people of all ages. Ideally, a core group that might foster this liturgical ministry would include some people already skilled in digital media art-making and some, regardless of their media skills, who were particularly sensitive to the metaphorical in liturgy and life (Crowley, 2006, 2007).

. . . I wanted my students to discover how photographs of daily life can potentially serve as “a portal to the mystery of God” (Evangelical, 2002). This is not a photography course. It is a course designed to help these current and future ministers of the church ecumenical to lead small groups in doing photography as a spiritual practice. Through the creating and sharing of photographs and the practice of contemplation of those photographs, an elementary form of *visio divina*, it gives them experience in the mystagogy of daily life and begins to prepare them to be mystagogues for their faith communities. “Mystagogy” is a term used to refer to reflection upon the experience of the “mysteries” that are the sacraments. A “mystagogue” is the one who would lead that reflection, as did the mystagogues in the patristic era with neophytes after Easter Vigil initiation. Photography done in the course of a small group experience, within a contemplative prayer-filled context, may result in local congregants creating images that appear on their parish website, in the church bulletin, in their worship, in catechetical classes, or in ongoing faith formation groups. Regardless of where or whether the images produced might ultimately contribute to the life of the community, that destination is not the *raison d’être* for the process. Creating a community of everyday mystics is the long-term goal.

Each week each student would upload an album of five to seven photographs to our online course site. At the start of class, after prayer that invoked the Holy Spirit, we would engage these photographs. Only after viewing the full set in silence would students then be free to indicate an image she or he wanted to go back to and comment upon. I instructed students to respond to what they saw and what that evoked within them, before they were to make any comment upon the particular photographic skill in evidence. The students learned how even a photograph of lines could evoke and provoke their imaginations. Once students had learned to respect this process—contemplate in silence, comment about the image and what it evoked, share what they had discovered in the act of making the image and in encountering the image with others—did

we move on to ask questions related to worship. . . . Eventually we reversed the process to the admittedly harder assignments of taking photographs for particular liturgical occasions.

The initial students, all ministers-in-training, . . . encouraged me to see that this process need not be limited to the purposes of creating liturgical media art. The process itself had value as a spiritual practice. It could work with any parish group. Each hour-and-a-half session adapted Prechtel’s basic structure for spiritual companionship small groups:

- simple opening ritual with prayer;
- brief check-in time;
- group focus, that is, contemplation and conversation about the photographs; and
- closing prayer (2012, p. 37).

Consequently, I adapted my classroom process for a small group of my fellow parishioners. At the start of each of the six sessions, we began with prayer that called upon the Holy Spirit to be present in our viewing and our sharing. We looked at the images each person had offered, person by person. Other members of the group would comment on what they saw or felt and what the images evoked in their memories and imaginations before the photographer whose images they were would speak of what she or he had discovered in the process of making the images. Over the course of an hour-and-a-half, the projection of the images lead to rich conversation and sharing about the grace the parishioners had glimpsed in their own neighborhoods that week because they were intentionally open to finding it. Phillips points to the importance of how the act of making images can lead to interaction with others and the Holy Other in our midst:

Our relationships with people are vital and constantly changing. The more we give, the more we receive. The more we seek, the more we find. Finding God at eye level takes little more than attention, intention, and commitment. (2000)

Having a group in which you can share where you found God and to whose members you are accountable leads to enhanced seeing of the divine in the daily. Each gathering closed with prayers of thanksgiving for these moments of finding and sharing God-at-eye-level with each other. . . .

Over time, I created a website that included short reflections designed to help the participants make spiritual connections between their taking images and their “receiving the light”: “Photography as a Spiritual

Practice,” <http://www.photogsp.weebly.com>. . . . What was very new about this mini-course was that many of the images shared, including my own, were taken on smartphones, a practice some have dubbed “iPhoneography.” Even though some of the people who used their smartphones also owned DSLR cameras, the smartphone was “there” when they glimpsed grace in their world and wanted to share it.

This whole process is a hybrid one—a mix of online and face-to-face interaction and contemplation—that only recently has been made possible because of the easy access of camera phones and the easy sharing of the Internet. . . . For the churches this means that through these kinds of small group interactions and creative efforts we have new possibilities for developing our sacramental imaginations and increased opportunities for more frequently putting on our “sacramental glasses.”

#### *What are the implications for faith formation?*

. . . The subjects of what may be photographed, the people who may take those photographs (children, teens, young adults, adults, elders), and their particular circumstances will inevitably vary. The approach to engaging in digital media art-making, though, changes significantly and beneficially when these images can be viewed in small groups and become the focus of communal reflection. Then this focal practice can become a spiritual practice that leads to an experience that can be truly transforming—*communio*. . . . This is the possibility open to the churches that embrace the opportunity of leading their members, of whatever age, into deeper “sacramental living in a post-conciliar church” though participation in small groups engaged in digital media art-making as a spiritual practice.

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