

BUILDING DIGITAL BRIDGES

Considerations for ministry in the emerging communication landscape

Anthony G. Roman

There is a difference between the youth's context and that of their parents'. That's not the strongest opening statement I can think of. But consider this table showing generational and geographic differences between Catholics by Gallagher (1988). Although he stresses geographic location as a factor, I think age factor alone is enough determinant of the differences he cited regardless of location. These differences can be observed among members of every household whether in rural or urban setting.

	<i>Older Generation (Rural)</i>	<i>Younger Generation (Urban)</i>
<i>Faith question</i>	What the Church teaches	Who is Christ for me?
<i>Church</i>	Source of community Expression of shared meaning	An option among many for a weekend Usually boring
<i>Church's moral teaching</i>	Sets the social standard	Archaic Irrelevant
<i>Liturgy and music</i>	Comfort and security	Old fashioned Out of date Unmoving

Such differences have consequences on ministering with young people. People advanced in age like our parents are mostly thinking of ways to better the youth's situation and rightfully they do so. However, the gap between youth and parents' contexts is becoming a factor to reckon with in a world treading through media development. And this gap also seems to be a mere continuation of past situations. Our grandparents found themselves in a similar conflict situation with their children, our parents. And so did our parents, with us.

Mother recalls how grandmother warns her of dancing too much "Boogie" and of her fascination with Elvis "the Swinging Pelvis" Presley. My grandmother whined about how mother's generation seemed to be engulfed in a pop culture that is opposite from their time of the 20s. That era characterized by lady-like ladies and gentleman men, prim attires and Victorian-like dances was gradually overshadowed by ear-bursting prom music, ballooning petty-coats, naked necklines and swinging bodies on the dance floor.

Not too long ago, about 21 years minus my age now, it was my turn to get hooked on artists like Madonna and Michael Jackson. And it was mother's turn to complain to colleagues about my media behavior and the youth culture at that time. One evening, while watching British artists Simon Le Bon and gender-bender Boy George on TV, mother sneaked from behind me and asked "Is that the kind of program you like?" She used an Ilocano term (dialect from northern Philippines) to refer to the pop icons' performance as "wiggle-wiggle." Obviously, that was not her ideal of entertainment. But it was mine. Twenty-one years later, it was my turn to complain about my teen cousins' fascination with pop artists Garbage, Beyonce, Puff Daddy, etc. And I suspect that soon, these cousins will also complain about the media behavior of those younger than them.

Some dynamics are clearly at work here. In the three generations I have just described, pop culture did not only evolve. The members of the different cultures meeting at certain points also produce conflicts or conflict situations. Both groups, the young and the old, question the ideals held by the other. One group imposes itself upon the other, while the other tries to assert an identity and while discovering new boundaries. In the area of media appreciation, savvy and consumption, these two groups collide.

Since we are dealing with digital media at present, I would refer to this gap as yet another form of *digital divide* only this time, the phenomenon is happening within families and communities. Addressing this "generational digital

divide” is the focus of this paper. Drawing from Papal statements, documents published by the FABC-Office of Social Communication as well as library resources, I will propose three measures to help reduce this gap: (1) using the present media landscape as a springboard for moral development, (2) communicating, taking into account the ‘new culture’ created by modern means of communication, and (3) modeling communication on the Source of all good communication, the Perfect Communicator, Jesus Christ.

But first, let us draw a picture of the situation I just described. If we plot this gap on a grid, we will have two sloping lines traversing thru a time-line of globalization and development of communication technology against a measure of media appreciation, savvy and consumption (Fig. 1). This rudimentary presentation, show two progressions representing both young and matured sectors of society remaining off tangent for the most part, with no point of convergence. This has serious consequences in ministry for the young.

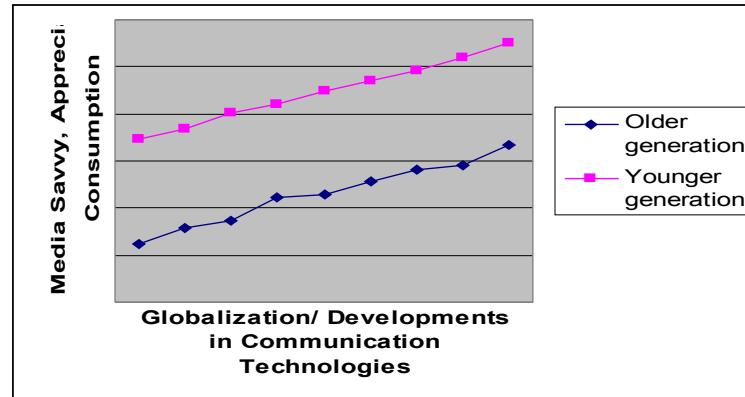


Fig. 1: Generational "Digital Divide"

A friend once tried to relive his knack for telling stories when two nieces came while he was tinkering his car. He thought the classic "Cinderella" tale would appeal to his nieces aged five and four. So he proceeded, making sure that all dramatic details are well incorporated, but all the while observing a blank stare and a faint smile in the young faces. He heightened his emotions and even inserted suspense but the faint smile remained. Finally he reached the lost shoes episode and on to the "happily ever after" remark; still, no remarkable reaction from the kids. He did a little questioning to bring the narrative experience to a close and seal in the moral lessons. But the older niece's first reaction was "Kuya Edgar (*Kuya* is Tagalog for older brother), you are bluffing! That's not how the story goes." Edgar was sure he was faithful to the text of his *Lady-Bird* book he read ages ago. So he asked "How did you learn the story?" "*Ever After!* Kuya Leo rented for us last week," was the quick reply. He then explained why there were differences in the two stories, and completely missing out the moral lessons. Needless to say, Edgar felt more embarrassed than triumphant after that experience. He was in the *Lady-Bird* era. The nieces are in the digital Hollywood era.

The Communication Landscape

In a meeting of Bishops responsible for communication in Asia meeting on "Family and Communication, Communication in the Family" (Bishops' Meet 2003, Negombo), I urged a three-way communication of families amidst factors hindering authentic communication, open sharing, dialogue, and mutual understanding: First is communication with God, Source of all good communication, through prayer and contemplation; second, communication with family members to express the love that binds them and help develop moral sensibilities especially of the young; and third, communication with other families, in communion and solidarity, to live what it means to be community.¹

¹ Roman, Anthony: "Family and Communication, Communication in the Family." In "FABC Papers" No. 110. Hong Kong: FABC, 2003. pp. 4-18.

Those factors hindering authentic communication of and in the family are television, Internet, video games, cellular phones and shopping malls.

Television

- Television has penetrated most if not all Asian households. Today, the common talk especially in urban areas revolves around the number of television sets at home rather than if a family owns a set or not. In 2000, a study of the “Asian Media and Information Centre” (AMIC) found that young people do not only spend considerable hours in front of TV, they also have access to programs meant for adults and actually watch them.² Young adolescents who were interviewed for the research said they find no program suitable for their age bracket. TV programs are either too “kiddish,” mostly appealing to very young viewers, or adult-oriented. This was seen as a problem area because kids in their teens may not be ready for the programs’ often complex plots and portrayal of uninhibited sex and violence.³
- A disturbing news correlating promiscuity with the burgeoning communication technologies in Asia was published in “The Week” in India October 2002. It says: “The explosion of television in the early 1990s, followed by the Internet in the mid-1990s, and now mobile telephony ... has allowed greater interaction between the sexes allowing them freedom to shed traditional inhibitions. Discreet channels of communication like chat lines on the net, telephones and SMS are a great lure for youngsters to experiment with premarital relationships.”
- “India Today” has published an article in October 2002 entitled “Material Children,” featuring young people being lured into “blatant consumerism,” calling this phenomenon the “new religion for adolescents.” The researchers argue that young children have changed role models from traditional figures like Mahatma Gandhi or Jesus Christ to pop icons they see on television, films and advertisements. “Youngsters tend to take the materialism expounded in ads as gospel” the article said.

Internet

- Consider this TIME magazine article (May 27, 2006) and what it says about time spent by young Americans on digital devices and Internet:
Today 82% of kids are online by the seventh grade, according to the Pew Internet and American Life Project. And what they love about the computer, of course, is that it offers the radio/CD thing and so much more--games, movies, e-mail, IM, Google, MySpace. The big finding of a 2005 survey of Americans ages 8 to 18 by the Kaiser Family Foundation, co-authored by Roberts, is not that kids were spending a larger chunk of time using electronic media--that was holding steady at 6.5 hours a day (could it possibly get any bigger?)--but that they were packing more media exposure into that time: 8.5 hours' worth, thanks to "media multitasking"--listening to iTunes, watching a DVD and IMing friends all at the same time. Increasingly, the media-hungry members of Generation M, as Kaiser dubbed them, don't just sit down to watch a TV show with their friends or family. From a quarter to a third of them, according to the survey, say they simultaneously absorb some other medium "most of the time" while watching TV, listening to music, using the computer or even while reading.
- China is the most rapidly growing online market in the world. Its number of Internet subscribers reached 80 million in 2003, second only to 140 million in the United States (Yoo & Kim 2004). The mainland has 68 million web surfers. They are expected to number 142 million by 2007 (Logan & Luk 2004). Multi-media messaging, which enables mobile users to send colour pictures, animation, recorded sound and video 40 times faster than second-generation systems, had only 8 million PRC subscribers in 2003, but experts believe it will expand to an industry worth US\$22 billion by 2008 (Taipei Times 2004).⁴

² Anura Goonasekera, et. al.: “Growing Up with TV, Asian Children’s Experience.” Singapore: AMIC, 2000.

³ “We’re now used to and actually enjoy bite-size, quick and snappy programs on TV and film; no matter how long they are. U.S. consumer trend researchers call this ‘technomorphing’: changes in our expectations as a result of rapid changes in technology. Steven Johnson, author of ‘Everything Bad is Good for You’ argues that TV’s ‘erstwhile linear, single-themed plotlines used to call for passivity, today’s increasingly multi-pronged programs are actually making us smarter.” (McNicoll, Tracy: “A World of Digital Dimsum.” In “Newsweek” Sept 26-Oct 3. p. 84.)

⁴ John D.H. Downing, with Yong Cao “Global media corporations and the People’s Republic of China. (Internet web text). (2006). World Association for Christian Communication (Producer and Distributor). Available: http://www.wacc.org.uk/wacc/publications/media_development/2004_4/global_media_corporations_and_the_people_s_republic_of_china

Video Games

- “The Strait Times” (Oct 2002) described how young South Koreans are “turning into broadband zombies.” The gaming industry are producing “zombie-like addicts who are turning on and into computer games and dropping out of school and traditional group activities, becoming uncommunicative and even violent because of the electronic games they play.”
- The virtual world of MMORPG – massively multiplayer online role-playing games – became addictive to pathological levels, Smith & Jones company will open a 24-hour addiction treatment center in Amsterdam for so-called online game addicts. Young Koreans are getting “hooked on the virtual world” to the point of dying from excessive number of gaming hours. The country’s “shortage of recreational diversions force millions of students and adults to escape into cyberspace and be transformed into knights who slay dragons, spaceship captains who save the world from aliens, or princesses who crusade for a lost throne in medieval Europe.” The Korean government now runs a Center for Internet Addiction Prevention and Counseling to help teens overcome online addiction.⁵

Cell (Mobile) phones

- Now we head toward the next phase, when the power of the Internet extends to mobile devices. Though an estimated 700 million people are online worldwide, that's nothing compared with the 2.1 billion people with cellphones. Rich Templeton, CEO of Texas Instruments, which makes the chips at the core of most of the world's mobile handsets, predicts that four billion people will have them by 2010.⁶
- SMS has become a vital part in the Filipino lifestyle. SMS also helped overthrow the corrupt Estrada government in 2001. The major telecommunications companies have estimated that in 2005 the number of mobile phones/subscribers will have risen to 49 million, almost 60% of the population. In 2002, Nokia estimates that there are around 10 million cellphones in the Philippines, transmitting about 100 million text messages a day.⁷ In a recent tech-show in Singapore, IT experts estimate mobile phone companies now processing 200 million text messages daily.
- With the advent of digital media including SMS, much of human experience has become “mediated by electronics and telecommunications networks.” “Membership to our culture – the shared experiences with people – becomes based less on traditional criteria like location, ethnicity, kinship ties or religion but rather on affordability and our ability to purchase access to the network.”⁸ The phenomenon of cellular phones has created a gap between those connected and those who are not. There is a perceived elitist membership into the culture of cellular phone users, while non-members remain as outsiders.

Shopping Malls⁹

Malling or hanging out in shopping malls has emerged as a new way to spend leisure time. In Manila (Philippines), there is already a high concentration of them. Shopping malls are the “new plazas,” replacing the traditional social center of towns and cities. There is not one municipality or city in Metro Manila that does not have at least one mall and new ones are upcoming. *I, The Investigative Reporting Magazine* (2002) reports that top Filipino mall developer, SM, plans to build two new shopping malls per year within the decade. 45 more malls are scheduled for construction during the same period. Another mall developer plans to build some 100 “strip” malls in several provinces across the country.

Malls are the “new down towns” where people do not only shop. A vast array of goods and services are available under one roof, family members would not have the time to sit down and dialogue. Although one emerges as better informed of what’s new and what’s “in,” malling is never the same as quiet moments of recollection or intimate sharing with a trusted person. The experience

⁵ “There is a neurological explanation for this addictiveness. The human brain is wired to respond strongly to situations that combine both the promise of reward and the exploration of new environments. Professor Jaak Panksepp of Bowling Green State University calls this the ‘seeking circuitry’ in the brain controlled by the neurotransmitter dopamine, which plays a crucial role in most addictive drugs.” (Johnson, Steven: “I Can Stop Playing Anytime I Want.” In “Newsweek” Sept 26 – Oct 3, 2005. p. 68.)

⁶ Kirkpatrick, David: “Life in a Connected World.” In “Fortune” magazine June 26 2006.

⁷ Roman, Anthony: “Texting God: SMS and Religion in the Philippines.” In “Religion and Social Communication, Journal of the Asian Research Center for Religion and Social Communication” vol. 3 no. 1 2005. Bangkok: ARC, 2005. pp. 41-59.

⁸ Celdran, David: “Text Revolution” in “I, The Investigative Reporting Magazine,” April-June 2002.

⁹ Roman, Anthony: “Family and Communication, Communication in the Family.” In “FABC Papers” No. 110. Hong Kong: FABC, 2003.

is often less relaxing, even stressful says an observer. But young Filipinos still flock to the malls even on weekdays, regarding them as the ultimate hangout place.

Observers, however, are wary about the phenomenon. Aside from manipulating people to buy through aggressive (sometimes offensive) marketing schemes, malls seem to introduce another “divide” among people; a notion of “othering” or “us versus them.” Not everyone is allowed inside malls – those who are not properly dressed or suspicious looking are denied entry so as not to “upset the malls’ carefully calibrated environment.” Prices of goods and services are also mostly exorbitant giving wrong signals to rural folks and kids about the ideal kind of living.

Many other facts can be added to this; facts about how families and communities are robbed of opportunities for authentic communication, dialogue and sharing. Is there a way through all this? The Chinese character of the word “crisis” brings together two characters; one for “danger,” the other for “opportunity.” A crisis therefore, is both danger and opportunity. Can we turn this crisis into an opportunity?

There were two dominant reactions to the film “The Da Vinci Code” movie (2006). One was outright rejection of the film as un-Godly and profane, even sacrilegious. The other saw the need to review, renew or revitalize catechism and evangelizing efforts. The way modern means of communication seems to work in our societies can be looked at from the second perspective. This is essentially what my three proposals embody.

Wealth to harness

But before discussing them, let us consider two things:

1. The media is not an all-evil phenomenon, nor a hot bed of vice as some people might think. The Pastoral Instruction *Communio et Progressio*, magna carta of communications, says modern media have the capacity to carry the message of salvation. “Modern media offer new ways of confronting people with the message of the Gospel... are invaluable helps for Christian education... offer marvelous opportunities to all for considering the implications of their religious convictions through the discussion of events and problems of the day...” and make more interesting the “teaching of Christianity.”¹⁰

We can draw positive moral and spiritual insights from media products; certainly because Christians are present in media specifically the secular media. In the Philippines, there is a band of actors, producers, directors and industry workers called the *Oasis of Love* Catholic charismatic ministry. There are Protestant groups of entertainment personnel involved in socio-civic causes. Famed Catholic directors have networked with NGOs and Church bodies seeking media literacy and providing media reading skills to Filipinos.

In Hollywood, Christian entertainment workers wanting to be Christ’s witness through their work in cinema and television have banded in a group called *Act One*. TV shows like *That ‘70s Show*, *Joan of Arcadia*, *Touched by an Angel*, *Boomtown*, *ER*, and *NYPD Blue* all have Christian professionals behind them, expertly incorporating Christian and human values in storylines that seem trivial, vulgar and controversial on the outset. Strong Christian themes are also woven in films like *X-Men*, *The Matrix*, *The Incredibles*, *Spiderman*, *Lord of the Rings Trilogy*, *Harry Potter* series, and other films that enjoyed commercial success and worldwide releases.

Act One’s publication “Behind the Screen, Hollywood Insiders on Faith, Film and Culture” (2005) urges viewers not to shun television nor films so as not to miss the very realm where God wishes to manifest Himself.¹¹ By monitoring programs and giving feedback to networks and movie outfits, Christian viewers will be helping those Christian professionals behind the screen improve and witness more to their faith through the entertainment media.

¹⁰ *Communio et Progressio* nos. 126-131, Pastoral Instruction (1971). In Eilers, Franz-Josef (ed.): “Church and Social Communication, Basic Documents.” Manila: Logos (1997).

¹¹ Lewerenz, Spencer and Nicolosi, Barbara (eds): “Behind the Screen, Hollywood Insiders on Faith, Film and Culture.” Grand Rapids, MI: Bakerbooks (2005).

The Internet is also a haven for religion seekers. While it has the image of being riddled with pornographic and hate stuff, Pew Research Center in the US notes that:

Nearly two-thirds of online Americans use the Internet for faith-related reasons. The 64% of Internet users who perform spiritual and religious activities online represent nearly 82 million Americans. Among the most popular and important spiritually-related online activities measured in a new national survey: 38% of the nation's 128 million Internet users have sent and received email with spiritual content; 35% have sent or received online greeting cards related to religious holidays; 32% have gone online to read news accounts of religious events and affairs; 21% have sought information about how to celebrate religious holidays; 17% have looked for information about where they could attend religious services; 7% have made or responded to online prayer requests; and 7% have made donations to religious organizations or charities.¹²

This means along side the “garbage” we find online, there are offerings that give users a premium including faith premiums like those mentioned. In Asia, efforts are expended to dilute Internet exchanges with religious content. In the past seven years, bishops' conferences and dioceses have opened web portals to reach a wider audience for their services and to convey Christian and human values online. Consider just a few examples:

- Seoul archdiocese has opened a Cyber-Pastoral Centre at <http://veritas.ne.kr> to help form and prepare catechumens for baptism. Catechesis via the Internet is the thrust in this computerized society, eliminating barriers of time and distance in religious communication while maintaining personal contacts.
- The diocese of Uijeongbu, Korea had launched on-line TV broadcasts with mottos “Beautiful Eyes Looking at the World” and “A Path Opened to the Beautiful World.” This service offers formation programs for lay people, social welfare and cultural programs.
- An Internet chatroom for seminarians is being planned with the Union of Catholic Asia News (UCANews) at the fore to create a forum for dialogue and discussion among seminarians throughout the continent.
- The first online evangelization school opened in Hong Kong in 2005 headed by an Italian priest of the Pontifical Foreign Missions Institute. The mission is to train Christians to do evangelical work and to preach the Gospel to non-Catholics.
- The Jesuits in Singapore maintains an online Bible prayer guide where visitors can receive Gospel E-messages daily via the Free Gospel Email service.
- In the wake of disasters like the 2004 killer Tsunami, websites of NGOs and other Church bodies carried the news to far-off continents and served as channels of relief and support to survivors and families of victims.
- On the occasion of its seventh anniversary of establishment in 2004, The Catholic Church in Tajikistan opened its official Internet website with facts about the Church in the Central Asian state. Uzbekistan has long maintained a presence in cyberspace with its Agnuz website providing news and information to local Catholics.

2. The second consideration is the fact that young people are a wealth of resource that can be harnessed for pastoral ministry. A youth group in Laos doing missionary work at home is also extending pastoral care to locals in need. They are leading clandestine prayer sessions amid threats of apprehension by local authorities. They are “missionary minded” said a Bishop from Thailand, and “zealous” given that the entire country has only one Bishop-pastor.¹³ All over Asia, we find similar stories: of brave young people sometimes giving their lives because they love Jesus so much. Recently, a young Jesuit seminarian was killed in Cambodia in his effort to save children from a landmine. Two Missionaries of the Poor – one Indian and one Filipino – were killed in cold blood in Latin America. Young Vietnamese Catholics were in the news lately for leading a musical prayer session at Thanh Da parish attracting some 400 other youths to the melody of their flutes, organ and guitar. Singaporean youths recently attracted a throng of young people in a staged skit showcasing real life dramas of people and how they found God.

¹² Raine, Lee: “Faith Online: 64% of wired Americans have used the Internet for spiritual or religious purposes” (Internet web text). (2006). Pew Internet & American Life Project (Producer and Distributor). Available: http://www.pewinternet.org/PPF/r/126/report_display.asp

¹³ Phimpisan, George Yod: “Youth as Missionaries: The Laos Experience.” In “E-generation, The Communication of Young People in Asia.” Manila: Logos (2003). p.153.

Young people in Asia are smart, intuitive and at home with digital gadgets. They are the “best people to catch other youth for Jesus.” Youth as partners for ministry has the following advantages:¹⁴

- They are practical, not flooded by theory – easily motivated and effective
- Jesus, for them, is often a personal hero and this makes all the difference
- Relationships are at the center of their lives. It is the same with evangelization. They spontaneously build communities.
- “Their freshness and enthusiasm, their spirit of solidarity and hope” (EA 47) transforms all that they do, even the everyday Church life.
- For a young missionary, creativity is at its height. (She is) restless about what is dry and boring. This can be powerful in the hands of the Holy Spirit.
- They are an integral part of the multi-ethnic background of Asia and as such the best ones to be in dialogue with cultures in day-to-day life.

Media: springboards for moral sensibility

According to the ritual theories of Victor Turner, Arnold van Gennep and others, there is a stage in every ritual (communication process) where the participants change. That stage referred as *liminal* or stage of *liminality* is likewise a stage of self-transcendence. One is taken out of her context and transported to a plane of “between and betwixt,” the “now and the not yet,” a threshold separating two realms of existence. At such point, the changes sought in the ritual process, let’s say in a rite of passage, is confirmed. She either experiences separation after a burial rite, integration after a wedding ceremony or confirmation after a graduation rite. Thereafter, the participant is brought back to her original context transformed psychologically, cognitively and emotionally.

Turner refers to liminal experiences as something that involves the mysterious, has an “antiseccular” even religious component, and where the “revelation of an Other” is experienced. William James’ study of religious experience (1971) led him to conclude that when a person is converted, “some religious ideas that were previously peripheral in consciousness now take central place.” Turner, however, speculated that in today’s industrialized (information) society, people might be involved instead in the *liminoid*. This is a term he invented to denote its resemblance with the liminal but without the capacity to let participants experience “absolute transcendence” or seeing the “Ultimate Power of Creation which made finite creatures.”¹⁵

Consider this assessment of Csikszentmihalyi and his example of what he calls “autotelic” or that “activity in which one loses oneself or becomes totally engrossed, regardless of the external rewards.”

“You yourself are in an ecstatic state to such a point that you feel as though you almost don’t exist. I’ve experienced this time and again. My hand seems devoid of myself, and I have nothing to do with what’s happening. I just sit there watching it in a state of awe and wonderment. And it just flows out by itself.”¹⁶

James forwarded this example of a ritual participant experiencing partial self-surrender or letting go in the process:

“An athlete... sometimes awakens suddenly to an understanding of the fine points of the game and to a real enjoyment of it, just as the convert awakens to an appreciation of religion. If he keeps on engaging in the sport, there may come a day when all at once the game plays itself through him – when he loses himself in some great contest. In the same way, a musician may suddenly reach a point at which pleasure in the technique of the art entirely falls away, and in some moment of inspiration he becomes the instrument through which the music flows.”¹⁷

¹⁴ Edezhath, Edward: “Sharing Christ with Youth.” In “E-generation, The Communication of Young People in Asia.” Manila: Logos (2003). p.147.

¹⁵ Goethals, Gregor: “Escape from Time, Ritual Dimensions of Popular Culture.” In Stewart Hoover and Knut Lundby: “Rethinking Media, Religion and Culture.” Thousand Oaks, CA; London; New Delhi: Sage (1997). pp. 125 & 128.

¹⁶ Ibid. pp. 124-125.

¹⁷ Ibid. p. 126.

Giamatti writes about the point where an artist, actor or athlete achieves “near-absolute concentration” which transforms the individual and spectators alike:

“The individual’s power to dominate, on stage or field – and they are versions of the same place and are only by analogy altars – invests the whole arena around the locus of performance with his or her power ... Power flows in a mysterious circuit from performer or spectator ... and back, and while cheers or applause are the hoped-for outcome of performing, silence or gasps are the most desired, for then the moment has occurred – then domination is complete, and as the performer triumphs, a unity rare and inspiring results.”¹⁸

While liminal experiences remind us of our Absolute End, the liminoid gives pseudo-religious experience that help achieve perfection in sports, the arts, and other secular activities. Both liminal and liminoid have the ability to transform individuals and give a sense of freedom but liminal experiences are the surer way to reach the realm of the mysterious and the holy. Consider for example the liminal experience in quiet moments of prayer, Bible sharings and attending Mass. Participants are better transformed into the persons they are meant to be, compared to the liminoid experience of watching, say, the World Cup, staying focused on an exercise regimen or shaking heads with Madonna or Britney Spears via an Internet-streamed concert. The results of the “conversion” are far more questionable in the latter. Three ways to address this issue are thus, to:

- a) Increase liminal experiences in societies and communities,
- b) Decrease the liminoid, or
- c) Turn the liminoid into liminal.

Carmelite Father Henk Hoekstra and his colleague Verbeek expounded on this third point, urging that communities adopt a “dialogical spirituality” in media use.¹⁹ This process engages viewers in a conversation about a common narrative experience, say a film, and collectively draw from both narrative and individual viewers their understanding and experience of spirituality. Such a dialogue aims to:²⁰

- Teach viewers understand audiovisual language and its aesthetic and ethical implications (colors, music, symbols, non-verbal expressions);
- Sensitize viewers to the forms of implicit or explicit morality in the mass-mediated culture (through the analysis of the audiovisual program);
- Develop a moral judgment about morality in different audiovisual programs;
- Stimulate and cultivate dialogue about the audiovisual programs and morality in general;
- Stimulate the development of a moral judgment on the mass-mediated world.

All media products can be a subject of such media dialogue, even songs, literary pieces, video games, advertisements and MTVs. The initiative only requires a capable person or team of persons to direct and re-direct the discussion, ensuring that ethical, moral and theological issues are properly addressed. The Titus Brandsma Media and Spirituality Center of the Carmelites in Manila regularly holds film dialogues of this kind for religious and lay groups.

This kind of dialogue goes well into the direction of *media education* which is a persistent concern of the Church.²¹ And, it can happen within families as well. The bishops of the annual Bishops’ Meet 2003 taking the theme “Family in Communication. Communication in the Family” encourages families “to share media like watching TV programs together. Parents and children discussing together the use of TV, with children even participating in the decision

¹⁸ Ibid. p. 127-128.

¹⁹ Hoekstra, Henk and Marjeet Verbeek: “Possibilities of Audiovisual Narrative for Moral Formation.” In Rossi, Philip and Paul Soukup (eds.): “Mass Media and the Moral Imagination.” Kansas, MO: Sheed & Ward (1994). pp. 212-233.

²⁰ Ibid. p. 224.

²¹ cf. “Communication Challenges in Asia.” Bishops’ Meet 1996 Tagaytay City, Philippines; “A New Way of Being Church in Asia – Communication Consequences.” Bishops’ meet 1997 Samphran, Thailand. no 5.b; “*Novo Millennio Ineunte*: FABC Concerns – Communication Challenges. FABC Offices present their vision & concerns.” Bishops’ Meet 2001. no. 7; “Modern Communication Technologies: Challenge for the Church in Asia?”. 2nd Bishops’ Institute for Social Communication (BISCOM II) Bangkok, Thailand. Recommendations, no. 2; “Social Communication Formation in Priestly Ministry and Mission.” 3rd Bishops’ Institute for Social Communication (BISCOM III) Samphran, Thailand. Orientations, no. 3.4, Recommendations, no. 1.

about the use of TV, can be an enriching experience of communication and a means for growth and maturity for all.” (Recommendations, no. 3)

Communicating in today’s ‘new culture’

Communication technologies are creating a new culture and are radically influencing the way we live. New communication technologies (NCTs) create a new vocabulary and new relationships via internet, email and other technologies which the Church cannot neglect. Young people, especially in cities, grow up with the latest communication equipment. Church leaders should be aware of the importance and possibilities of modern communication technologies for their communities especially their young members, and take up these challenges. NCTs require a proper introduction and continual updating of Bishops, priests, seminarians, religious and young people with Church responsibilities. In her education, the Church should empower all media consumers, especially the young, in the proper use of NCTs. Priests, seminarians, religious and lay people should be trained as *cybermissionaries* to fully utilize NCTs for evangelization. The expertise of professionals for such formation should be invited.

These are excerpts from statements of two meetings organized for Bishops by the FABC-Office of Social Communication. One was on “Modern Communication Technologies: Challenge for the Church in Asia” (BISCOM II, 1999) and the other was on “Megatrends Asia: Communication Trends for the Church” (Bishops’ Meet 1999).

From the statements we see the emphasis on the need to empower *all* media consumers in today’s communication landscape. But prior to that, the Bishops did also highlight a necessary condition for effectively empowering media consumers, that is, the “proper introduction and continual updating” of everyone with Church responsibilities. Often we find in families (and communities) parents being taught by youth how to fiddle with cellphones or how to maneuver a mouse. Usually parents inherit their children’s outmoded cellphones so that they can have a more hi-tech unit. This is not to say that parents should go to the far extreme of *fandom* for gadgets and gizmos.²² That might reduce them to mere *techno-freaks*, jeopardizing their ability for open and dialogic communication. The Bishops are pointing to a balanced, critical and compassionate stance towards communication technologies and the new culture created by them.

The Holy Father has dealt with the subject of this “new culture” quite extensively in the Encyclical *Redemptoris Missio* (1990), offering advice about communication and ministry in a society marked with ubiquitous new media. He said:

The first Aeropagus of the modern age is the world of communication, which is unifying humanity and turning it into what is known as a ‘global village.’ ... Involvement in the mass media, however, is not meant merely to strengthen the preaching of the Gospel. There is a deeper reality involved here: since the very evangelization of modern culture depends to a great extent on the influence of the media, it is not enough to use the media simply to spread the Christian message and the Church’s authentic teaching. It is also necessary to integrate that message into the ‘new culture’ created by modern communications. This is a complex issue, since the ‘new culture’ originates not just from whatever content is eventually expressed, but from the very fact that there exist new ways of communicating, with new languages, new techniques and a new psychology. Pope Paul VI said that ‘the split between the Gospel and culture is undoubtedly the tragedy of our time (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 20), and the field of communications fully confirms this judgment. (no. 37c)

This statement by the Pope was my framework for a 2004 study on SMS (short messaging system or texting) and Religion in the Philippines. There are religious SMS services offered by mobile phone companies and few religious groups in the country where some 49 million people (60 percent of 77 million total population) are cellphone users exchanging about 200 million text messages a day. I wanted to gain insight on whether or not Catholic students are using religious SMS services, which generally send quotes from the Bible at a premium rate. I also compared religious use of the cellphone against the secular chat services offered by mobile phone companies. My study involved a survey of 500 Catholic students in Metro Manila. Here are my findings:²³

²² In the continuum between two poles: fandom and censure, “fandom” is the state of being an ultimate fan, admirer or aficionado of media and/or technologies; while “censor” cuts off all affiliation and use thereof.

²³ Roman, Anthony: “Texting God: SMS and Religion in the Philippines.” In “Religion and Social Communication, Journal of the Asian Research Center for Religion and Social Communication” vol. 3 no. 1 2005. Bangkok: ARC, 2005. pp. 41-59.

1. Religious SMS are sent to individual subscribers from two sources:
 - a. Mobile phone companies and few religious groups send Premium-rated Biblical texts and inspirational quotes to subscribers much like news alerts, traffic advisories, and financial information. About 38 percent young people subscribe to religious SMS service while the majority complain about the cost this kind of service involves. Some say it's boring and too Catholic, while others do not like being passive in the one-way communication process.
 - b. Users themselves send and resend so-called "forwarded messages" about God and Christian living at a cost that is the same as the normal texting rate. These forwarded messages are the youth's everyday greetings linking them with friends, and keeping them in touch. They are also found to boost one another's morale. An earlier study which I quoted in my research, shows 80 percent of texters are pleased at the arrival of these messages, a third said they feel important, and another third said they are inspired by them.
2. SMS provides the opportunity for ordinary users to be content developers themselves. A carefully crafted message fitted for a liturgical season may be sent and re-circulated to a user's network of friends. Paul Levinson calls such developers "mobile hearths," people who can immediately enact or implement thoughts and ideas via the technology at hand, in this case cellphone and SMS. In order to dilute the flood of SMS with religious thought, one only needs a hint of piety and time to craft religious forwarded messages.
3. Religious SMS in the Philippines has adopted the "new language" of the texting generation. Religious texts are expressed using abbreviated words and sentences with incorrect grammar – all in the name of economy: economy of space and economy of keypunches. A simple TC, GBU or JAPAN can powerfully convey loving concern for the other. TC normally closes a lengthy greeting and asks the recipient to "take care." GBU invokes God to Bless You. JAPAN refers not to the country but to "Just Always Pray at Night." More intimate texters may end their greetings with ITALY, "I trust and love you."
4. SMS technology is used in the Philippines for a wide range of purposes but mostly for entertainment. SMS voting is the "in-thing" among TV programs, mainly variety and game shows. News programs receive SMS feedback from viewers. Mobile phone companies also offer as staples in their host of services ringtones, polyphonic tunes, logos, screen savers and games. These have very short shelf-lives but they remain constant offerings of mobile phone and wireless service companies in the country. Other services include religious SMS (one-way sending of inspirational quotes mentioned above), and chat services – the mobile version of Internet chatrooms where relationships are formed.

I examined whether religious SMS services are used by young people or if they show a leaning towards the secular mobile chat services. And I found that alongside the 38 percent religious SMS subscribers, 34 percent subscribe to mobile chat services.

43 percent of the students are aware of religious SMS services, but some are not happy being passive in the SMS exchange. They would enjoy an active, interpersonal exchange rather than the one-way sending of Biblical and inspirational quotes. Mobile chat subscribers, meanwhile, enjoy meeting chatmates and new friends. For them, chatting with strangers is exciting, entertaining and somewhat of an adventure.

The topics of the chat sessions were not exactly known but there is strong evidence, and a few informants attest to this, that they revolve around relationships and sex. The identities shaped by youth for themselves to lure potential chatmates reveal a lot their intentions and need. The COLLEGE chatroom maintained by a mobile phone company has this partial list of chatters at 0915 hours on 31 July 2006:²⁴

²⁴ The names given by chatters to call themselves deserve some explanation. In the "College" chatroom, there is one resident who is matured enough to call himself "dad." *dad4m2msop* is short-cut for "dad for man-to-man sex on phone." This chatter is seeking overtly sexual conversations or text exchanges, which stimulate masturbation. *m2mlove* chatter is seeking a homosexual relationship (man to man) beyond physical connectedness (love). In Tagalog, the word "pare" and "tol," means close male friend. "Sarap" means delicious, and "mo" is equivalent of the word "you." *tol-sarap-mo* means "(male) friend, you are delicious!" "kan2tero." is actually "kantotero" which means "fucker." *kan2tero27m*, 27 years old, sees himself as a fucker. *sextayopre1* invites other male chatters to a sex session. *chupaero23* is a 23 year old male who calls himself a sucker (chupaero). *lickmepare*

<i>dad4m2msop</i>	<i>gwapodude1</i>	<i>hotnhard2</i>	<i>avalanche8</i>
<i>mrhunk25</i>	<i>tol-sarap-mo</i>	<i>guy4m2m</i>	<i>chupaero23</i>
<i>educbachelor</i>	<i>ivan2311</i>	<i>pre-cum76</i>	<i>str8pogiboi1</i>
<i>centurion</i>	<i>voltaire23</i>	<i>hardy27_mms</i>	<i>lostgurl</i>
<i>hunk2hunk41</i>	<i>hotm2m9</i>	<i>bon1</i>	<i>lickmepare</i>
<i>m2mlove</i>	<i>kan2tero27m</i>	<i>sextayopre1</i>	<i>m2mtxtm8pare</i>

The TEENS chatroom is inhabited by these chatters, and more, at 0917 hours on 31 July 2006:

<i>precious49</i>	<i>xwif</i>	<i>joseph023</i>	<i>stud7</i>
<i>bubslicker</i>	<i>john384</i>	<i>jay691</i>	<i>sarapsexpare</i>
<i>kayle16</i>	<i>9278443506f</i>	<i>gameboy15</i>	<i>cutie399</i>
<i>monchie3</i>	<i>_brent_</i>	<i>win16</i>	<i>gwpoprakbro</i>
<i>ichizen</i>	<i>sexyteen</i>	<i>sniper112</i>	<i>biwntsbfl</i>
<i>tea3</i>	<i>dyamiam_mms</i>	<i>missh0rny</i>	<i>sexym2m2</i>

The same mobile company maintains 11 chatrooms total.

Equally, if not more disturbing, is the fact that one out of 10 of my respondents (aged 15-24) have had sex with an SMS chatmate. Few informants also said they have had overly sexual exchanges with a chatmate culminating in masturbation by both parties. “Mobile sex” is a reality now much like “online sex” that is happening via the Internet.

This study opens doors to better understanding of young people and youth culture in the Philippines. Young Filipinos are seeking to connect and relate with other people – family, friends, peers, even strangers. Mobile chat services provide this opportunity. Sadly, religious SMS services generally do not. They do, on the one hand, encourage reflection on God’s word, helping forge and deepen a relationship with God. Another way to achieve this, however, is by giving young people the chance to SMS other individuals about their faith.

Young Filipinos are seeking “connection” with people, and not with machines that send inspirational quotes for a fee. Filipinos after all are generally fun-loving and enjoy the company of friends. Friends are a “comfort zone.” Content providers should be able to incorporate this reality into religious SMS services.

A mechanism could be found where young people are able to interact with other people about their faith, forming “communities of texters” based on Christian values. Communities of faith are thriving on the Internet; there can be communities of texters as well. Such a service can be considered more “integrated” to the youth culture in the Philippines.

John Jewell (2004) distinguishes between “connectivity” and “connection” as one that provides access (connectivity), while the other has something to do with building relationships, enabling sharing and dialogue – the building blocks of community (connection).²⁵ The sending of Biblical quotes via SMS provides connectivity between the user and the Bible. The technology renders itself as a channel bringing God’s Word to the user who may not have ready access to the Holy Book at a particular time. Establishing SMS communities, meanwhile, goes into the direction of connection as Jewell understands it. This distinction made clear, he says, would produce positive results in online ministries.

Professor Jewell, who is also a pastor, suggests likewise that between “technology” and “ministry,” Church leaders have to choose ministry. Technology merely supports ministry and if we place all our energies, say, in

invites other male chatters to lick him.

In the “Teens” chatroom, a resident calls him/herself a licker of nipples (bubslicker). There is a *gameboy15*, *missh0rny*, and a *stud7*. *sarapsexpare* tells another male chatter (pare) that sex is delicious. *gwpoprakbro* is actually “gwapo para kay brother” which literally translates to “handsome for brother.” *biwntsbfl* translates to “bisexual wants boyfriend.”

²⁵ Jewell, John: “Wired for Ministry, How the Internet, Visual Media, and Other New Technologies can Serve Your Church.” Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press (2004). pp. 18-20.

communicating online or via SMS, we risk imposing technology rather than integrating it in ministry. He forwards thus the following propositions:²⁶

1. To be aware of the pitfalls of NCTs in the life of the Christian community
2. To be aware of the promise of new technologies that can facilitate and enrich ministry
3. To develop a working strategy for integrating technology and ministry

In *The Rapid Development* (2005), Pope John Paul II, herald and Father of the Universal Church, resounded the words of our Lord saying “Do not be afraid!”

Do not be afraid of new technologies! These rank “among the marvelous things – *inter mirifica* – which God has placed at our disposal to discover, to use and to make known the truth, also the truth about our dignity and about our destiny as His children, heirs of his eternal Kingdom.”

Communicating what we have

Communicating via technologies necessitate a working knowledge of new technologies and their applicability to the context and target community. Since we are communicating with a vast audience, at times geographically spread, we ought to consider forms and styles in which our message fit and the degree of acceptability to our hearers and viewers. Often when using media, we communicate information about happenings in our parishes, news of events as well as pronouncements made by Church leaders. Our efforts are often spawned by the need to share Church teachings like the latest encyclical or the new pastoral instruction. This is paramount to the faithful’s spiritual growth and moral development.

However, there is another level of communication that is equally, if not more, important than the formal teachings of the Church. Jesuit Father Paul Soukup says this communication happens in the ground, in the environment where Catholics live.²⁷ This environment filled with interpersonal dealings and personal encounters is where moral development actually takes place. The Church’s communication in this environment is both necessary and crucial because this is where people would “see how they love one another.” Soukup calls this realm, the “common sense Catholic living.”²⁸ Sadly, this realm is often neglected bringing forth rift, misunderstanding, and division in our families and communities.

Consider these examples:

- Pope John Paul II instigated the World Meeting of Families and for years has pointed out, in a number of apostolic letters and homilies, the value and dignity of the human family. In the 2003 world meeting in Manila, he made a selfless effort despising sickness and fatigue to be present with the congregation via satellite television.
- A chaplain of a charismatic group sounds good on the microphone. He is able to animate people and bring them to tears if necessary. One morning, he reprimanded a lowly janitor for using too much water on the plants. The dumbfounded fellow, who has not met the priest before, was shocked at the priest barking “Do you know who I am? I pay the bills in this house!”
- An elderly priest hearing confessions one evening told a young student asking him to be his spiritual adviser to wait until the line of confession finishes. Surely after the last person got out of the confessional, he met the student like an old friend. The new found friends chatted until way pass the priest’s bedtime.
- A middle-aged member of a Catholic women’s group wearing her pristine uniform cheats in a Communion queue, staring blankly at the shocked youngster she overtook. Without blinking, she turned and paced towards the priest giving Communion. The same woman raised her arms wide open as she sang the “Our Father.”
- A mother talked about their family’s dramatic escape from the oppressive rule of a local government official. Her audience: an irate youngster who felt he doesn’t need to hear the story again and suffer the pain all over again. But he did not want to

²⁶ Ibid. p. 25.

²⁷ Soukup, Paul: “The Church as Moral Communicator.” In Rossi, Philip and Paul Soukup (eds.): “Mass Media and the Moral Imagination.” Kansas, MO: Sheed & Ward (1994). pp. 200-203.

²⁸ Ibid. p. 200.

offend his mother so he pretended to listen. The mother finally ended praising God for being responsible for the deliverance. This gave hope to the young man and renewed his faith.

- Brother Peter was everybody's friend. With his wrinkled face, he smiles at everyone every time. He was caretaker of the chapel I go to at 5pm during work days. Every time I came to the chapel, I find Brother Peter and for a whole hour he would accompany me with his silent chores – arranging prayer books, and preparing the white board for tomorrow's Liturgy. He was my inspiration. Long after Brother Peter had a stroke and headed on to heaven, I'd like to think that he is still there in the chapel at 5pm watching and praying with me.

Interpersonal (relationship) communication is so important in today's communication landscape. Bishops gathered for BISCOP II (1999) said:

We are not to lose sight of the truth that it is the person and not the technology that is the best means of communication especially in Asian cultures (Bishops' Meet 06). Despite the new communication technologies, we should not forget that it is people which matter most. NCTs must help, not enslave them. Personal relationships, a warm smile, and time for one another are still important. The advent of NCTs should not undermine or diminish *human* and traditional means of communication. (Orientations, no. 5)

Pope John Paul II reaffirms this in his message for World Communication Day 2002 saying:

The fact that through the Internet people multiply their contacts in ways hitherto unthinkable opens up wonderful possibilities for spreading the Gospel. But it is also true that electronically mediated relationships can never take the place of the direct human contact required for genuine evangelization. For evangelization always depends upon the personal witness of the one sent to evangelize. (cf. *Rom* 10:14-15). (no. 5)

This brings us to consider the "witness of life" urged by Pope Paul VI in *Evangelii Nuntiandi* where he said:

...for the Church, the first means of evangelization is the witness of an authentically Christian life, given over to God in a communion that nothing should destroy and at the same time given to one's neighbor with limitless zeal... "Modern man listens more willingly to witness than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses." (no. 41)

Divine Word Father Franz-Josef Eilers has written extensively on Communication Theology and Spirituality. In his book "Communicating in Ministry and Mission," he forwards a proposition to view communication *as* a theological principle after scouring Papal teachings as well as landmark works by known theologians Greshake, Rahner, Martini and others.²⁹ He also establishes a profile of a Christian communicator as someone who is first and foremost grounded on God, Source of all good communication, and imbued with the gifts of the Holy Spirit.³⁰ Eilers emphasizes this in unison with Bishops gathered in 1998 on the theme of the Asian Synod that year and its consequences to the communication ministry.³¹

With the many challenges being faced today, we felt that the spirituality of those involved in social communication must be re-emphasized. Such a spirituality "flows out of the communication of the Holy Trinity. (Bishops' Meet 1996)

Jesus Christ as the 'perfect communicator' (*Communio et Progressio*, no. 11) is the model for all Christian communication.

"Christian communicators need to be men and women of Spirit-filled prayer, entering ever more deeply into communion with God in order to grow in their ability to foster communion among their fellow human beings. They must be schooled in hope by the Holy Spirit, *the principal agent of the new evangelization (Tertio Millenio Adveniente*, no. 45)..." (John Paul II, World Communication Day 1998)

²⁹ Eilers, Franz-Josef: "Communicating in Ministry and Mission, Introduction to Pastoral and Evangelizing Communication, 2nd ed." Manila: Logos (2004). pp. 17-26.

³⁰ Ibid. pp. 30-36.

³¹ "Synod of Bishops- Special Assembly for Asia: Social Communication Perspectives and Challenges" Bishops' Meet 1998 Final Considerations. Taoyuan, Taiwan. Final Considerations, no. 1.

Any spirituality of communication is first and foremost expressed through the witness of life (cf. *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, no. 41) which means for the communicator in Asia:

- a) to be a person of contemplation and prayer, similar to the missionary whom Pope John Paul II describes as a “contemplative in action” (cf. *Redemptoris Missio*, no. 91)
- b) the ability to build communities through love, sharing, communion, relationship and quality
- c) the content of one’s communication should reflect one’s spirituality rooted in the Incarnation – communicators needs to be people-oriented
- d) the proclamation of Kingdom values amidst a society of violence, corruption and evil forces.

Eilers also proposes a “Model of Christian Communication” which unlike secular linear communication models gives primacy to the message rather than the sender of the communication process.³² In the new model, the Sender is subordinate, and a mere channel of the Message who is God Himself. (Fig. 2) Thus, communication without the necessary grounding in the Message would hardly have an impact on receivers. This calls to mind known communication tenets like “we are what we say” and “we cannot give what we don’t have.” Some communication paradigms lifted from the Gospels can also be recalled like “... out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks” (cf. Mt 12:34) or the Lord’s promise of an Advocate who turns disciples into witnesses: “... but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth” (cf. Acts 1:8). When the Lord first sent the disciples on mission, he assured them “... do not worry about how or what you are to say; for it will be given you in that hour what you are to say. For it is not you who speak, but it is the Spirit of your Father who speaks in you.” (cf. Mt 10:19-20)

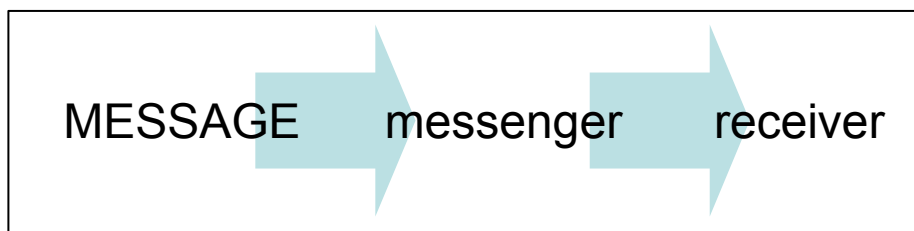


Fig. 2. Model of Christian Communication

Conclusion

The following propositions are aimed at minimizing the digital gap between older and younger generations, and aid ministry for the young:

1. Adopting a “dialogic spirituality” to enable parents, teachers, Church leaders and young people reflect on their media experiences and draw moral sensibilities from them;
2. Using the proper technology for ministry taking into account the “culture” of the target receivers;
3. Being grounded on God, Source of all good communication, through prayer and contemplation.

These propositions can help bring families and communities through the crisis caused by burgeoning media and communication technologies. However, on the level of practice some concrete measures have to be enacted. The following related issues might also be considered:

1. Are there programs for spiritual enrichment in the community? How effective are they in forming better Christian communicators?
2. Are there communication education/formation programs for families, parents, teachers, Church leaders and young people?

³² Eilers, Franz-Josef: “Communicating in Ministry and Mission, Introduction to Pastoral and Evangelizing Communication, 2nd ed.” Manila: Logos (2004). pp. 150-151.

3. Which professional organizations or persons (lay or Church-related) can be invited to help form and empower media consumers in the community?
4. Are there professional organizations or persons who can animate, develop and promote creative talents for communication and media use?
5. Is there proper “communication” planning in the community?³³ Do existing plans respond to recent communication developments?
6. Which organizations/ academic institutions can help study the realities and condition of today’s youth especially in view of the new communication culture?

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*Anthony G. Roman
Staff Assistant, FABC-Office of Social Communication/
Asst. Lecturer, Pontifical University of Santo Tomas Graduate School
Email: aroman@catholic.org*

³³ Cf. “Aetatis Novae, Pastoral Instruction on Social Communications” nos. 20-33. Pontifical Council for Social Communications (1992). In Eilers, Franz-Josef (ed.) “Church & Social Communication, Basic Documents 2nd ed. Manila: Logos (1997). pp. 131-136.