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EVANGELIZATION OF YOUNG PEOPLE IN THE AGE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

INTRODUCTION

Today, the ability to reach out to people who permanently live in the “media ocean” has become critical. To be able to establish a relation in this context means to seek common grounds and ways of communication. Evangelization in today’s world is primarily about an encounter, conversation, dialogue, and the opportunity to share personal faith-related experiences. Participation and collaboration are also key. In a sense, it is about sharing one’s vision of the world, hopes and ideals. However, such activities are increasingly moving online, into the digital space.

Mass media are a vital agent in the modern world. They become not only a tool for communication, but above all for transmission of information and formation of people. They provide guidance and inspiration addressed to individuals, families and entire societies [Chmielewski 2017, 191-205]. Not only technological knowledge, but also the opportunity to know people who use social media is of growing importance. The ubiquitous use of social media brings about social and cultural transformation. The Church therefore faces a huge challenge of entering the digital world. Young people play a special role in this challenge. This article sets out to present forms of youth Evangelization through the use of social media.

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1. THE IMPORTANCE OF EVANGELIZATION

*“Go into all the world and preach the Gospel to all creation!”
(Mark 16:15).*

The term “Evangelization” comes from the Greek language and has a biblical origin, where it was used as a synonym for mission [Jagodziński 2017, 5-17]. It is derived from the verb *euangelidzo*, i.e., proclaim the good news [Murawski 1990, 16-18]. However, this term has been used only recently, although nowadays it can be considered quite common [Pawlina 1995, 25]. According to the *Dictionary of the Polish Language*, Evangelization is “the promotion of the principles of the Christian faith, missionary activity.”¹ Catholic theology recognizes Evangelization as the proclamation of Christ where He is not known [Biela 2015, 260]. Therefore, Evangelization can be considered to have a qualitative meaning. It refers to the proclamation of the Gospel with a full acceptance of the consequences, it is aimed at changing the lives of people receiving it, whether individuals, small communities and entire societies. Therefore, it contributes to the transformation of communities and cultures, by proposing a new way of life [Comby 2007, 102]. Over the years of Evangelization effort, an observation has been made that it must be carried out based on knowledge about host cultures; by engaging and integrating with society, the Gospel can profoundly transform it [Jagodziński 2013, 95].

The importance of preaching the Good News comes directly from the teaching of Jesus, who sent his disciples with the words, “Do not go among the Gentiles, and do not go into a city of the Samaritans; but rather go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. And as you go, preach, saying, ‘The kingdom of heaven is at hand.’ Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons! Freely you received, freely give” [Ryś 2012, 138]. Evangelization entails the proclamation of the Good News, the constant search for paths that have their source in the Gospel. Very often it takes modification in the forms of pastoral work so as to reach out to recipients in a language they understand. It is necessary to be aware that the mission results from the call and from serving God and people [Caraballo 2012, 128].

¹ See <https://sjp.pwn.pl/slowniki/ewangelizacja.html> [last access: 02.04.2023].

The new Evangelization is focused on exploiting digital opportunities.² It is therefore crucial to use the tools offered by the media, especially social media. In today's world, the Church pursues the existing work of Evangelization, but is also increasingly aware of how important it is to enter the world of media. This determines how missionary and pastoral activity should be practiced, in a sense leaving no choice to the new Evangelization but to use social media.

Nowadays, the Church faces the challenge of proclaiming the "new Evangelization". It is a response to the generational crisis, world events, persecution, and new problems and challenges of societies. The mission of the Church is to strengthen people's faith in such a way that the content conveyed is appropriate for the modern generation. It is especially important to care for all people and to pay particular attention to young people, who are the future of the world. Therefore, they should be properly shown the path they can follow with God. Among other things, the future of the Church also depends on it.³

2. CONDITIONS OF THE FUNCTIONING OF YOUNG PEOPLE IN THE MODERN WORLD OF SOCIAL MEDIA

People are social creatures by nature. Therefore, they seek connections with others. Nowadays, however, establishing and maintaining contact is gaining on completely new, previously unknown features, as it involves, among other things, the use of social networking sites. They are particularly important in the lives of young people, who mainly communicate with each other in this way. Social networking sites allow them to make and maintain acquaintances, search for information and acquire knowledge.

Youth has its specific characteristics. It is often marked by an attitude of rebellion and ventures to make isolated decisions about oneself and one's future. It is also a time of many difficult choices that will have their

² See http://www.opoka.org.pl/biblioteka/W/WP/benedykt_xvi/przemowienia/massmedia2009_24012009.html [last access: 01.04.2023].

³ Ioannes Paulus PP. II, Adhortatio apostolica de Familia Christianae muneribus in mundo huius temporis *Familiaris consortio* (22.11.1981), AAS 74 (1982), pp. 81-191, no. 36-41.

consequences later on in one's life. This is often accompanied by an internal struggle between what is good and what is evil. Regardless of the difficulties encountered, it is the youth who will build the culture of the future. Young people are in a constant search for the truth, as it is the truth that provides the basis for human greatness and dignity. A major threat may come from the identification of good with what is currently pleasant, and evil with what constitutes an obstacle to the satisfaction of desires.

Young people often struggle with numerous problems and suffering that may affect their spiritual, mental and physical condition. They travail through adversities, calamities, poverty, and separation of their parents. They are often affected by lack of development opportunities and loneliness.

Teenagers use social media almost constantly in their everyday lives. As mobile devices become ever more sophisticated and accessible, young people use various types of websites without restrictions. They do it at school, at home, while on the go. Social networking sites are both an opportunity to contact others and an important source of education and information. Their great potential is especially noteworthy. Also, young people willingly share their free time on the Internet, so appropriate use of this environment may offer multiple benefits. Making a proper use of what is best in the digital reality while preserving existing institutions is crucial [Keen 2007, 170].

Today, young people struggle with many problems and face numerous worries and fears. It is therefore key that they have access to essential values, so that they share their experiences and build a better future. Of particular importance in this respect may be the proclamation of the Gospel, and it is worth adapting it to the ways of how young people function in their lives.

3. THE NEW EVANGELIZATION THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA

Evangelization can be realized when it is possible to reach out to an individual. It is a person's encounter with Jesus Christ. It is in this descent to the level of the individual that Evangelization finds its expression and essence. It is an opportunity for everyone to become a Christian and live in an intimate relation with God [Moens 2012, 19-20]. Through an encounter, it is possible to experience God's love, which leads to a sense of full

happiness. A person is freed from the tendency towards isolating their conscience and focusing only on themselves. The new forms of Evangelization are aimed at a very important goal, namely showing the love of God revealed in Christ. When the Church undertakes to proclaim the Good News to all people, it must appropriately adjust the tools used. The new Evangelization should therefore also allow young people to delve into the richness of faith. Evangelization increasingly entails the need to master the means of social communication. These are means that are used particularly commonly by young people. They are sites that determine the rhythm and content of life [Chmielewski 2018, 28].

The meeting ground of Evangelization and social media is in a person. Without the person, modern Evangelization would be a vain exercise. More and more people use social media. It is in the virtual space that real people meet. The importance of social media is confirmed by statistical data on the number of social media users. The feature of social networking is especially important from the point of view of Evangelization. Digital networks have a positive contribution to the creation of open public space. New bonds and forms of cooperation emerge.⁴ The line between the real and virtual worlds gets increasingly blurred. Physical presence is no longer a condition of contact.

Social media facilitate communication and content creation. They reduce the distance and help maintain contact between people, often from remote locations. Network users focus on making contact and sharing content. An appropriate use of social media for the purposes of Evangelization offers an opportunity to communicate faith and an invitation to share the Good News. In this way, they have become a necessary tool for transmitting faith and establishing contact with other people.

For many teenagers, the main place of digital activity is Facebook. Communication using this type of networking site differs significantly from classical communication [Nowak 2011, 16-18]. Entire classes, professional groups and associations have their own Facebook profiles. These enable exchanging information and data, resolving conflicts, or simply having a conversation [Penkowska 2014, 9]. With the right approach, Facebook can also be used to evangelize young people. Through this networking site, users have the opportunity to search and share their thoughts

⁴ See <http://bc.upjp2.edu.pl/Content/4102/8.pdf> [last access: 01.04.2023].

and news. Also, user networks and groups can be created, which provides a setting for building a mesh of contacts. In the past, one could only dream of such a privilege [ibid., 62].

Facebook is built of virtual communities, the Church community being one of them. Everyone can have access to it and take part in furthering it. Everyone can mark their presence in a variety of ways, unique to themselves. Preferences, beliefs and tastes are formed in this process. Intangible information carriers provide the opportunity to influence young people in the same way as those material. Moreover, virtual content is a natural environment for young people in which they feel comfortable.

Figure 1. Academic Pastoral Ministry on Facebook

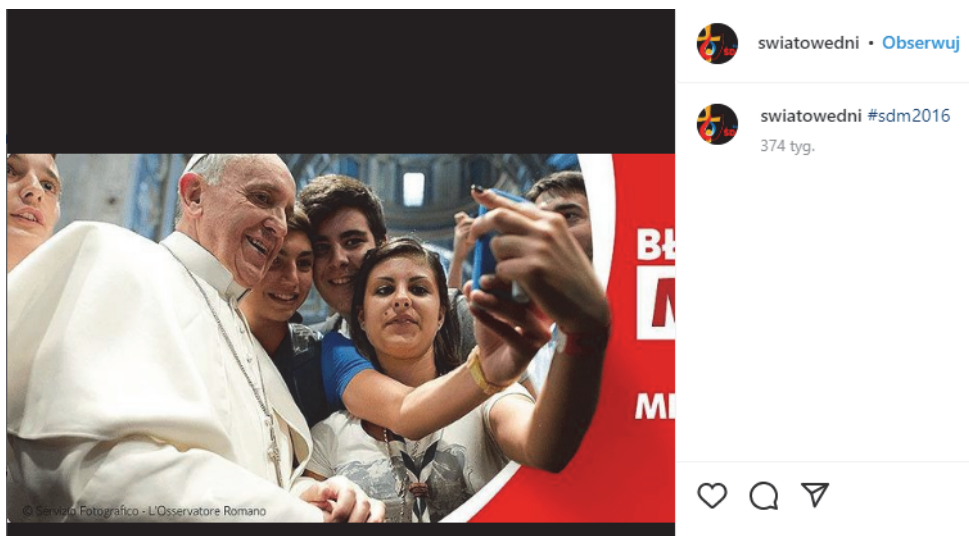


Source: Facebook.com

Instagram is a photographic social networking site that was launched in 2010. Authors post their pictures there to demonstrate that they have visited specific places or met with a person. Some of the content posted on the site may also be intended to carry a more profound message [Bąk 2016, 142]. Instagram also features content that is addressed to young

people by the Church. These include photos (such as the presented photo with the Pope) and short content.

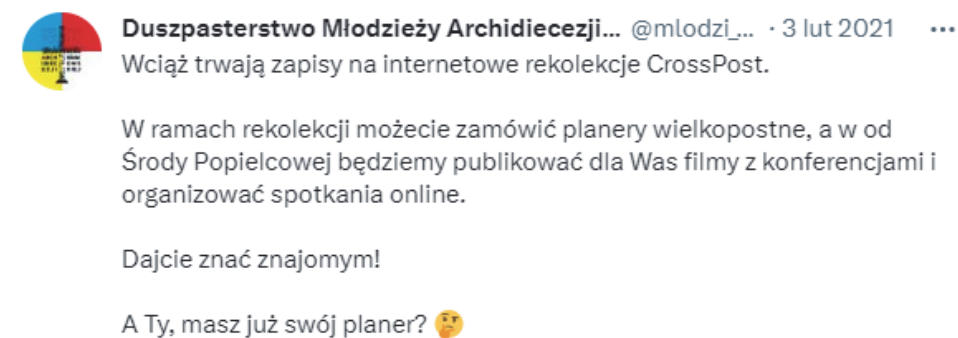
Figure 2. Instagram and the Church



Source: Instagram.com

TikTok is a mobile web application. Its main functionality enables publishing short videos. They are intended to have a form similar to music video clips. Extra visual and sound effects can be added to the videos posted. Priests who publish content about faith are also active on this platform.

Twitter is a tool that can be said to be a combination of a web blog and SMS service. On Twitter, users can post short content, mainly in descriptive form, sometimes with a picture attached. It is also an interesting example of a channel to reach out to young people. With its tweets, the Church shows young people that they matter for it.

Figure 3. Retreat on Twitter

Source: Twitter.com

Video sharing is the main functionality of YouTube. It is particularly important in today's culture, which is dominated by images used as the

key means of communication. This tool also gains on popularity in proclaiming the Good News. Videos posted there can also support contemporary Evangelization in an accessible and simple way. These videos often have “short, flashy” titles that appeal to young people and fit into their language.

Figure 4. Rev. Jan Kaczkowski on YouTube



Source: YouTube.pl

The above examples of the use of social media highlight the challenges facing the Church today. The various social media tools comprise the reality of the functioning of communities around the world. Therefore, given the extensive opportunities for the transmission of current information and news about the world, it is also very important to use them to for the purposes of Evangelization.

4. RULES OF CONDUCT FOR THE CHURCH'S ACTIVITY ON SOCIAL MEDIA

The Church's conduct on social media is determined under appropriate regulations and standards of conduct. This topic has been on the agenda for many years, at least since 2004 when the Polish Bishops' Conference issued a document which laid down the norms of conduct for clerics and

members of monastic orders during radio and television broadcasts [Chmielewski, Durma, and Kusiak 2018, 146]. The document stated: “In the mission of proclaiming the Gospel to all people, the Church uses the means of social communication, including radio and television, as tools whose enormous potential in the modern world cannot be overestimated.”⁵ These norms comprise a set of principles for the pastoral care of the Church in Poland in the face of the need to organize the transmission of the Gospel message. The normative statement contained in the document, as J. Adamczyk points out, provides guidelines for speaking in the media, rules for broadcasting events and publishing materials [Adamczyk 2008, 139].

In accordance with the Code of Canon Law,⁶ pastors are required to actively use the media in pursuing the mission of the Church. This should be understood to include modern forms of transmitting the Word of God – “The pastors of the Church, using a right proper to the Church in fulfilling their function, are to endeavour to make use of the instruments of social communication” (Can. 822 § 1). Voices are also heard that in its mission the Church should fulfil the tasks set for it by the bishops’ conference [Bieliński 2010, 20]. Therefore, it is key that the mission of the Church be pursued by using social media [Przyczyna 2006, 7].

Another point to be made is that news agencies play an essential role in the world of social media. These focus on collecting and transmitting information regarding specific areas of social life. In Poland, this function is fulfilled by the Catholic News Agency established by the Polish Episcopate. Its tasks include promoting Catholic activities in Poland and around the world [Przeciszewski 2011, 47].

Social media should be used prudently by the Church. Also, it should be kept in mind that both believers and non-believers are present in the media, and some of them are also hostile towards the Church. It is therefore key to avoid posting content that is harmful to faith, contrary to morals or scandalous.

In his message for the 48th Day of Social Communications, Pope Francis points out that “Keeping the doors of our churches open also means keeping them open in the digital environment so that people, whatever their situation in life, can enter, and so that the Gospel can go out to reach

⁵ “Akta Konferencji Episkopatu Polski” 10 (2005), no. 1, pp. 74-76.

⁶ *Codex Iuris Canonici auctoritate Ioannis Pauli PP. II promulgatus* (25.01.1983), AAS 75 (1983), pars II, pp. 1-317.

everyone.”⁷ Contemporary Evangelization is therefore focused on understanding and showing the path to Christ using various types of tools.

CONCLUSION

Social media are very popular all over the world. They carry both opportunities and threats, so it is key to make an appropriate use of them. With judicious use of social networking sites, it is also possible to reach out to young people with the message of the Good News and Evangelization.

Contemporary Evangelization efforts are realized in various environments and places [Wuerl 2013, 63-75]. It is becoming increasingly important to add new forms of the mission so that it corresponds to the natural milieu of the community, especially young people. Using social media requires awareness that this channel is an extremely open and difficult form of communication. With awareness of the possibilities that social media bring, events can be pinpointed that are important from the perspective of culture, society, politics, which shape human behaviours and attitudes.

To sum up, a conclusion can be made that today the Church has at its disposal an extremely powerful tool for Evangelization, that is, social media. Given the wide access to the Internet and mobile devices, it is possible to reach out to numerous groups of people. Also, the faithful of the Church are increasingly aware of how important it is to use social media for Evangelization and promotion of the Good News. Social media are a unique Evangelization tool. It is particularly important in getting through to young people. More and more priests, bishops and lay people understand the need for change and for use of social media in the transmission of the Church’s teachings.

⁷ See https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/pl/messages/communications/documents/papa-francesco_20140124_messaggio-comunicazioni-sociali.html [last access: 01.04.2023].

Evangelization of Young People in the Age of Social Media

Abstract

The article sets out to present the problem of Evangelization of young people on social media. The definition of Evangelization and its most important contemporary aspects are discussed. The significance of social media in the lives of young people is taken as the main premise, in view of the dependence that people today have largely developed on the access to this communication channel. Examples of using new media for Evangelization in contact with young people are also given.

Keywords: means of social communication; Church; social media; Evangelization

Ewangelizacja młodzieży w dobie *social media*

Abstrakt

Celem artykułu było przedstawienie zagadnienia ewangelizacji młodzieży w *social media*. Przedstawiono definicję ewangelizacji oraz jej najważniejsze współczesne aspekty. W związku z tym, że współcześnie ludzie w znacznym stopniu uzależnili swoje funkcjonowanie od możliwości korzystania z mediów społecznościowych, zdecydowano się na przedstawienie znaczenia *social media* w życiu młodych ludzi. Zaprezentowano także przykłady wykorzystywania nowych mediów do ewangelizacji w kontakcie z młodzieżą.

Słowa kluczowe: środki społecznego przekazu; Kościół; *social media*; ewangelizacja

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