THE POTENTIALS OF NEW MEDIA FOR CATECHETICAL INSTRUCTIONS IN THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN NIGERIA

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Abstract:
This paper identifies one of the main challenges of Catechetical instruction in Nigeria, which is fixation in a single oral method. The most common method of instruction is through oral communication, which consists of recitation of questions and answers. Pastoral instructions, Church’s decrees and Papal messages have stressed the need for the use of communication technologies in teaching and preaching, yet there is a slow adoption of these technologies. How can the New Media enhance catechetical instruction of children and adults? This paper examines this question and points out advantages of new (digital) media. Furthermore, the paper suggests practical ways by which we can build on the existing traditional oral methods of catechetical instructions with New Media. The author stresses that the major strength of New Media is its dynamism. It is dynamic in the sense that it is interactive and incorporates diverse media (convergence). New Media is not without limitations and these limitations are elaborated. More still, the paper suggests some online resources that catechetical instructors can use to improve their work.

Introduction
Through the years, the Church has used prevalent media to communicate the message of Jesus Christ. Several official documents of the Church support the use of technological media for the propagation of the faith. *Inter Mirifica*, the Decree of the Church on the Means of Social Communication, holds: “It is, therefore, an inherent right of the Church to have at its disposal and to employ any of these media insofar as they are necessary or useful for the instruction of Christians and all its efforts for the welfare of souls” (No. 3). In addition, the Pastoral Instruction on the Use of Social Communication, *Communio et Progressio*, stresses that “The means of social communication are (to be) used to complement the established ways of teaching” (No. 48). Furthermore, on January 24, 2010, Pope Benedict XVI announced the theme for the 44th World Communications Day: ‘The Priest and Pastoral Ministry in a Digital World:

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New Media at the Service of the Word.’ The Holy Father summarizes this theme in these words:

The spread of multimedia communications and its rich “menu of options” might make us think it sufficient simply to be present on the Web, or to see it only as a space to be filled. Yet priests can rightly be expected to be present in the world of digital communications as faithful witnesses to the Gospel, exercising their proper role as leaders of communities, which increasingly express themselves with the different “voices”, provided by the digital marketplace. Priests are thus challenged to proclaim the Gospel by employing the latest generation of audiovisual resources (images, videos, animated features, blogs, websites), which, alongside traditional means, can open up broad new vistas for dialogue, evangelization and catechesis.²

The message of the Pope is not just to priests but also to everyone, especially to all pastoral agents, preachers, teachers and various leaders of the Church. The message challenges pastoral agents and religious educators to take advantage of the multimedia, as well as New Media and to be actively present in the digital world.

Since the 19ᵗʰ Century when Christianity began to take roots and spread in Nigeria, the oral method of catechetical instruction has been the most common. This method uses questions and answers, memorization and recitation of religious instructions. The oral method is good in itself, but the problem is that it neglects other methods that are available. The other challenge is that catechetical instructions are mostly done for the purpose of receiving the initiation sacraments (Baptism, Confirmation and Holy Eucharist). Consequently, candidates who learnt their catechism by rote easily forget or cannot defend or explain vividly all that they have learnt, except for a few who continue to build on what they have learnt.

A poor catechetical instruction strategy has serious implications for the development of the Church and an adverse effect on the youth. Robert White observes that, “Many parishes have very weak youth catechetical programs and inspirational activities” (2014, p.9).

Young people constitute the greater percentage of Church members in the demography of Nigeria. They are called digital natives and so the Church must reach out to them using the digital language, which they understand well. Therefore, there is an urgent need to catechise the youth using New Media.

² http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedictxvi/en/messages/communication/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20100124_44th-world-communication-day.html (accessed 18th November, 2019)
In the foreword of the book *YouCat* (Youth Catechism), Pope Benedict XVI advised the youth in the following words:

> You need to know what you believe. You need to know your faith with that sense of precision with which an IT specialist knows the inner working of a computer. You need to understand it like a good musician knows the piece he is playing. Yes, you need to be more deeply rooted in the faith than the generation of your parents so that you can engage the challenges and temptations of this time with strength and determination.³

Based on these stated challenges, this paper attempts to provide answers to the following three questions:

1. What are the gaps in the method of catechetical instruction in Nigeria that the New Media could fill?
2. How can New Media add value or complement traditional oral methods of teaching catechism?
3. What are some of the prospects and limitations of New Media?

This paper is divided into the following sections: The first section is a general observation, which points out some gaps in the teaching of catechism in Nigeria. The second section affirms that New Media supplements traditional oral method; the third section points out the prospects of New Media; the fourth section identifies some of the limitations of New Media; the paper ends with a brief conclusion. After the bibliography, there is an appendix recommending online religious sites that can be useful for catechetical instructors and those undergoing catechism classes or on-going faith formation.

**IDENTIFYING SOME GAPS IN THE TEACHING OF CATECHESIS IN NIGERIA**

A survey carried out in selected urban parishes in the following dioceses: Lagos, Onitsha and Port Harcourt shows the following common traits:

- **Catechism Age Grades**: The selected urban parishes are parishes with large population and active participation in catechism. The Catechism age grades were divided into class one (0-5 years); Holy Communion preparation class (6-12 years); Confirmation classes consisted of those

who are 12 years and above (mostly adults). There are also post catechism classes, which have to do with marriage courses and in some cases, catechism for new converts into the Church.

❖ **Age of Catechists:** The age bracket of the catechists in the six parishes under survey was between 50-62 years. The age bracket is instructive, because it goes to show that the youth are so few or almost absent in playing the role of catechists.

❖ **Use of Media:** The method of teaching is oral recitation and memorization. Among the six urban parishes under survey, only one used multimedia or special teaching aids such as a computer and projector in the teaching of catechism. Interestingly, none of the parishes complained of lack of funds to purchase media teaching aids, but lack of skilled instructors. One of the parishes complained that the erratic nature of electrical power is the reason why they do not use multimedia to teach catechism.

❖ **Syllabus:** Only one of the three dioceses under survey had a clear and detailed syllabus for the different stages of catechism.

❖ **Books:** The popular books that are available for Catechism for Igbo-speaking catechism participants are *Katikizim nke Okwukwe Nzuko Katolik N’Asusu Igbo*, which contains 578 questions and answers on basic Catholic teaching and *Ekpere ndi Katolik N’Asusu Igbo*, a book containing some fundamental Catholic prayers. Apart from these elementary Catechism books, some well-grounded teachers use the Compendium of Catholic Doctrine, Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC) and some books specially designed for the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA).

❖ **On-Going Catechism:** There are various platforms for on-going catechism in some of the parishes. Children have two platforms on which they are taught catechism outside the official parish catechism classes: First, there is what the parishes refer to as Sunday School, where the children are engaged by teachers on Sundays; secondly, some of the children attend Block Rosary Crusades in the evening, where there is an on-going teaching of catechism and where they learn some essential Catholic prayers. The on-going formation of adults takes place in some faith-sharing groups that operate as Small Christian Communities. Some parishes organize programmes which they call ‘Know your Faith’ on Sundays. Other options for on-going catechesis are in the membership of different societies, organisations and associations in the parish (Catholic Women Organisation, Catholic Men Organisation, Catholic Youth Organisation, Legion of Mary, Charismatic Renewal, etc).
Participation in retreats and other special activities organised by these groups or by the parish are other avenues for faith formation of adults.

NEW MEDIA SUPPLEMENT TRADITIONAL ORAL METHOD OF CATECHESIS.

The present traditional oral method of teaching catechism in parishes and schools resonates well with traditional oral African instructional method. This is because African indigenous “teaching process took the form of stories, legends, riddles, and songs; while at the practical level individuals enacted what they had learnt didactically, by imitating and watching what their elders performed.” This traditional form of education is transmitted by word of mouth through myths, music, proverbs, dance, stories, culture and religion from one generation to another.

Communication scholars refer to this African traditional oral method of communication as Oramedia. Oramedia, like indigenous African educational system, explains how a message is communicated through stories, songs, drama, drums, artworks, and artifacts. The Church has used oral methods of instruction in different ways and within different cultures.

While the traditional oral methods of teaching catechism are very rich, there is an urgent need to build on the traditional instructional system with New Media. The New Media, like other media will not supplant, but supplement the traditional methods. There is hardly any form of media that supplants the other. In the history of the development of various media of communication, there is hardly any medium that has supplanted the other. Rather, each one has complemented the other. Invariably, each medium of communication has advantages in given situations. Catechetical instructions have to continually make use of the various media of communication in order to make the Gospel message more accessible and comprehensible. Many years ago, the church called for renewal in catechetical instructions in the encyclical of Pope Pius X, Acerbo nimis (On teaching Christian Doctrine), 1905. In this encyclical, as

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Whenman notes, the Pope called for a renewal of religious instruction that addresses children, youth and the elderly and people in different fields of life.\(^7\)

The call for the renewal of the methods of catechetical instruction means that the walls of the catechism classroom have to be expanded by New Media. In addition to papal messages, many writers have reiterated the urgent need to use the media in evangelization and instruction. Most of the literatures written on this subject matter can be classified into two categories: Prescriptive and Instructive. Prescriptive are the literary works that make strong arguments in favor of using the media in proclamation of the word and for religious instruction. These literatures provide the theological basis for the use of media in the Church. Some prescriptive literatures include Gan’s Encountering Christ in the Media (2010), Zsupan-Jerome’s Connected Toward Communion (2014) and Tirpak’s selected messages of Pope Benedict XVI on Catechesis and Media (2011). On the other hand, literatures that fall within the instructive category are those that explain practical ways for the effective use of the media in the Church. Among these instructive literatures is Brandon Vogt’s (2011) book, which is specifically on the practical application of New Media in the Church. Two examples of instructive literatures, which pay special attention to Catechesis and digital media, are Hoffman’s Catechesis in a Multimedia World (2011) and Zukowski’s Digital Catechesis (2009).

In Nigeria, the use of New Media is still in the prescriptive stage. Even though encyclicals and papal messages have recommended the use of multimedia and New Media, the use of these instruments of communication is not yet prevalent in most parishes and dioceses across the country. This explains why there is hardly any practical case study where scholars have evaluated the use of multimedia in catechesis. Thus, scholars who write on Catechesis and the use of multimedia in Nigeria are still on the stage of prescribing New Media in teaching catechesis than on assessing the impact of New Media in religious instruction. This work takes the on-going research on catechesis further by identifying some of the prospects and limitations of the use of New Media in Catechetical instructions.

**PROSPECTS OF NEW MEDIA**

New Media have many prospects for catechetical instructions. Having observed how New Media work, I wish to enumerate some of the opportunities these new technologies offer:

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a) **Convergence:** Convergence here means that the New Media have the capacity to combine multimedia – text, audio, images, animated features, and video. New Media engages the different senses, the intellectual, visual, emotional and auditory senses. Apart from using multimedia and New Media for general instruction of catechism participants, multimedia also gives room for teachers to adjust to the different media needs of the participants. This adjustment is necessary especially for people who are physically challenged: audio for the vision impaired; video for the hearing-impaired with subtitles; print for the hearing-impaired.

Convergence on another level is not just the combination of different media. According to Espinoza and Johnson-Miller, “Catechesis is a comprehensive process of Christian initiation and growth that enables meaningful multidimensional interaction of all aspects of Christian faith and human life. This involves all aspects of our human existence, such as the intellectual, emotional, rational, physical, intuitive, and imaginative, as well as all aspects of the biblical narrative, church tradition, and an experiential encounter of God”⁸ In short, catechesis is a convergence of multidimensional segments of the human and Christian life.

b) **Interactive Learning:** The New Media provide people with space to interact with one another through the usage of multimedia on real time basis with instant messages. Interaction here can be understood in the sense that “Any instruction or catechesis fulfils its purpose only and only if it is a dialogue in which statements interact with questions – it must not be a unidirectional monologue”⁹ A set of participants in catechism class who form a social media group can stay connected long after their official catechism classes are over. By so doing their interactive and educative social group becomes a platform through which on-going faith formation and discussion can take place. These discussions can take place through blogs and social media pages.

c) **New Language of Digital Age and Youth:** New Media is an influential language in the modern world and it motivates and excites young people. This is why young people born within the digital era are called digital

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natives and older people born during the years when analogue media was trending are called digital immigrants. Since digital language is a new language it is advisable that those who understand the language well communicate catechism in the language that is conversant to digital natives. Digital language is not restricted to the youth alone, but is open to all who are willing to learn. There are cases where older adults are more proficient in the use of digital technology. In this case, these older adults have moved on from being immigrants to ‘naturalising’ and becoming full citizens in the digital world.

d) **Teachers’ Advantage:** It is the desire of every teacher, including religious instructors that everyone participates actively in the class. Not every class member will be vocal and confident enough to engage in class discussion. Through New Media interactions some shy participants in catechism classes are able to participate more actively through chatting. This involvement of silent members of the class through chatting enables teachers to get a sense of what participants are thinking, the questions they are asking and the concerns they are expressing.

e) **Resources:** The Internet is arguably the largest library in the world today. Information and communication technology have made it possible to access online resources through computers and mobile devices. Through the Internet, religious instructors and catechism participants are able to have access to many resources on scriptures and educative documents from the magisterium of the Church. More so, rich e-learning media resources are available on the web and have a global outreach.

f) **Distant Learning:** An added advantage of New Media is the fact that online reading materials can be accessed wherever there is Internet network. Distant learning also gives opportunity to those who are living far from the centre of learning to access reading materials and possibly meet with the larger group at intervals. Distant learning is also useful for those who are unable to attend regular catechism or faith formation sessions because of their busy work schedule.

g) **Creativity:** New Media gives room for creativity where participants can re-create the lessons of catechism, by making it more comprehensible to those who are learning, without losing the essence of the doctrinal message. For example, media messages can be put in form of cartoon or songs for children.
LIMITATIONS OF NEW MEDIA

Having listed some prospects or advantages of New Media, I wish to mention some of their limitations as follows.

a) They are Demanding: Developing instructional resources on New Media demands time, creativity and talent. There are millions of messages competing for attention on New Media. Therefore, those who create digital catechetical resources have to take time to develop messages that are attractive, educative and relevant.

b) Digital Divide: New Media emphasize digital divide where people in economically wealthier parishes have more facilities and those in rural parishes have little or no opportunities to have access to New Media. Internet network drives New Media operations and this means that those who are out of network coverage will have little or no access to New Media. Rural church communities in Africa are likely to have minimal presence in the New Media world. Therefore, New Media creates a digital divide among people, between the ‘haves’ and ‘have nots.’

c) Addiction and Distraction: One of the challenges of New Media is the danger of addiction. In the last century, addiction to television was a major concern, and in the current digital world, more and more people are becoming addicted to the Internet and to the media. Those who participate in catechism sessions and ongoing faith formation must remain focused to their faith-seeking understanding, otherwise, one click on the internet can distract them away from their point of interest.

d) Second to Face-To-Face Interaction: There is a tendency to over depend on social media or the virtual world for catechism sessions. This overdependence on social media groups could suppress face-to-face interaction, with all its advantages.

e) Complex for Elderly Catechism Teachers: observations show that a considerable number of Catechism instructors are elderly people. However, the fact is that not all of these instructors were open to New Media technology and not all are ‘New Media literate’.

f) European/American: Most digital resources are in English and prepared for European and American contexts. Some of the resources can only be useful when they are adapted to local contexts and languages.
Conclusion

One of the important determinants of a vibrant parish is the time and resources they expend on catechesis and faith formation. Catechesis and faith formation are dynamic and so there is need for creativity. The traditional oral methods for catechetical instructions are good and the New Media are helpful. These latter methods are not to supplant these former methods, but to complement them. The New Media offer a variety of options for catechetical instructors and since these new communication technologies are gifts of God they should be used for religious instructions, as much as possible. Online multimedia resources with their rich contents can enrich catechetical instructions.

APPENDIX: A RECOMMENDATION OF ONLINE RESOURCES FOR CATECHISM AND FAITH FORMATION

There are countless online resources for catechism and faith formation. These resources offer good information on scriptures, spirituality and the teaching of the church.

A. WEBSITES

I. Vatican website (vatican.va), Loyola Press (loyolapress.com), Our Sunday Visitor (osvcurriculum.com),
II. Pflaum (pflaum.com), RCL Benziger (rclbenziger.com),
III. Sadlier (sadlier.com), and Saint Mary’s Press (smp.org) americancatholic.org,
IV. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (usccb.org),
Catechetical office of New York - https://nyfaithformation.org/catechist-helps-and-resources
V. Vibrant Faith at Home - http://www.vibrantfaithathome.org/
   a. eCatechist.com - http://www.ecatechist.com/
VI. Faith Formation Matters (from Sr. Janet Schaeffler)
   http://www.janetschaeffler.com/index.html
VII. McKean Zyromski’s Website - http://www.pagezyromski.com/
IX. Word on Fire Catechism,
   https://www.wordonfire.org/resources/browse/catechism/mans-capacity-for-god-26-49/
X. Transforming Catechesis-
   http://transformingcatechesis.com/category/digital-catechesis/
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B. BLOGS:

I. Sr. Caroline Cerveny, SSJ-TOSF, DMin, at acyberpilgrim.org
II. Jared Dees, M.Ed, MA, at thereligionteacher.com
III. Lisa Mladinich, and others, at amazingcatechists.com
IV. Joe Paprocki, DMin, at catechistsjourney.com

C. VIDEO RESOURCES

II. Catholic Link - Videos and Resources - http://en.catholic-link.com/

D. CATECHETICAL CRAFTS, GAMES AND ARTSS

I. The Catholic Toolbox - http://catholicblogger1.blogspot.com/
II. This Resource Site offers ideas and handouts.
   http://faith.thatresourcesite.com/
III. Catholic Icing.com - http://catholicicing.com/