



Mission in an Online World

Speaking Notes, Sr. Bernadette M. Reis, fsp

I am very grateful to the International Union of Superiors General, for your invitation to present at this launch of Communicators for Women Religious Handbook. It is truly an honor for me.

I am also very happy to be able to connect my passion for religious life and the land of my birth since it was with the generous contribution of the United States Embassy to the Holy See that this Handbook was made possible.

All of you are already very familiar with the challenges that we face in today's quickly changing online world. For many of us, it has been difficult translating our physical missions or apostolic works into online presences. Today I hope to make perhaps a small attempt to understand what the reality is. Then I would like to offer a Gospel paradigm that may provide enlightenment. And lastly, I hope to give some concrete examples of how mission might be carried out online.

Let's start by trying to understand the situation. I hope you don't mind if I first illustrate this with my own personal experience. In 1990 I was stationed in our community in New York City. Every morning and evening we commuted to Manhattan from Staten Island on the ferry. I loved observing the commuters—some reading newspapers, others reading books, others holding private conversations. The familiar call, "Shine" would ring out now and then from the shoe shiners seeking customers as they walked up and down the ferry. I will never forget one time when a toddler sitting on her mother's lap was jabbering away. At a certain point, her mother put a pacifier in her mouth. Then the mother started jabbering away. A few minutes later the toddler put the pacifier in her mother's mouth! That was New York City in 1990.

I went back around 1998 or 1999 years later. I didn't hear "Shine" any longer. Fewer people were reading newspapers or books. Many people had MP3 players. The hum of people holding private conversations was diminished. I lived in New York City again from 2007-2009. I think you know where I am headed. Even fewer people reading newspapers or books; and almost everyone connected to a smartphone, or tablet.

Now let's take a look at what's happened in more or less the same time in another way. (Shift Happens: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F9WDtQ4Ujn8>)

So, what does it all mean? We can begin to understand that by naming some of the differences between my presentation and the film clip? (take audience feedback)

What we just experienced is the shift that has occurred in my life time from what we can call a verbal culture and an iconic culture. As a result of this shift, language has evolved. In the verbal culture, we communicate essence. We use words which can only be understood by a limited number of people who can interpret the code. The mental picture predominates. Each person interprets reality through imagination. So, for example, each one of you had a different mental image of the little girl I told you about in my story on the ferry. None of you know exactly what she looked like—so the mental image is distant and abstract from the actual reality. In an iconic culture, technically produced pictures have taken the place of mental images. Appearance is communicated.

Communication is much more powerful because it is highly sensual and can communicate reality much more exactly. But universal concepts such as humility and peace cannot be expressed with one image as it can with one word.

The way we experience time has changed. Verbal language moves fluidly move in and out of time through the use of tenses. Nuance can be added through the use of conditional, subjunctive, interrogative, exclamatory, and imperative modes. With iconic language, on the other hand, the present is the only time conveyed. Flashbacks or time machines are used to give the illusion of past and future. But the actions taking place through these devices are still presented as being lived in the present. Thus an eternal now is possible in iconic language without the possibility of nuance that verbal language provides. Space is also affected. The mental image associated with verbal language occupies no space, whereas iconic language includes dimensions that give it spatial characteristics.

With verbal language, first an idea is perceived and an emotion is only a secondary movement. Sometimes there is no emotion at all. Iconic language, however, automatically touches the receiver at an emotional level. The idea communicated is the secondary movement which often remains subconscious.

Verbal logic is sequential, that is it follows a logical course from one point to the next in order to reach a conclusion. Verbal learners cover a topic from beginning to end, step by step. Iconic language is intuitive and communicates the conclusion immediately without having to go through a sequential process. Iconic learners use the “window” method—picking and choosing the content they want.

Those who have grown up in an iconic culture are:

- More picture oriented than logic oriented
- More feeling-oriented than rational
- More intuitive than discursive
- More spontaneous than process oriented
- More abreast of information
- Less able to communicate verbally

And now we are going to throw mission into this Babel. After all, organizations committed to mission are top heavy on people formed in the verbal culture. If a discussion between verbal culture and iconic culture begins here—what to you get? (wait to get feedback)

Well-intentioned verbal Martha's, intent on *diakonia* who do not understand the language or the logic of the iconic Martha's—but who are in decision-making positions. And iconic Martha's who impatiently want to dive into the online world without having secure roots in the spirituality or the vision of the organization to which they belong.

Therefore, I hope to shed some light on this situation which I think we are all too familiar with. I'd like to do that by changing the icon.

If instead of beginning with the online aspect of mission, we were to begin with mission itself, we would have firmer and more blessed ground on which to build an online mission presence. Let's allow Mary and Elizabeth to teach us what mission is. First of all, before embracing a mission, we need to be willing to die. Mary goes on mission to Elizabeth only after she has accepted the possibility of death. This is confirmed by the first line Luke wrote as soon as she gives Gabriel her Fiat. Some English translations say that Mary "Got up" or Mary "set out". However, the Greek says, "Having risen in those days." It is the same word used for Jesus' resurrection. She has risen because she accepted the possibility of death by stoning because she freely consented to bearing a child other than Joseph's. In this way she associated herself to the salvific mission of the child she had been asked to bear. Her Fiat was "tested abandonment, a death in order to live, a crossing through the fire of the paschal mystery. This is a death of the heart, not to mention the risk of stoning, which becomes real in the choice of this servant of the Lord: Mary lets go of the foreseen for the unforeseen, security for risk, the Law for the Word of God. She trusts in God on the exact same day that she experiences an interior tsunami. Totally guided by the Word, she rises to a new life: the life of the Spirit."¹

¹ PRATILLO, FRANCESCO. *Maria di Nazaret: La vita si fa risposta*. Milano: Paoline, 2018

As soon as Elizabeth hears Mary's greeting John leaps in her womb for joy. The meeting of these two women is amazing. It is an eternal moment. Here are two women, carrying within them two men. On these two men rest the salvation of the world through their respective missions. Do you understand what the mystery of the visitation is? Two women hold the salvation of the world in their – wombs. One is living the twilight of her life—the other is hardly past the dawn of hers. Yet there is absolutely no age gap, no culture gap. There is pure joy because they are allowing the children within them to begin to accomplish their mission—in their wombs.

This is the icon that must motivate mission in an online world. Our mission must be focused on providing others with what they need in order to live the mission that they have been assigned by God. And we can only do that if we, like Mary, accept death so that others might live. It means feeling the excruciating suffering of our brothers and sisters to the point that we literally feel their pain. And, moved with compassion, as Jesus was, we respond. The Greek word used for "compassion" in the Gospels, is the word chosen to convey the Semitic word *rachamim*. This is a compound word composed of the words "uterus" and "water". Therefore, when Jesus "feels compassion", we are before a profound mystery—that is we are before Jesus who in his turn bears others through the gut-wrenching breaking of the waters of birth to new life. The person is released from bondage in order to perform their God-given mission.

This brings to my mind a story I read recently in the Global Sisters Report. Unfortunately, I cannot locate the article. It was about a group of sisters who go to one of the questuras in Rome where migrants have to go for their soggiorno. Many of the young women who go there are preyed on by pimps. They are successful in offering an alternative to some of the young women, but not all. When asked how they can just stand there watching the pimps recruit some of the young women, one of the sisters responded, "We stand there like Mary under the foot of the cross. She too was helpless in doing anything. But she was there sharing his pain. That's what we do." Incredible. This is what I mean by saying that mission must begin from participating in the real pain of others. This sister suffers for these young women. She has

taken on their pain, and stands with them as Mary stood suffering under the cross of her son. These sisters are bearing these women just like Mary bore Jesus.

Now we are ready to talk about Mission Online. The first base I would like to cover is a critique of the online presence of many organizations devoted to mission. Then we'll go to second base—ideas of what types of mission we could effectively be done online. The Third base, which will hopefully lead us home, is how to come up with a plan using three steps.

Let's go to First base. Many mission-oriented organizations use social media and the internet the way other companies use it. Our web pages sport the same buttons that other companies use to make themselves known or to inform clients of their products. We think it is wonderful that we update our websites immediately on the election of our new councils, or have texts available for download during major meetings. Much of what we communicate online is text heavy—why? Because the creators come from a verbal culture.

This, in my opinion, is not mission. It is publicity. It's about us, and directed toward us. The purpose is letting people know who we are, what we do, how to join, what events we are organizing, etc. We need this type of online presence—but it is not necessarily an online mission. Perhaps it can be defined as mission support.

This leads me to ask the question: Do we really understand the potential of the internet and social media? Because if we did, we might begin to use them and accomplish a real mission with them.

Ready for second base? Let's go back to the sisters suffering under the cross with Mary. It is women like that who have physically built incredible networks that truly can be considered mission: schools, hospitals, asylums, homes for the poor and the aged, centers for drug rehab and so on. Talitha Kum is one such intercongregational international network reaching out to people caught in the web of human trafficking. What would this mission look like online? How can we heal the sick online? How can we contribute to the healing of victims of abuse online? How can we minister to the poor online?

About 10 years ago, I was involved with a group who was exploring just such a mission. We wanted to form a group for the spiritual, physical and psychological healing of the victims of abuse. Before we started, we wanted to know what the best approach would be. So, we interviewed Barbara Thorpe, from the Office of Pastoral Support and Child Protection, in the Archdiocese of Boston. Our question to her was why so many victims of pedophile priests came forward in 2002 and not the decade previously when the James Porter case had been in the Media. Her response was that the difference was the internet. Because victims prefer anonymity, they did not come forward in the early 90s because they would have exposed themselves too much. However, when the story hit the news in 2002, survivors could initiate the process safely and anonymously online.

The sky is literally the limit should we take our mission online. There will always be a need for physical structures as well. But for those who for one reason or another are not yet in our structures, cannot access them, etc., there is the internet—where we can reach the otherwise unreachable.

For educators, their contribution may mean making sure that media education is part of the curriculum. It may mean taking the classroom virtual.

For those working in prison ministry, it may mean developing online tools so that their contact with inmates is not limited to one time a week or month.

For those working in human trafficking, online mission could be finding out how social media is used to lure people into the trap in order to develop similar tools to get people out of the trap. It may also be using the internet to discover where people are being kept, and alerting local authorities—much the same way that don Fortunato Di Noto does regarding child pornography.

For those working in healing ministries, it may mean providing consultation services online or through social media for those who cannot afford healthcare, or who cannot travel to the places where it is accessible.

How can we direct retreats or prayer groups online?

And furthermore, what would happen if organizations began to work together to provide mission online?

If there is time: What other dreams are out there?

Our icon of Mary and Elizabeth shows us that their mission is a cooperation in the mission of another person. A mission is never a solo act. If someone sings a solo, there should always be a back-up chorus behind them. Therefore, for those of us who have dedicated our lives for a mission, even our individual social media presence should reflect the mission that we live. Pope Francis says that “Where vocation is concerned, there is no such thing as a selfie! Vocation demands that somebody else take your picture.” Policies regarding individual online presence may, therefore, be something to consider.

I often hear a lot of fear regarding these types of possibilities: We don’t know how. We are afraid of viruses. We are afraid of repercussions, law suits, etc. If we allow our fears to be roadblocks, we will never get anywhere. If, however, we allow them to surface, they may show us the way we need to go: What information do we need? Who we need to be licensed with? Who we need to be partnered with? What anti-virus programs do we need? Fear can keep us from seeing the people the mission is intended to reach by making us focus on the work that needs to be done. There are people dying in the Mediterranean Sea every day. Children are being trafficked every day. Women are being sold on sex markets every day. Young people are accessing pornography online every day. There are poor people who cannot obtain health care every day. A hundred years ago, missionaries could have gotten shipwrecked reaching their destinations, and they did not let that stop them. Why? Because they were inspired with a mission—and behind that mission are people whom we may be able to help—we may make a difference in their lives.

One of the things to keep in mind is that an online mission is similar to mission carried out physically. I think the mistake that many organizations make is that we start doing things online for the sake of being online. Yet, we would never build a building that way, would we? Since many of our organizations are present in various countries, we run the risk of duplicating efforts, dispersing energy, and communicating in a haphazard way. In the end our online presence lacks direction, synergy, and therefore, impact. It takes time and energy to ask the right questions before jumping online.

This leads us to third base.

What are the right questions? Like any other task that we accomplish in mission, these questions are important. Like other plans, it needs to be formulated in writing, and should be subject to evaluation. We can think of it as a blueprint. Once we have responded to these strategic questions, we can move on to tactical planning.

After we have created a strategic plan, we can begin to ask the tactical questions. In order to respond to these questions, we might need to do some research. The answers to these tactical questions and the research we do will help us get down to the practical level.

Once we have a better idea of the timing and how we want to do what we want to do, we can begin to make actual choices. In other words, we can choose the platforms we want to use, set them up, begin posting across platforms, etc. You might think that your work is now done once you have set up the accounts. However, these accounts need to be kept up with fresh content, and analysis needs to be done with the help of analytics in order to help you understand if you're choices are effective. You never know if a year from now a different platform might have made the one you have chosen obsolete!

This process is not original to me. I am borrowing it from a book called *The Social Media Gospel* by Meredith Gould. For anyone who wants to critique their online mission presence or who wants to get ideas, I highly recommend it.

I hope that this presentation has been helpful. We are living in a challenging time—and this creates a challenge to those of us who perform various missions. However, like those who have gone before us, it is now up to us to face the challenges and reinvent our missions if we truly want to make a difference in today's world.