

Seven Digital Challenges For An E-Catechesis

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Abstract

The deployment of digital technologies continues to lead us to a real upheaval in our ways of thinking, communicating, forming, transmitting the faith and evangelising. It is a kind of “digital ecosystem” that they establish. Catechesis is not exempt from this. The contribution considers seven main challenges that a “holistic e-catechesis” (in sense of digitised catechesis) seeks to address in the age of “*digital ecologies*”, due to changes in our relationships with knowledge, truth, temporality, authority, spiritual experience, pedagogy of initiation and community. We are urged to develop hybrid forms of combination between face-to-face and online catechesis, because given the law of “synesthetic” incarnation at the heart of the Christian faith, the all-digital approach remains an illusion.

Keywords: Digital Ecologies; Evangelisation; Catechesis.

Introduction

At the time of the two previous *General Directories for Catechesis*, dating from 1971¹ and 1997², the participatory Internet 2.0 that emerged in the early 2000s did not exist, nor did *social networks*. Facebook was

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¹ Congregation for the Clergy, *General Catechetical Directory* (Rome, 1971): http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cclergy/documents/rc_con_cclergy_doc_11041971_dircatgen_fr.html.

² Congregation for the Clergy, *General Directory for Catechesis* (Rome, 1997): http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cclergy/documents/rc_con_ccatheduc_doc_17041998_directory-for-catechesis_fr.html.

launched in 2004, Youtube in 2005, Instagram in 2010 and Twitter in 2015, to mention only those. Reflecting the times, the new *Directory for Catechesis 2020 (DC)*³ not only devotes part of chapter x (contemporary cultural scenarios facing catechesis) to the impacts and challenges of the digital (nos. 359-372)⁴, but also makes regular allusions to it throughout the document: either with regard to the effects of the globalisation of communication on the inculturation of the faith (no. 47); or as regards the languages and collaborative tools of the web to encourage the sharing of experiences and mutual knowledge between catechised people (nos. 213-217); or regarding the importance of the original characteristics of the generation of “digital children” for the reflection on the rooting of catechesis in the existence of people (no. 237).

We will open our study by identifying, according to the *DC 2020*, the specificities of the virtual universe and the repercussions of the anthropological mutations that it implies⁵. Then, thanks to the research carried out at the Institut Supérieur de Pastorale Catéchétique (ISPC) of the Institut catholique de Paris⁶ and in the context of the study group linked to the international French-speaking review *Lumen Vitae*⁷, we will

³ Pontifical Council for the Promotion of the New Evangelization, *Directory for Catechesis*, coll. “Documents des Églises” (Paris: Bayard / Cerf / Mame, 2020) (quoted *DC*): <https://eglise.catholique.fr/approfondir-sa-foi/vivre-sa-foi-a-tous-les-ages/transmettre-la-foi/catechisme/directoire-catechese-edition-2020/>.

⁴ On the section on digital culture in the *DC*, see in particular the articles in Italian by Giuseppe Savagnone, “La globalizzazione della cultura e il cambio d’epoca: sfide per l’evangelizzazione e la catechesi,” *Salesianum* 88, 4 (2020): 715-724; Fabio Pasqualetti, “Il *Direttorio per la catechesi* (2020) e la cultura digitale. Una lettura critica dei nn. 359-372,” *Salesianum* 88, 4 (2020): 725-754.

⁵ See in this regard, the Jesuit theologian Antonio Spadaro, *Cyberthéologie. Penser le christianisme à l’heure d’internet* (Brussels: Lessius, 2018); then the Acts of the 10^{ème} Congress of the International Society of Practical Theology, *Évangéliser dans l’espace numérique ?*, edited by Marie-Rose Tannous, Lorraine Ste-Marie and Pierrette Daviau, coll. “Théologies pratiques” (Brussels / Montréal: Lumen Vitae / Novalis, 2018) to which we have contributed with “Pratiques spirituelles sur le Web. Quelques innovations des retraites en ligne”, 41-58; as well as the works of Guy Marchessault, the latest of which, *Le web : défi @ églises chrétiennes* (Montréal: BouquinBec, 2017).

⁶ See in this regard the writings of Isabelle Morel, the new director of the ISPC, *Transmettre la foi en temps de crise* (Paris: Cerf, 2020), 29-121 (“Face à la révolution numérique”) and “La recherche de l’ISPC sur le numérique,” *Lumen Vitae* 75, (2020): 179-190.

⁷ As in the issue edited by Roland Lacroix, “Catéchèse et numérique. Prendre la mesure du changement”, *Lumen Vitae* 75, 2 (2020): 121-240; and the other number previously edited by Yves Guérette,

note the new conditioning due to this new *medium*, in a set of seven relationships to knowledge, to truth, to time, to authority, to Christian initiation, to spiritual experience and to community, with regard to the catechetical pedagogies which result from it. We will thus establish that a “neutral and anodyne use of digital tools” is not possible, because they shape a new way of seeing the world and organising it, of bringing about relationships, of conceiving communication and generating knowledge⁸.

1. Digital as a cultural and existential *medium*

1.1. *The virtual continent: a new agora*

For digital technology is not just another instrument of communication, it is the advent of a new culture without frontiers, which is reshaping mentalities, changing languages and establishing new hierarchies of values (cf. *DC*, no. 359). It constitutes a new existential environment and a real cultural milieu, and determines a way of thinking and forms of education unknown until then. The last Popes speak of the “digital continent” that evangelisation is called to explore⁹, taking into account its revolutionary constitutive laws, its fluidity, its omnipresence, its multidirectional functioning.

In fact, we are no longer in the era of the informative sites and pages of Web 1.0 sites, in which recipients remained “consumers of content”. With Web 2.0, Internet users are constantly interacting and becoming actors in the debate in these new contemporary *agoras*. Communication is no longer unilateral from a sender to a receiver, which is what the Church is used to (cf. *DC*, no. 214), it becomes multidirectional through an infinite multitude of communicative relationships and messages, since

“La recherche de la vérité à l’époque d’Internet et du Web,” *Lumen Vitae* 69, 1 (2014): 1-120; as well as his article, Yves Guérette, “La catéchèse et l’annonce de l’Évangile dans la culture du numérique” *Lumen Vitae* 76, 2 (2021): 213-223.

⁸ See Spadaro, *Cyberthéologie*, 14-15.

⁹ See Benedict XVI’s messages for the “World Social Communications Days”, <https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/fr/messages/communications.index.html>; and those of Francis, <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/fr/messages/communications.index.html>.

each user produces his or her own signals¹⁰. This demands that ecclesial organisations accept to enter into debate, to expose themselves to multiple dialogue without any control over the course of the exchanges, and to risk themselves in the *arena* of this new virtual *Areopagus* that are the social networks.

Especially since we have now moved on to Web 3.0 with the mobile version of the net, the tablet, the smartphone, the telephone or the smartwatch, and even to Web 4.0 with autonomous and connected objects which are modifying professional and public societal environments by the introduction of robots, about which some people wonder whether they will not escape human control, and by the invention of the “*metaverse*”, that parallel universe into which users can themselves enter and settle thanks to their “*avatar*”. In any case, this transformation is leading to considerable and lasting upheavals that concern the totality of knowledge, relations and exchanges between human beings¹¹. We understand why the *Directory* states: “It is necessary, in addition to technological knowledge, to acquire effective methods of communication, as well as to ensure a *presence in social networks or on the Internet*, in order to witness to Gospel values.” (no. 214) The posture of communication can no longer be that of overhang or linear transmission of content and information, but of missionary participation within places of exchange in unknown terrains. A truly risky and exciting attitude of “going out” (cf. *Evangelii gaudium*, no. 27)¹².

1.2. *Narratives and images*

For the “*digital immigrants*”, including those who, like us, have gradually entered this “multi-screen” society, it is necessary to take into

¹⁰ Cf. Jérôme Cottin and Jean-Nicolas Bazin, *Vers un christianisme virtuel. Enjeux et défis d'Internet*, (Geneva: Labor et Fides 2003), 61.

¹¹ Cf. Guy Marchessault and Martin David-Blais, “Le Web, défi aux Églises chrétiennes,” in Marie-Rose Tannous, Lorraine Ste-Marie and Pierrette Daviau (eds.), *Évangéliser dans l'espace numérique ?*, 14.

¹² Pope Francis, *Evangelii gaudium*, Apostolic Exhortation on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today's World (Rome, 2013), nro. 27 (cited *EG*).

account the gap that separates them from the “*digital natives*”. For, as the *Directory* points out, the distinction that separates the two groups is “the distinct mental approach they have towards new technologies and their use. There is also a difference in the style of discourse, which for the [digital children] is more spontaneous, interactive and participatory” (no. 362).

Multitasking, interactivity, hypertextuality: the *DC* points out that the characteristic language of new technologies is more intuitive and emotional than rational and analytical, which sometimes makes it more convincing and captivating than traditional forms of discourse. In particular, the web plays much more on the register of narration and “*story-telling*” (cf. no. 363) than on that of argumentation, which is not without affinity with the fundamental literary genre of biblical revelation, woven above all from the narratives of the history of salvation in the Old Testament and in the Gospel. The content of the faith is narrated, the kerygma is narrative, and adherence to the God-father of Jesus Christ is achieved through the proclamation of the Lord’s deeds. This has been the case throughout the centuries of Tradition through the testimonies of the Fathers and saints.

Furthermore, the *Directory* acknowledges: “Digital children seem to favour images over listening. From a cognitive and behavioural point of view, they are in some way shaped by the *media* consumption to which they are subjected, which unfortunately limits their own critical development.” (no. 363) In spite of this notice to be taken into account in the pedagogy of catechetical initiation, the fact remains that alongside listening, central with the *Shema Israel* (Deuteronomy 6,4), iconographic languages mark out the education in faith of the people of God throughout the history of the Church, between the capitals and stained glass windows of cathedrals, sculptures and paintings with religious subjects, icons and representations of a sacred nature.

1.3. *A virtual “ecosystem”*

It is therefore a real “ecosystem” that ecclesial catechesis is called upon to face and in which it cannot avoid immersing itself, a “digital catechetical ecology” to which the Church is urged to initiate generations of all ages, including forms of religiosity in which software, search engines and algorithms play an undeniable role. Indeed, the latter “encourage us to perceive the whole universe as a flow of data, to understand life and living organisms as little more than biochemical algorithms, and, in radical versions, to believe that humanity has the vocation to create a global data processing system” (no. 365).

It is not a question of blind and “fideistic” adherence¹³ to these new “authorities of the web”, but rather of possessing the codes of the virtual universe, of having critical reference points in order to be able to evaluate the relevance of what is proposed there, of accepting its horizontal, multidirectional and “synesthetic” functioning, that is to say, bringing all the senses into play, the “pervasiveness of the contents” (no. 365, in the sense of their capacity for mutual interpenetration) and thus to try to propose a credible proclamation of the Gospel¹⁴.

Catechetical education has an eminent role to play in this *area*, in order to enable the new generations to “face the challenges of the digital society” (*DC*, no. 368), being aware that the social media have almost become for many “the principal agents of socialisation, almost succeeding in substituting those traditionally known as the family, the Church and the school” (*DC*, no. 369).

We can therefore measure the importance of taking into account the cultural and societal challenges of the digital world, from which no one can escape, not even catechesis of course. On this “digital catechetical ecology” depends its future and its relevance in the postmodern era.

¹³ Cf. Guérette, “La catéchèse et l’annonce de l’Évangile dans la culture du numérique”, 219.

¹⁴ See our book with Jean-Claude Boillat, *Web & Co et pastorale. Les nouvelles technologies de l’information et de la communication et la transmission de la foi*, coll. “Perspectives pastorales”, no. 6 (St-Maurice, Saint-Augustin, 2013) which attempts to identify some paths in this direction.

2. Seven Issues

It is therefore particularly opportune in this context to take stock of current research in practical theology on the proclamation of the Gospel in the digital continent, in order to avoid both the pitfalls of naive slavery to these new “virtual” languages as offering a total substitute for the “real” framework of Christian communities, and the error of demonising these platforms as offering no valid mediation of the experience of God.

Among others, we refer to the workshops, seminars and research groups¹⁵, to the courses, dissertations and theses¹⁶ as developed, proposed and conducted at the ISPC of the ICP in Paris and as already reported in the contributions of Isabelle Morel and Joël Molinaro¹⁷.

2.1. Relationship to knowledge

More than mere instruments, digital devices determine changes in the art of communicating, thinking and living in society. The virtual *medium* shapes those who use it, it is not confined to a functionalist role as Roman Jakobson’s schema of communication would tend to suggest.

¹⁵ Such as the E-KT: “catéchèse et numérique” (“E-KT: Catechesis and Digital”) group and the “Groupe de recherches en anthropologie chrétienne” (“Research Group in Christian Anthropology”) (GRAC).

¹⁶ We are thinking in particular of Renaud Laby’s master’s and licence’s theses, whose possible publication in the *Cahiers Internationaux de Théologie Pratique* we have evaluated: “Église et Internet : une sociologie des sites Web paroissiaux et diocésains de l’Église catholique de France,” *Cahiers Internationaux de Théologie Pratique* online: www.pastoralis.org, janvier 2017; and Renaud Laby, “Internet et la communication évangélique,” *Cahiers Internationaux de Théologie Pratique* online: www.pastoralis.org, janvier 2017; as well as to his ongoing doctoral research which the author shared at the IX International Colloquium of the ISPC on pastoral care with young people, 12-15 February 2019: Renaud Laby, “Jeunes et réseaux sociaux. Limites et opportunités pour l’évangélisation,” in *Entendre et proposer l’Évangile avec les jeunes*, dir. Enzo Biemmi, François-Xavier Amherdt and Isabelle Morel, coll. “Cerf Patrimoines” (Paris: Cerf, 2020), 187-217.

¹⁷ See Isabelle Morel’s presentation, “Évangéliser à l’ère du numérique. Présentation d’un itinéraire de recherches”, at the 2016 Congress of the International Society of Practical Theology (ISPT) in Ottawa (published in the 2018 Proceedings, *Évangéliser dans l’espace numérique*, 113-122); the article entitled “L’évangélisation au défi de la révolution numérique. La voie de la synodalité fraternelle”, in Marie-Jo Thiel and Marc Feix (eds.), *Le défi de la fraternité*, coll. “Theology East-West”, no. 23 (Berlin / Münster / Wien / Zürich / London: LIT Verlag, 2018), 561-571; and the two writings already mentioned above. From Joël Molinaro, let us point out the intervention “Catéchèse et multimédias : la catéchèse à l’heure du numérique”, for the Service de catéchèse de Strasbourg, 2020.

Digital technology in catechesis transforms the pedagogy, the conception and the very being of the activity.

Indeed, on the one hand, all information placed on the *net* is in principle free, even if we pay for it with our attention, according to another concept of “digital ecology”¹⁸. It is therefore accessible to everyone, provided that the quality of access is guaranteed, which is by no means always the case according to the “digital divide” between the northern and southern hemispheres, which the pandemic period has only served to highlight and accentuate.

However, on the other hand, it is not enough in catechesis to “transmit content”, even if the acquisition of this content is verified. In order to encourage the learning of skills, including those of linking realities and finding meaning in existence, it is necessary to succeed in associating the knowledge that “telematic knowledge” splits up and disjoins, without any systematic organisation, and to revive the knowledge of the past that the collective memory tends to erase. Catechetical art therefore consists in inviting collages and associations of fragments with the help of hierarchical criteria¹⁹, which can be very useful for the thematic assembly of isolated scriptural pericopes and the coherent constitution of biblical figures in the manner of mosaics.

2.2. *The relationship to the truth*

As the mediologist Régis Debray points out²⁰, we have passed through various “media spheres”, from the “logosphere”, dominated by orality and the truth of what is believed, to the “graphosphere”, where, thanks to printing, what is written and read is true; then the “videosphere”, where the visual and the image make what is seen true; today we have reached the “hypersphere”, governed by the *net* and the infinite reference

¹⁸ See on this subject the fascinating work of Yves Citton, *Pour une écologie de l'attention*, coll. “La couleur des idées” (Paris: Seuil, 2014).

¹⁹ Cf. Renaud Laby, “Vers quelle rationalité à l'ère du numérique ?,” *Lumen Vitae* 74, 2 (2019): 221.

²⁰ Cf. Régis Debray, *Cours de médiologie générale*, coll. “Bibliothèque des idées” (Paris: Gallimard, 1991); Régis Debray, *Vie et mort de l'image. Une histoire du regard en Occident*, coll. “Folio / Essais” (Paris: Gallimard, 1992).

to other texts, all placed at the same level of truth, where what is discovered on the web²¹ is now considered true.

Our whole relationship to truth, so important in Christianity, with Christ presenting himself as “*the Way, the Truth and the Life*” (John 14:6), is being turned upside down. How can we find our way in a world where conspiracy and ideological *fake news* follow one another, where the most questionable propaganda enjoys the same “consideration” as proven explanations²²? So much so that, according to American studies on publications broadcast on Twitter from 2006 to 2017, *fake news* spread by far the fastest and reached the most Internet users, due to the emotion it arouses and the novelties it brings²³.

2.3. *Relationship to temporality*

As we explored at the 12^{ème} SITP Congress in May 2018 in Freiburg²⁴, our relationship to time has also changed with instant accessibility of an unimaginable amount of information on the web and a discontinuous flow that puts the past and present on the same plane as the future. How do we detect the presence of the Lord and hear his Word in a culture where all data seem to be available instantly without any mediation? How do we situate the notion of a progressive spiritual maturation that does not happen in a snap of the fingers, like a tree that does not grow in a second? How can we envisage the eschatological horizon and the dimension of expectation that it implies, constitutive of the liturgical year and of Christian existence until the ultimate advent

²¹ See Laby, “Vers quelle rationalité à l’ère du numérique?”, 214-218.

²² The recent experiences with Covid, vaccines and the Russian invasion of Ukraine have demonstrated this time and again.

²³ See Dimas Danang Agus widowanto, *La performativité des récits de témoignage de la foi. Analyse théologique de l’utilisation des réseaux sociaux numériques en Indonésie pour l’évangélisation*, Dissertation for a canonical degree in theology (Paris: ISPC, 2018) and its summary in *Journal of Asian Orientation in Theology* 2, 1 (2020): <https://e-journal.usd.ac.id/index.php/JAOT/article/view/2348>, cited by Morel, “La recherche de l’ISPC sur le numérique”, 180, 182-183.

²⁴ The proceedings of which we have published, François-Xavier Amherdt (ed.), *Tout, tout de suite. Parole de Dieu et médiation chrétienne dans une culture de*, coll. “Théologies pratiques” (Bruxelles / Montréal / St-Maurice: Éd. Jésuites / Lumen Vitae / Novalis / Saint-Augustin, 2020).

of Jesus Christ, when we claim to be able to obtain all things at the very moment we desire them?

However, as neuroscience, cognitive psychology, and the sciences of education underline, catechetical pastoral care also requires the deployment of catechetical processes over time, not only as a mode of organisation, but as a fundamental element for the learning of the Christian life according to its various components. The pedagogy of initiation, valued in particular in the catechumenate, emphasises how it is by implementing regular stages, punctuated by ritual steps spread out according to a structuring rhythm, that the memorising and maturing of the faith is directed towards a progressively acquired freedom²⁵.

2.4. *Reporting to authority*

These upheavals do not fail to challenge institutions, including ecclesial ones: since all information is placed on the same level (2.1); and since everything can *a priori* be discussed and questioned (2.2); since everything seems to be due without delay or intermediary (2.3), how can the hierarchical authority of the Church make its voice heard in its specificity and distinguish it from all the other messages presented as equivalent? What relationship to the magisterial authority can be maintained in a world governed by a networked structure (= web) without an identified decision-making reference²⁶? We find ourselves in a “biotope” where the mesh of elements excludes any centre of guarantee and organisation²⁷.

²⁵ See in this regard, again mentioned by Morel, “La recherche de l’ISPC sur le numérique”, 184, the diploma thesis of Véronique Fregard, *Apprentissage, maturation de la foi, initiation : des processus catéchétiques qui prennent leur temps* (Paris: ISPC, 2018).

²⁶ See Marta Kołodziejcka, *Online Catholic Communities. Community, Authority and Religious Individualization* (London: Routledge, 2018); Heidi Campbell, “Who’s Got the Power? Religious Authority and the Internet,” *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 12, 3 (2007): 1043-1062, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1083-6101.2007.00362.x>; Stewart Hoover, “Forward: Practice, Autonomy and Authority in Digital Religion and Digital Spiritual,” in P.H. Cheong – P. Fischer-Nielsen – S. Gelfgren – C. Ess (eds.), *Digital Religion, Social Media and Culture* (New York: Peter Lang, 2012), 6-12.

²⁷ See in this regard from the Secrétariat Général de la Conférence des Évêques de France, le Document Épiscopat 5, *Église en réseau. Quelle communion à l’ère du numérique ?*, 2017.

Other criteria are then brought into play, such as that of reputation: the person who has the greatest number of “*followers*” and the largest audience has pragmatic, moral or spiritual “*authority*”. It does not matter if what he puts online escapes verification and therefore evades the “*truth*”²⁸. The tyranny of the algorithms that, in fact, reign over the circulation of information on the Internet is established. Thus, as J. Molinario points out, 1% of the contents concentrate more than 90% of the attention²⁹. And the vast majority of Christian sites and blogs only reach browsers who are already convinced or interested, and whom the algorithms direct towards messages and exchanges that can only confirm their point of view.

2.5. *Relationship with spiritual experience*

Another challenge and questioning in the context of the web: to what extent does the reception of testimonies of faith on the web favour an experience of personal encounter with Christ³⁰? The various questions highlighted in the previous paragraphs are involved in the discernment of this issue and show its complexity.

On the one hand, according to Ricœur’s dialectic of “*explaining and understanding*” and his hermeneutics of testimony³¹, the event of the story viewed on the network has a meaning that requires interpretation. The witness can present himself with the status of “*envoy*” on the web, without his credibility being questioned by any control. At that point, the content of the story distances itself from the witness and no longer belongs to him, so that the one who hears it and allows himself to be persuaded can himself identify with it to a certain extent, appropriate it as

²⁸ See in particular the writings of Dominique Cardon, *La démocratie Internet. Promesses et limites*, coll. “*La République des idées*” (Paris: Seuil, 2010); and Dominique Cardon, *À quoi rêvent les algorithmes. Nos vies à l’heure des big data*, coll. “*La République des idées*” (Paris: Seuil, 2015).

²⁹ Molinario, “*Catéchèse et multimédias : la catéchèse à l’heure du numérique*”.

³⁰ For this and the following two points, see also Marine Châtelain, “*L’utilisation du numérique dans les propositions catéchétiques*,” *Lumen Vitae* 75, 2 (2020): 191-200, specially 198-200.

³¹ Cf. François-Xavier Amherdt, *L’herméneutique philosophique de Paul Ricœur et son importance pour l’exégèse biblique. En débat avec la New Yale Theology School*, coll. “*La nuit surveillée*” (Paris / St-Maurice: Cerf / Saint-Augustin, 2004).

coming from the Lord and experience an encounter with Christ marked by the seal of truth.

However, since there is no way to verify the authenticity of the testimony, since no ecclesial authority gives it a seal of credibility, and since the functioning of algorithms risks directing the Internet user towards accounts that already correspond to his or her own universe of spiritual meaning, there is no reason to establish that modes of evangelisation and formation on the web can guarantee to put in place satisfactory conditions for a spiritual experience of authentic intimacy with Christ. Caution and discernment remain as always in this regard.

2.6. Relationship to the introductory pedagogy

In the same vein, the question arises for “*e-catechesis*” as to the extent to which it is appropriate to use digital *media* to propose a path of initiation, as recommended by the *TNOC*³², which has been taken up by other European Bishops’ Conferences. The arguments are jostling for position, so essential is the issue.

Firstly, it is worthwhile to use tools and languages that belong to the generation of children and young people of the first decades of the 21st century, and that many adults have now made their own. Secondly, there are interesting proposals for making the Word of God resound (*cat-echo*) today and encouraging Internet users to enter into resonance with it, such as the *Interparole* or *Par la Parole* websites³³.

As an extension of the previous paragraph on spiritual experience and in anticipation of the following one on links to a living community, let us also point out the magnificent experiences of the “*Retreats in the city*”, with offers of introduction to prayer, personal or family, for both young and old³⁴. Everything that can serve as relevant ingredients, linked

³² Conférence des évêques de France, *Texte national pour l'orientation de la catéchèse en France*, (Paris: Bayard / Cerf / Fleurus-Mame, 2006).

³³ Site *Interparole*, “Catéchèse biblique, liturgique et sacramentelle,” <http://interparole-catholique-yvelines.ccf.fr/>; site *Par la Parole*, “Découvrir la Bible, se questionner,” donner du sens, prier, <https://www.catechese-par-la-parole.catholique.fr/>.

³⁴ See among other *Retraite dans la ville* of the Dominicans, <https://www.retraitedanslaville.org/>;

to Tradition and ecclesial teachings, to elaborate catechetical itineraries of a catechumenal type, including the journey towards the sacraments, carried by the liturgy of the Church and by Christian and religious communities, deserves to be retained and integrated.

Thirdly, Catholic websites remain mostly of the order of “communication” by a sender rather than “transmission” concerned above all with the recipients³⁵. If the pedagogy of initiation is to benefit from online catechetical resources, they must move away from the perspective of unilateral communication of data made to be assimilated, to that of companionship “which takes its time” and which allows each person to experience a personal, interior and committed journey.

It is therefore appropriate that the forms put online should be in line with the aim of a rationality of exchange and interaction, which digital tools allow to a certain extent, somewhat along the lines of the medieval *disputationes* that certain “digital spaces for catechetical work” made it possible to experiment with, particularly during the pandemic, with the regulation provided by catechists or parents³⁶.

Fourthly, it remains true that a course of initiation entirely at a distance cannot be envisaged, because it lacks the central principle of incarnation of the Christian faith.

2.7. *Relationship with the community*

“Virtual” on the *net* does not mean “unreal”. The communities of catechetical groups, like those of retreatants in a parish or a pastoral unit, or those gathered around a spirituality, a religious congregation or a

and *Notre-Dame du Web* of the Jesuits, <https://www.ndweb.org/>, which we mention in our contribution François-Xavier Amherdt, “Pratiques spirituelles sur le *Web*. Quelques innovations des retraites en ligne”.

³⁵ For the differentiation between these notions of “communication” and “transmission”, see Régis Debray’s *Introduction à la médiologie*, coll. “Premier cycle” (Paris: PUF, 2000).

³⁶ For this question of the valorisation of the exchange of words on the web, according to the logic of the Covenant with the Lord, according to an evangelisation both of the network and by the network – thanks, for example, to a *forum* animated by *community managers* trained in evangelical communication, see Renaud Laby, “La pastorale en ligne au défi de l’alliance,” *Revue théologique de Louvain* 53, 1 (2022): 61-81.

monastery, all benefiting from a “veritative and authoritative” regulation, constitute true communities of faith and of the Church. How many have rediscovered the offices of the *Liturgy of the Hours*, the prayer of the rosary or even the beauty of the Eucharist thanks to online TV channels such as *KTO*³⁷.

However, it remains that the anthropological truth of our personal being, body, soul-heart and spirit, made for interpersonal relationship, can never be satisfied with entirely digital approaches. The entirely virtual remains a utopia towards which it is not appropriate to strive in the name of the Word made flesh, true God and true man, who took on our humanity so that we might become God. A total “excarnation” of Christianity would be opposed to the language of the flesh (cf. *EG*, no. 88), of the fraternal embrace according to *Fratelli tutti*³⁸, of the experience of the living community in flesh and blood which Francis invites us not to “allow ourselves to be robbed of” (cf. *EG*, no. 92; 101).

If the liturgy and the Catholic sacraments are so much inscribed in our five senses, if catechesis is called to live “synaesthesia” through the interaction between them (cf. *DC*, no. 372), if Ignatian evangelical contemplation passes through our eyes, our ears, our hands, our nostrils and our palates, it is because our fundamental anthropological structure joins the being of Christ who, as the Son of God, became a visible man to heal the blind, the deaf, the dumb, the crippled and the lepers, to resurrect with his glorious body marked by the signs of his Passion, and to promise us the final embrace in the arms of the Father, echoing the baptismal embrace (cf. *EG*, no. 144).

The South American pontiff waxes lyrical about this: “We feel the need to discover and transmit the ‘mystique’ of living together, of mixing, of meeting, of hugging, of supporting each other, of participating in this somewhat chaotic tide that can be transformed into a true experience of brotherhood, into a caravan of solidarity, into a holy pilgrimage.

³⁷ <https://www.ktotv.com/>.

³⁸ Pope Francis, *Fratelli tutti*, Encyclical letter on fraternity and social friendship (Rome, 2020).

In this way, the greatest possibilities of communication will be transformed into the greatest possibilities of encounter and solidarity among all.” (EG, no. 87)

Conclusion: Theological education and synodality

“E-catechesis” will never be able to fully achieve all this. We are called to a holistic catechetical ecology, both digital and communal, liturgical and incarnational. This is also true for theological training courses which, if they take place only online, will deprive themselves of a dimension of dispute and mutual questioning between students and with the teachers, the indispensable value of which is measured when, after an online course, days of debate and presentation of intermediate or final work are organised³⁹.

In the future, the challenge will be to discern which type of hybridity in presence/online must be able to be lived in the best way for which type of formation and thus to favour the creativity required for the credibility of ecclesial and catechetical offers. This challenge is also situated in the aim of synodality, which it is no longer legitimate or opportune to limit to existing bodies (councils, synods of dioceses, bishops, continents), but which it is now necessary to develop in all contexts, activities, groups, associations and movements in the Church, in cooperation with societal bodies.

It is not only a question of respecting creation and fighting global warming through the energy savings that “*digital ecologies*” can partially achieve – there is still a lot of progress to be made in this area – but of offering a “holistic eco-catechesis”, at the anthropological and environmental level.

³⁹ We experienced this most convincingly at an Online-CAS at the University of Freiburg (Online-CAS “Pastoral in den Kontexten menschlicher Mobilität und Migration”, <https://www.unifr.ch/theo/fr/>) on the topic of the pastoral care of human migration and mobility, where the encounters involved led to discoveries and formative events that were otherwise unparalleled.

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