



General Congregation 8 - 13 October 2023

Testimony of the digital mission

EMBARGO UNTIL SPEECH DELIVERED

José Manuel DE URQUIDI GONZALEZ
and Xiskya Lucia VALLADARES PAGUAGA, R.P.

Dear brothers and sisters of the Synod assembly:

Many among you have already spoken in your interventions about the importance of “evangelising the digital environment”. I believe it could be a contribution to the discernment of B2 to share the experience we have had in the so-called Digital Synod. Formally, the project is called “The Church Listens to You”. It is an initiative carried out by a network of missionaries and digital evangelists, with the support of the Dicastery for Communication and the General Secretariat of the Synod. It is a missionary expression of the Synod, because it is directed exclusively to the periphery, to those who have not participated in person.

From our experience, we could say that there are **three main fruits**:

The first was that the digital mission became an important element in the global consultation of the Synod from October 2021. In the first phase, over two and a half months, 250 missionaries conducted listening processes in 115 countries, and in seven languages, thus reaching a total of more than 150,000 people who wanted to answer the questionnaire, of whom 30% were non-believers and people distant from the Church. Fifteen digital missionaries were invited to the various continental assemblies to share their discernment from the experience of their mission. Two of them are here in the assembly.

The second fruit was the creation of the very awareness of the *digital mission*. While many missionaries have been evangelising online for a long time, they have done so by personal initiative, with very few receiving any institutional support. They are those who have long felt the call to also evangelise in networks and digital spaces as their Christian vocation. For this listening project, spaces had to be created, a network among these missionaries, so that we could meet and discern together. Thus, the awareness that we were part of something that could be called the digital mission, carried out by and within the Church, has been a concrete fruit of the synodal journey. Now there are nearly 2000 digital missionaries from all the world, and the number continues to grow.

At the same time, within us, mainly among the laity and young people, a desire was discovered to better connect with our Bishops and Dioceses, and to be better accompanied, recognised, and integrated into the apostolic mission of the Church. A crucial moment in this growing awareness occurred during the World Youth Day in Lisbon, in August, where we organised a

meeting, in person for the first time, consisting of a Mass and a Festival, with 577 missionaries from 68 countries.

The Mass and blessing of the Digital Evangelizers and Missionaries in Lisbon reflected the **third outcome of this synodal listening project**. It is the Church's increasing awareness that, in the words of Cardinal Tagle in Lisbon, **the digital mission is not merely a tool for evangelisation**, but it is "*a space, a territory... a new world for the Church of communion and mission.*"

Brothers and sisters, I want to emphasise this point: *The digital environment is a culture, a "place"* where people – all of us – spend a significant part of our lives. It is not just a tool, but, as Pope Francis says in *Christus Vivit*, "has had a profound impact on ideas of time and space, on our self-understanding, our understanding of others and the world, and our ability to communicate, learn, be informed and enter into relationship with others" (CV 86). Like any culture, it has its own language and ways of acting. And as in every culture, for the seed of the Gospel to grow there, it needs to be inculturated.

Within this culture, we find brothers and sisters longing for the Proclamation. Many there need hope, they need to heal their wounds, they need a hand, they need God. For many, it is not enough to tell them the Mass schedule or invite them to visit the cathedral if we have not first engaged in dialogue with them, getting closer in order to listen to them. Sometimes they feel confused or ashamed, and they need a "travel companion" to assist them. To be that companion, we need to step outside of ourselves, our ways of thinking, to meet them, listen to them, and accompany them.

It is said that we are in a moment of transformation in the Church, that the inherited model no longer works for speaking to the digital age. It is suggested that, in this transitional era, the Church should be built from the peripheries, there in the Galilee of non-believers and the wounded, where those yearning for God do not know how to call upon Him. Our experience is that the digital culture holds much of this "new Galilee", and that the Lord is there, ahead of us, taking the lead, as Pope Francis says.

We are also aware of many things in that environment that are not of God. We are not naïve. In "Toward a Full Presence", this May's Pastoral Reflection by the Dicastery for Communication on interaction on Social Networks, the algorithms that condition and filter the networks for economic gain are well analysed. Like all missionaries, we need to know where the pitfalls and deceptions lie.

But what leads us to that territory is the same Spirit that, through this Synod, invites us to embrace the mission to this new Galilee. It is humble listening, accompaniment, and dialogue, in addition to a good understanding of the treasure of our faith, which allow us to engage in dialogue with a population that is hard to find in churches. They are those between 18 and 40 years old (30% non-believers). They are those who believe "without belonging", the distanced and alienated, the "Nones" as they are called in English. They are those who left the Church, hurt by so much discrimination, who got bored with our sermons, who did not understand our language or perhaps never set foot in a church. But they continue searching. They spend a large part of their hours online because they are "partially hidden" there. Their anonymity has allowed them to overcome shame and distance, or just to ask questions. Engaging in dialogue with them requires time, patience, and much love.

Finally, I want to emphasise a relevant point for section B2.2. To evangelise in digital spaces, it does not matter if you are a priest or layperson, male or female, young or adult: of the 250 evangelists in the first phase, 63% are laypeople, 27% priests, and 10% religious brothers and sisters. What matters is your ability to listen and engage in dialogue. What is surprising is the trust placed in the person, word, and testimony of the digital missionary. In this sense, the new Galilee of the digital environment is an ideal territory for a synodal missionary Church in which all the baptised assume co-responsibility for evangelisation.

We have also discovered the importance of what is said in Worksheet B 2.1, point (d), that the limitations and failures of Christian communities are not an obstacle to the mission, but rather, I quote, “the movement of reaching out driven by faith, hope, and charity is a way to confront this incomplete nature.” On the networks, everything is provisional, fluid, incomplete. And there, what we offer is not the façade of a grand historical basilica, but the merciful face, trying to understand the language to convey Life. And from that primary encounter, many then find the courage and desire to enter the Basilica.

Let us dream together that one day all Dioceses have their teams of “digital missionaries” sent by their Bishops; and that the ministry of digital listening to find the suffering brother becomes a normal part of the life of the Church. And if the dream becomes a reality, surely in the future they will say it was the Synod on Synodality that made it possible.