

Roman Catholic Church and Cautious Embrace of Modern Communication Media

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Abstract

The Catholic Church has a complex history in its appropriation and use of modern means of communication. It has at various times sought to adapt and pushed back. Almost with equal measure, it has variously churned out instructions and guidelines and even condemnations on the heels of inventions and innovations that pushed the boundaries of traditional means of communication. For instance, the church transitioned from colourful medieval manuscripts to printed books with the invention of the printing press in the middle of the fifteenth century. Interestingly, whenever the church has been able to embrace any invention, it has almost always done so through the purviews of its mission of evangelisation. In contemporary times, *Inter Mirifica* (promulgated on 4 December 1963 by the Second Vatican Council) and *Communio et progressio* (23 May 1971) are two documents that signalled the church's preparedness to accept the reality and phenomenon of the new frontiers ushered in by contemporary means of communication. The objective of this article is firstly to make a historical excursus of the Catholic Church's embrace of the means of communication, characterised by caution and wariness, eagerness and enthusiasm. Secondly, it apports a space to the Catholic Church in some African countries. It also highlights the importance attached to means of communication, especially the radio apostolate, by the local churches in those places. It does so by situating the media consciousness among local church hierarchies on the continent within the injunction of Pope John Paul II in *Ecclesia in Africa*.

Keywords: Roman Catholic Church; popes; communication; media; information; innovations; Africa; internet



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Introduction

Alioune Diop, the father of African Catholic Negritude and the founder of the once influential *Présence Africaine*, etched this expression: “Faith lives by confronting events and new ideas” (cited in Foster 2015, 252). The Catholic Church traditionally attempts to adjust each time there is a new idea or invention. It sometimes embraces new ideas and new inventions with great enthusiasm, as it did, for instance, with humanism and Renaissance arts between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries in Europe. At other times, the church does so reluctantly, when it cannot help but come to terms with a new reality, or even resists where and when it can put up a fight. For example, after the invention of printing around 1439 by the German printer, Johannes Gutenberg, the church at first delightedly welcomed it, considering printing as offering great opportunity and potential for the dissemination of the Christian message. Indeed, the earliest printing facilities in Europe were set up in abbeys, episcopal residences, and ecclesiastical universities (Baragli 2012). Archbishop Berthold von Henneberg, a strong supporter in the fifteenth century of Renaissance humanism, masterfully defined printing as “a sort of divine art” (Baragli 2012). His description concurs with the late medieval understanding of sacred art as *ancilla theologiae* (handmaid of theology), which was ascribed a triple function of *memoria* (memory) *Biblia pauperum* (Paupers’ bible) and *excitatio* (rhetorical device to elicit attention) (Scasso 2008, 116).

Religion and communication play significant complementary roles in the cultural history of humanity. At each turn of the evolutionary wheel, a revolution in communication nearly always affects religion and transforms religious practices as well as people’s understanding of religion itself (O’Leary 1996, 782). The American religious historian Walter Jackson Ong identifies four stages in the history of human communication. The first three are orality, literacy, and print culture. These are grouped under the umbrella of “primary orality,” which was operative throughout the periods of chirographic writing before the invention of printing. The fourth stage as identified by Ong is what he calls “secondary orality.” It is described as a post-literate and post-Gutenberg culture, exceptionally now characterised by electronic devices that have the potency to reach much larger audiences because of advances in technology and electronic media (Maignant 2017, 21; O’Leary 1996, 782–83).

The dominance of electronic media, especially in the last quarter of the twentieth century, brought the world to the present cultural evolution and communication stage. This dominance effectively “dissolves” time by “disordering the sequence of events and making them simultaneous in the communication networks, thus installing society in eternal ephemerality” (Maignant 2017, 29). Although primarily focused in general on the embrace of modern communication media by the Roman Catholic Church, the article, towards the end, reserves space for the place and use of modern means of communication within the Catholic Church in some African countries. It is not possible to cover the whole of the continent due to its geographical size and various local peculiarities.

The article notes approvingly with an acknowledgment that the local church on the continent has made appreciative contributions in the ministry of radio broadcasting where both the church and Catholic-related organisations have left their imprints in some African countries. The article explicates that the development, interest in, and use of the mass media by the Roman Catholic Church in Africa can be found within the bigger tapestry of an existing corpus of ecclesiastical documents, papal encouragements, and pronouncements in that regard. As qualitative research, it adopts the narrative history approach in its presentation and analysis of church documents and relevant materials used therein to arrive at its conclusion.

The Popes and Means of Communication

Contemporary means of communication are generally considered by the Catholic Church as an integral part of its work of evangelisation. This consideration is precisely evident on two fronts: the spread of the gospel (in a strict sense), and the diplomatic activities of the Holy See in the economic and social promotion of justice, peace, and development (in a broad sense). Through the Holy See and with the aid of modern means of communication, the church seeks to become a true and important political and diplomatic voice—a voice that is heard internationally. Hence, it endeavours to express its viewpoints on questions and issues that the church considers of utmost importance. These include peace in the world, human rights, economic promotion of poor countries, defence of human rights, and the development of biotechnology that respects ethical human values (Scasso 2008, 115).

It will be helpful to briefly review some papal pronouncements and church documents on means of communication. Following the invention of printing in the mid-1400s, Pope Innocent VIII issued *Inter multiplices* on 17 November 1487. Some of the provisions of Innocent VIII's norms are still subtly in force in one way or another. He established among other things: (1) ecclesiastical examination of all writings before printing; (2) granting of printing permission (*imprimatur*) for works that were judged not to be injurious to morality or the Catholic faith; (3) spiritual and monetary penalties for those who printed, read, or possessed books that had incurred ecclesiastical disapproval; and (4) confiscation and destruction of illegal books (Baragli 2012).

With the apostolic letter *Accepimus litteras* of 17 March 1479, Pope Sixtus IV approved and supported measures of censorship that had been put in place by the University of Cologne. They were directed against books that were suspected to be “infected with heresy” (Baragli 2012). Pope Leo X followed in that same direction with the publication of the papal bull *Inter sollicitudines* in 1515 for the Diocese of Rome. He decreed that his vicar general must examine and approve books and writings in Rome before they could be circulated in the “eternal city.” This papal prescript established that the violation of its directive carried the punishment of *latae sententiae*, a form of excommunication. It included confiscation of the work in question, or even its being

publicly burnt, and in some cases, the suspension of the printer from doing any further printing work (Baragli 2012).

The uneasiness of the popes towards the printing press in the early modern period is attributable in part to the rapid spread of the Protestant Reformation. Europe was already on its way to greater access to books and mass literacy. It is helpful to remember that before the rise of Martin Luther, the humanist movement including the Renaissance promoted the embracing of education, classical arts, literature, and science. For instance, Erasmus of Rotterdam (1469–1536) in his book *Institutio Principis Christiani* (The Education of a Christian Prince), which appeared in 1516, demonstrated the importance of education as an indispensable tool for the reform of society and the pertinent role of communication skills (O'Malley 2013, 45). The Protestant Reformation took place in Europe at a time when factors such as the availability of education and printed books could help its spread and flourishing. In that regard, it stands to reason to affirm with Susan Karant-Nunn and Ute Lotz-Heumann (2017) that “[t]he success of Protestantism overall owed much to printed propaganda.” Conversely, according to the same authors, “Catholic adversaries of the reform movement never fully exploited the printing press for their own purposes” (Karant-Nunn and Lotz-Heumann 2017). It has been estimated that publishers in Wittenberg, the city of Luther, published about 2,721 printed works between 1517 and 1546. Cumulatively, it translates to an average of 91 publications per year (Karant-Nunn and Lotz-Heumann 2017). Naturally, such massive publications that spread the reformers’ ideas made Catholic authorities very jittery and therefore more determined to checkmate any further incursion into traditional Catholic areas in Europe. Hence, they resorted to churning out more restrictions from Rome.

Many of those ecclesiastical restrictive measures were codified with the constitution *Index Librorum Prohibitorum* that came into force in 1557 with the approval of Pope Paul IV. It was later modified by Pope Pius IV in 1564 with the Apostolic Constitution, *Dominici gregis*. With *Sollicita ac provida* of 9 August 1753, Pope Benedict XIV further stipulated norms for ecclesiastical censures, as well as the re-organisation of the Congregation of the Index (Baragli 2012). Two encyclicals appeared within that restrictive climate, *Mirari vos* (15 August 1832) and *Singulari nos* (15 July 1834). Both were issued by Pope Gregory XVI (1831–1846) against Félicité Robert de Lamennais and his fellow pilgrims of religious liberty. Gregory XVI not only condemned Lamennais’s newspaper *L’Avenir*, but he equally included in his condemnation some of the ideas propounded in the same newspaper and Lamennais’s pamphlet, *Paroles d’un croyant*, such as liberty of the press and conscience. Taking issue with the pamphlet, the pope described it as “small in size, but immense in perversity” (Dégert 1910; Hastings 1988, 321–39).

Similarly, in the 1864 *Syllabus of Errors* that was published by Pope Pius IX (1846–1878), among other things, the pope vehemently objected to the idea that “[t]he Roman Pontiff can, and ought to, reconcile himself, and come to terms with progress, liberalism

and modern civilisation” (Pius IX 1864, #80). However, some mitigation of the church’s restrictive measures gradually began to surface during the pontificate of Pope Leo XIII (1878–1903), especially with his *Officiorum ac munerum* of 25 January 1897. Leo abolished some of the inhibiting norms, particularly those that had been previously established by Benedict XIV (1740–1758). The directives of Leo remained in place until the promulgation of the *Canon Law* in 1917 (Scasso 2008, 118).

Although times and circumstances had substantially changed by 1917, the new code still retained a great part of the Leonine stipulations. According to Andrea Scasso (2008, 118), one notable trend in all those pontifical injunctions is that their magisterial norms were mostly measures that were repressive in matters of communication. Their major concerns were about the inherent danger in the use of increasing mass media of communication. It was not so much about how to analyse and appropriate the correct use of the media in the service of evangelisation. Such a change of perspective lay in the future. In the meantime, the church remained inattentive to the courageous and pioneering initiatives of people like Lamennais and other Catholics in the field. It misjudged those initiatives together with the press as sources of public failures, religious indifference, and moral decay (Baragli 2012).

The Roman Catholic Church has come a long way in its renewed interest and enthusiasm for technological innovations in information technology. It has emerged from its past shadows of distrust of the media. For the greater part of the nineteenth century, the church embraced and scorned the media in equal measure. It employed both *imprimatur* and *nihil obstat* as means of censorship and control since its primary concern remained the preservation of faith and morals among its faithful, particularly the common folk (O’Hanlon 2016, 203). Because of its mistrust and control, the Catholic Church was naturally perceived as backward concerning new and modern means of spreading thoughts and ideas (Scasso 2008, 116–18). It appeared somewhat as an enemy of freedom of expression and opposed to progress. Owing to the little flicker of light and opening during the pontificate of Leo XIII, his immediate successor in the person of Pope Pius X (1903–1914) affectionately described him as “the first pope of the press.” But in actual reality, the same Leo XIII did not hesitate to denounce what he perceived as “the unbridled freedom of the press with which men who love novelty gave themselves to spreading an infinite multitude of newspapers, the task of ‘challenging and questioning’ the eternal norms of the true and the just, of slandering and disliking the Church” (cited in Baragli 2012).

For his part, Pius X maintained the same line of thought in his denunciation of what he saw as an anti-religious and anti-clerical press. He considered it to have been infected with modernism. However, and despite their misgivings towards the press, *L’Osservatore Romano* was embraced by successive popes after its establishment in 1861 by Pius IX as the official newspaper of the Holy See. A weekly English edition of *L’Osservatore Romano* first appeared in 1968 after the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965). As far as most of the pre-Vatican II popes were concerned, good press was

judged good because it was Catholic, and if it defended the Holy See and the interests of the church. The French Catholic Newspaper *La Croix* (first published in 1880) helped bring about a better perception of the press by the Catholic Church. The paper changed the magisterium's view from one of considered pessimism to optimism, especially since *La Croix* endeavoured to describe public events to its readers from the standpoint of Catholic doctrine (Baragli 2012).

A caveat must be added regarding the church's reluctance to fully embrace the ever-evolving means of mass communication: the family has always been a primary preoccupation of the popes (Scasso 2008, 121). They naturally viewed their role as protectors of the deposit of faith and morals. In the same vein, it bears recalling equally that the Enlightenment, rationalism, deism, and their propensity towards atheism were major preoccupations for different pontificates (Dulles 2003, 194). That state of their animus remained as such for the greater part of the 19th century even up to the eve of the convocation of the Second Vatican Council in 1959. As Pope Francis opines, "The last years of the nineteenth century were the 'golden age' of modern atheism as a philosophical and ideological system" (Francis 2023, #25). It must not also be forgotten that the popes were men of their times in their half-hearted embrace of communication media, especially the newspaper. For instance, the encyclopaedists of the Enlightenment era disparagingly scorned newspapers as "vulgar" journalism, which in the words of Denis Diderot were meant for "the nourishment of the ignorant" (cited in Baragli 2012). As for Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the newspaper was "an ephemeral work" and "without any usefulness" (cited in Baragli 2012). And because it was neglected by prominent writers at the time, according to Rousseau, it only served "to give uneducated vanity to women and fools" (cited in Baragli 2012).

From Ecclesiastical Scepticism to Media Enthusiasm

A small but noticeable opening of the church towards new means of communication like cinema, radio, and television came with the pontificate of Pius XI (1922–1939). His interventions concerning the press and communication media oscillated between denunciation of moral failure and concern for a good press. Accordingly, he declared St Francis de Sales as the patron saint of Catholic journalists. In his two encyclicals *Divini illius magistri* (1929) and *Casti connubii* (1930), Pius XI treated *en passant* the question of cinema. Conventionally, public cinema is believed to have started on 28 December 1895, with the screening of the film *L'arrivée d'un train à la gare* by the Lumière Brothers (Baragli 2012). The pope disapproved of the spectacle of the cinema alongside "impious and licentious" books, as well as radio shows which, as they were conceived by him, could "easily become occasions for moral and religious decay for young people" (Pius XI 1929, #90). Nonetheless, in his well-pondered opinion, he was optimistic that the same means of communication, if properly directed and used, could become a great aid in public instruction and education (Pius XI 1929, #90).

Recognising the advantages of greater outreach through the aid of radio transmission, Pius XI established the Vatican Radio on 12 February 1931, in the presence of Guglielmo Marconi, the Italian inventor of modern radio. Like *L'Osservatore Romano* before it, the Vatican Radio was not so much seen by the pope as an instrument of human communication *per se*, but rather as a personal microphone of the pope and a field of Catholic Action. For the pontiff, it was “a classical field, magnificent for Catholic Action” (cited in Baragli 2012). Pius XI was the first pope whose message reached many people live on radio when his Christmas message was aired on 24 December 1932.

With the encyclical *Vigilanti cura* of 29 June 1936, Pius XI carefully conceded—while expressing a desire that cinematography might not be “the school of corruption”—that it might be “transformed into a precious instrument of education and elevation of humanity” (Scasso 2008, 119). Quite curiously, transmitting the Mass on the radio was forbidden, for two main reasons: (1) to avoid giving the faithful an occasion and easy excuse to skip their Sunday and holy day obligations, and (2) not to give weapons to the enemies of the church to be used against it. That prohibition was in tune with an earlier decree of the Sacred Consistorial Congregation of 10 December 1912, which expressly prohibited “in the churches all sorts of shows through projections or films” (Baragli 2012).

If Pius XI was the first pope to be heard live on the radio, his successor Pius XII (1939–1958) became the first pope to appear on a television screen with the transmission of his midnight Christmas Mass in 1948 (Baragli 2012). The papal Mass of Pentecost Sunday on 6 June 1954 was believed to have been watched live in Europe by about 25 million people. As it happened, the pope’s homily for that occasion was translated into five languages. In 1958, Pius XII proclaimed St. Clare of Assisi to be the patroness of television (Baragli 2012). Television became a regular public service, as well as a state-owned property, first in England in 1936. It became commercial in the United States of America in 1942 and developed into a techno-socio-cultural success after the Second World War. Pius XII recognised the benefits of the invention of this modern means of mass communication. He also acknowledged that the “clock of change” could not be turned backwards. For that reason, he welcomed the importance of being able to transmit the Mass on radio, which he saw as bringing great benefit to the sick and the homebound, and to those suffering in communist countries of the time. He described television as “a marvellous means offered by human science and technology” (Pius XII 1954). As his predecessors had previously done, he equally cautioned in his 1 January 1954 exhortation, *I rapidi progressi*, that, like any other means or instrument, the television was both “precious and dangerous at the same time” (Pius XII 1954).

In another encyclical, *Miranda prorsus* (8 September 1957), Pius XII beams a searchlight on cinema, radio, and television, and explores possible avenues through which the church could use them for missionary activities. He defines all three means as “wonderful technical inventions, fruits of human ingenuity, and at the same time, gifts of God,” that “serve directly or through an artistic expression, for the diffusion of

ideas, offer to the multitude, in an easy manner, images, news, and teachings, nourishment to the mind, also in moments of leisure and rest” (Scasso 2008, 121; Dyikuk, Egere, and Maimako 2021, 229). Pius XII especially appreciated television for its capacity to provide entertainment for families, while also serving as a powerful tool for information and spiritual upliftment. He acknowledged that being able to follow religious ceremonies on television could help the faith of those who were not physically able to participate. Thus, in *Miranda prorsus*, Pius XII approved the transmission of the Mass on television, especially for the benefit of those physically unable to attend in their parishes (Dyikuk, Egere, and Maimako 2021, 229). He acknowledged that Mass seen on television was “not the same as being actually present at the Divine Sacrifice, as it is an obligation on holy days” (Pius XII 1957). At the same time, the pope was not unaware that “from religious ceremonies, as seen on Television, valuable fruits for the strengthening of the Faith and the renewal of fervour can be obtained by all those who, for some reason, are unable to be actually present” (Pius XII 1957).

Cumulatively, it may be surmised that from the viewpoint of Pius XII, the means of social communication ought to be used to serve the cause of truth and good and to give information on right moral teaching. Television and other electronic means ought to offer good and healthy leisure, which should be beneficial for the intellectual, emotional, and educational development of every age group. Similarly, many recurring themes in the church’s magisterial pronouncements about the press, especially in the 1950s and early 1960s, concerned truth and charity in the dissemination of information. This is understandable since the propaganda of falsehood and hatred was understood to have contributed to racial discrimination and suffering during the Second World War when false propaganda fanned the flames of bitterness and rancour among the people of Europe (Baragli 2012).

Vatican II and Post-Conciliar Appropriation of the Media

As already noted, the general attitude of the Catholic Church towards journalists and those grouped under the broad umbrella of the “Fourth Estate” was at best one of cautious distance (Gribble 2017, 28). With the pontificates of Pius XI, Pius XII, and John XXIII, the church became ready to face and accept the reality and phenomenon of the new frontiers brought about by modern means of mass communication. This was somewhat evident in Pope John XXIII’s *motu proprio, Superno Dei nutu* of 5 June 1960, with which he introduced mass media among the issues to be discussed at Vatican II. With the same document, he established a special secretariat charged with considering problems related to modern means of mass communication.

Consequently, the Second Vatican Council became the first council to be widely covered by the international press. This included radio and television, with the interest of the news media in the conciliar events being of an unprecedented intensity. In the words of John O’Malley: “The media took an aggressive interest in the Council. ... The mere spectacle of Vatican II made it newsworthy even apart from anything else that

happened” (cited in Gribble 2017, 29). Such interest was far away from what obtained at Vatican I when Louis Veillot (one of the curial secretaries of that Council) expressed nothing but disdain for the press: “What difference does it make to the council what the journalists write about it? Journalists are the waves and the winds. They are not the captain, not the crew, not the bark. Well, their bark and their crew and their captain are used to these tempests and have seen more ugly seas than this” (cited in Gribble 2017, 29).

The overall evolution of the church’s eager appropriation of the media was itself the fruit of its awareness of the precious importance of communication media for the common good of the people. Although *Inter Mirifica* (Decree on the Media of Social Communications) was one of the first documents to be approved by the Council, its easy and prompt approval was born more out of “reasons of convenience rather than urgency” (Williams 1991, 169). The conciliar fathers were not conscious of the eventual import of a document that was considered insignificant at the time. However, its description of the responsibility of those who make and transmit information for the common good remains remarkable. Also outstanding is the injunction that those in civil authority ought to maintain a “careful balance between the freedom of the press and the safeguarding of public morality” (Williams 1991, 169). Although *Inter Mirifica* drew its textual inspiration from previous pontifical pronouncements, the conciliar decree considered communication media from its global importance through the action of the extraordinary and solemn magisterium of the church. The document is imbued with spiritual and moral principles in its emphasis on moral responsibility in the use of the media. It insists that the principles of moral order must equally be applied to the media as is the case in other human activities (Mirus 2010). Given those ever-binding moral principles, the decree in number 11 is unambiguous that everyone involved in the creation, dissemination, and use of communication media has “a very great responsibility” on account of the power they have “to direct mankind along a good path or an evil path by the information they impart and the pressure they exert” (cited in Mirus 2010).

The decree’s double intent and scope, as well as the authors’ commitment to peace and the promotion of human rights through means of mass communication media, would become evident in the various messages of post-Vatican II popes. “World Communications Day” was instituted by Pope Paul VI in 1967, to honour professionals in the communication media, and to encourage their cooperation (Pontifical Council for Social Communications 1971, #167). Among other things, papal messages for the annual celebration of World Communications Day offer insights and a window into the frame of mind of the Holy See concerning the social, political, ethical, and moral considerations of the day. This has meant for the church the greater use of, and recourse to, new technologies. From a legal viewpoint, with the promulgation of *Inter Mirifica*, modern means of mass communication were effectively brought into the official law of the church. This can be seen in canons 822–32 of Chapter IV of Book III of the 1983 Code of Canon Law, “*De instrumentis communicationis socialis et in specie de libris*”

(Scasso 2008, 122). Specifically, in canon 822, the code exhorts pastors of souls and bishops to always remember their triple responsibility of “*docendi; santificandi et regendi*” (teaching, sanctifying, and governing). The code further encourages and recommends the use of communication media in the fulfilment of those triple duties (Scasso 2008, 125).

Pope John Paul II’s apostolic exhortation *Catechesi tradendae*, of 16 October 1979, is emphatic on the important place of communication media in the work of catechesis and evangelisation. He underscores the great possibilities offered by different means of mass communication for catechesis, including television, radio, printing, discs, and tapes (John Paul II 1979, #46). It is not surprising that the Vatican embraced the internet early enough, as soon as the World Wide Web became available (Maignant 2017, 22). The 1990s witnessed remarkable inventions in what is commonly regarded as the “McWorld” where people began to be more connected “not only by commerce but also by communications, information, and entertainment” (Jennings and Brewster 1998, 528). The same decades equally saw the arrival of the 24-hour cable news channels (Jennings and Brewster 1998, 528). As for the Catholic Church, it promptly rose to the challenge of those decades by repositioning itself to take the advantages offered by the postmodern revolution in information technology. The Vatican website became operational in 1995, four years after the availability of the internet to the public (Maignant 2017, 22).

As a matter of fact, alongside the computer, the internet brought about a revolution in the dissemination of information, analogous to the way that the computer and the database changed the way of doing research, and impacted writing and editing with the word processor (Jennings and Brewster 1998, 549, 551). After emerging from its nearly three decades of obscurity, the internet (previously known as ARPANET—Advanced Research Projects Agency Network [first used in 1969]), rapidly occupied the centre stage of accessing information in the 1990s and progressively caught the imagination and popular attention of the world (Jennings and Brewster 1998, 553, 555). As it unstoppably moved into the mainstream of human life and activities, it became a powerful tool of discovery, once conceived as “the machine dream” by the British futuristic writer Herbert George Wells. He had envisioned the possibility of a “World Brain” in his 1930s science fiction *The Time Machine* and *The War of the Worlds* (Jennings and Brewster 1998, 555). Aware of the great potential of the internet, especially as a huge pool of information and its capacity to position itself as an indispensable alternative to traditional mass media, Pope John Paul II in 2002 described the internet as “a new forum for proclaiming the Gospel” (John Paul II 2002, #3). It was through that prism that he wanted the church to approach “this new medium with realism and confidence” (John Paul II 2002, #3). As underscored by him (John Paul II 2002, #3):

The Internet can offer magnificent opportunities for evangelization if used with competence and a clear awareness of its strengths and weaknesses. Above all, by

providing information and stirring interest it makes possible an initial encounter with the Christian message, especially among the young who increasingly turn to the world of cyberspace as a window on the world. It is important, therefore, that the Christian community think of very practical ways of helping those who first make contact through the Internet to move from the virtual world of cyberspace to the real world of the Christian community.

In the understanding of the Catholic Church, the internet itself is metaphorically perceived as a “third place,” a new continent, a missionary territory, and a new frontier waiting to be evangelised. It can thus be used to foster an authentic culture of encounter, rather than perpetuate division and rancour. It becomes a laudable instrument when the “net” and “networks” bring people together, help them share useful information, and allow for the educating of one another (Maignant 2017, 22; Tighe 2016, 4; Wooden 2019). In a particular manner, the Catholic Church is keenly aware that the great digital continent of the internet does not only involve breathtaking technological innovations. Most importantly, it is used by concrete human beings who bring with them their hopes, their sufferings, their concerns, and their pursuit of that which the human heart yearns for and desires in terms of what is true, beautiful, and good (Tighe 2016, 4). It is no wonder that at a certain point in the late 1990s, St Isidore of Seville (560–636), because of the versatility of his knowledge, was variously proposed to the Holy See for possible declaration as the digital patron saint of the internet. Despite some claims about such a seeming declaration by Pope John Paul II in 1997, no official document exists to that effect. Therefore, as explicated by Matthew Schneider, the seventh-century Spanish saint, at best, might be regarded as the “unofficial patronage of the internet” (Schneider 2020).

Pope Benedict XVI in 2010 focused on “The Priest and Pastoral Ministry in a Digital World: New Media at the Service of the Word” for his message for World Communications Day. That theme was meant to coincide with the church’s celebration of the Year of Priests in 2010. His message was meant to call the attention of priests to “the important and sensitive pastoral area of digital communications in which priests can discover new possibilities for carrying out their ministry *to* and *for* the Word of God” (Benedict XVI 2010). He equally asserts that “Church communities have always used the modern media for fostering communication, engagement with society, and, increasingly, for encouraging dialogue at a wider level” (Benedict XVI 2010). Conscious of their primary duty to proclaim Jesus Christ, the incarnate Word of God, and to communicate his saving grace in the sacraments, Pope Benedict XVI considered it imperative for priests “to be present in the world of digital communications” (Benedict XVI 2010). And they must be there “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” (Benedict XVI 2010).

Catholic Media in Some African Countries

The post-missionary local churches that began to emerge in Africa from the mid-1970s benefitted from a changed atmosphere within the Catholic Church after the Second Vatican Council, which witnessed greater openness to modern communication media. It is a truism to affirm to some reasonable extent that Africa's questions (and those of its local churches on the continent) were obviously not those of the long-established churches that dominated conciliar discussions at Vatican II. According to Bishop Patrick Kalilombe, from a numerical standpoint, African presence at the council was "marginal," and even "by proxy." There were only 311 prelates from Africa at the Council out of a total of 2,625 council fathers, amounting to about 12%. Only 60 bishops were of African origins, while the remaining 251 of the 311 were missionaries who were working on the continent at the time (Kalilombe 1991, 312). As Bishop Kalilombe rightly argues, Vatican II was "largely a forum for the concerns of the Churches of Europe and America in the 1960s" (Kalilombe 1991, 310). The concerns of Africa and its churches lay elsewhere: "decolonisation and national independence, development, the search for a localised Church and the teething problems of newly independent states" (Kalilombe 1991, 312, 317). In the immediate post-conciliar period, the responses of the local churches in Africa to Vatican II and its vision seemed to have been closely aligned with those of the older churches in the developed world. Bishop Vincent J. McCauley of Fort Portal, Uganda, was among the first missionary bishops in Africa to exert efforts "to develop the mind and the spirit of the council" (Gribble 2009, 728). In one instance at the presentation of the English translation of the conciliar documents, Bishop McCauley wrote: "The purpose of this volume is to make the official documents of the council readily available for information, study, and implementation among the people of God in Africa" (cited in Gribble 2009, 728).

Prior to the convocation of the Second Vatican Council, to be numbered among pioneer Catholic publications in Africa, was a periodical of the Organisation of Catholic African Students in France called *Tam-Tam*. It first appeared in 1952, with the subtitle "Monthly Bulletin of Catholic African Students." It helped to unite African Catholic students in various parts of France and reached many members of the clergy in Africa, particularly those in French Africa. At its zenith, *Tam-Tam* had a circulation of about 5,000 copies. It counted among its regular contributors luminary giants such as Joseph Ki-Zerbo, Jean Pliya, Nicolas Toufic, and Robert Sastre, among a host of others (Foster 2015, 43, 51). In 1965, the same year that the Council ended, the White Fathers in East Africa began the publication of *African Ecclesiastical Review* (AFER). It continues to be published to date.

One of the first visible results of Vatican II in Africa was the formation of regional and continental episcopal bodies, which enabled African bishops to be aware of their collective responsibility for the growth of their nascent churches. From that collective awareness ensued the consolidation and prominence of the Association of Member Episcopal Conferences in Eastern Africa (AMECEA). This group traces its origin back

to 1960 and only became officially established in 1961, a year before the start of Vatican II. It gained much prominence in the years immediately after the council. The AMECEA Pastoral Institute (API) in Eldoret, Kenya, serves as its publishing house (AMECEA n.d.).

Four years after the close of Vatican II, Pope Paul VI, on his pastoral visit to Africa in 1969, formally inaugurated the Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar (SECAM). Beginning with the assembly of the Synod of Bishops in Rome in 1974, SECAM has given the Catholic Church in Africa its present shape and the self-awareness of being a local church (Iheanacho 2021, 130). One of its areas of concern has been the role of communication media, which in turn reflects the general and greater appropriation of the media in post-Vatican II global Catholicism. Pope John Paul II made history by uploading on to the web his 1998 post-synodal apostolic exhortation on the Church in Oceania. It was the first of such actions by the Holy See (Ihejirika 2009, 32).

In the aftermath of the digital revolution, the Catholic Church began to move slightly away from its dependence on traditional modes of expression. It had been very much text-dependent and relied on the print media. One concrete sign of that change can be found in the emergence of Catholic radio stations in many places in Africa, where the Catholic Church is fully engaged in the radio revolution on the continent. According to Walter Ihejirika (2009), some of the community radio stations operating in Africa are promoted by Catholic dioceses or Catholic organisations. For Patrick Alumuku, “the Catholic Church has been identified with efforts to use this means as an instrument of social change,” by becoming itself in turn “instrumental to the setting up of community-orientated radio stations,” whereby the radio ministry is used for social education (cited in Ihejirika 2009, 34). Many Catholic dioceses in Africa own or operate through FM radio stations. Some of those Catholic-sponsored radio stations include Radio Icengelo and Yatsani Radio in Zambia, Radio Progress in Ghana, and Radio Veritas in South Africa and Liberia. Many of these radio stations at certain times of their transmission connect to the Vatican Radio in Rome for church and world news (Ihejirika 2009, 34; Samasumo 2022).

Radio Maria as an international Catholic radio has the widest coverage in Africa. It is operative in 24 African countries, which include small countries such as Lesotho, Togo, and Malawi, and big countries like Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Kenya, Cameroon, and a host of others. Apart from dominant official languages such as English, French, and Portuguese, many of its programmes are aired in many local languages (see Radio Maria network, <https://www.radiomaria.org/africa/>). Another station is Radio Kwizera, situated on the Tanzanian-Rwandan border. It was set up by the Jesuit Refugee Service in 1995. Its initial aim was to help in bringing about reconciliation between the Tutsi and Hutu peoples. The station was established as a direct response to the infamous hate radio of Rwanda, Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines, which spread falsehood and fanned the embers of genocide (Ihejirika 2009, 34). Rádio Ecclesia in

Angola was a constant target of Angolan government sanctions for its outspokenness against communist propaganda before the country's civil war. After the war, it played an important role in the post-conflict reconstruction of Angola. It also criticised the government of the late President José Eduardo dos Santos because of rampant corruption and embezzlement of the country's huge petroleum resources (Heywood 2006, 198; Iheanacho 2022, 7).

During the 19th Plenary Assembly of SECAM in Accra, Ghana (25 July–1 August 2022), the Prefect of the Vatican Dicastery for Communications, Dr Paolo Ruffini commended the initiatives of the Catholic Church in Africa for the establishment of Catholic radio and television stations where possible on the continent. He remarked thus (as cited in Samasumo 2022):

Most of these radio stations are re-transmitting (on their FM diocesan radio stations) Vatican Radio's daily bulletins, broadcasts in the English, French, Portuguese, Kiswahili, and occasionally many other African languages. I would like to compliment and recognize the ongoing efforts in communication at all levels, mostly through the flourishing of radio and TV stations wherever they operate in the Church, the Family of God, on the continent, abroad and online. The globalized world needs to hear about you too, and about what you are doing as a local church in your various dioceses.

The question of content generation is outside the scope of this research. However, it is noteworthy to observe that many Catholic radio and emergent television stations on the continent work in partnership with some international Catholic media houses such as Eternal Word Television Network (EWTN) and SIGNIS. Such partnership is meant to assist them in benefiting from global Catholic networks for evangelisation. The regional manager of EWTN for Africa is George Wirnkar from Cameroon. The continent falls within the global coverage of the network. In the affirmation of Wirnkar, "EWTN is available in 145 countries and reaches 25 million TV Homes on all continents" (cited in Aineah 2020). It aims at "bringing as many believers as possible on board to worship together" (cited in Aineah 2020). This objective is in realisation of EWTN's global mission, which is "to be a strong link between millions unable to worship and celebrate in unity with Holy Mother the Church that loves them dearly" (cited in Aineah 2020). Regarding SIGNIS, it is a Catholic media group that helps Catholic professionals in the communication media, which includes press, radio, television, media education, internet, and new information technologies. It is present in more than 100 countries and occasionally provides training and workshops for those who work in Catholic-owned media houses. One such training programme took place in December 2020. On that occasion, the then president of the Pan-African Episcopal Committee for Social Communications (CEPACS), Bishop Emmanuel Badejo, expressed the hope for the emergence of "a new generation of competent agents of hope" who would assist the "Church in Africa to animate a new continental information order" (cited in Samasumo 2020).

Conclusion

The focus of this research has been on the careful and circumspect appropriation of modern means of mass communication by the Catholic Church. It has endeavoured herein to trace as a form of a tapestry of the church's long and complex history of embracing various means of communication. It is a history that is marked by a contour of rich experience and watchful reservations, especially regarding its doctrines and morals. Yet, it must be affirmed that the Catholic Church, as such, did not have a problem with communication media provided they never infringed upon its deposit of faith and morals. As guardians of the faith of the church, the popes felt duty-bound to protect the faith of Catholics, especially the simple faithful. Although, after its cautious, somewhat "wait and see" approach towards novelties in the modern means of dissemination of information, the Catholic Church—especially from the late 1950s—began to realise the huge potentials that modern means of social communication hold for the church's global outreach. It started to welcome those potentials and appropriated them for the Holy See's role both *intra et extra ecclesiam*. It is beyond doubt that the appropriation and use of media technologies facilitate the dissemination of the Word to the masses around the globe. For the Catholic Church, with membership in many countries, continuous advancement in the capabilities of information technologies remains a big and significant blessing. The changes that those advancements bring, in the words of the Vatican social media guru, Paul Tighe, "are not just happening 'outside' the church but within our communities and in the everyday experience of believers" (Tighe 2016, 1).

In apportioning a space to local Catholic media in Africa, this research sought to highlight the fact that church media and their outlets on the continent of Africa reflect the positive change of attitude in the church's hierarchy towards media in general. Such positive developments within the Catholic world opened new vistas for the local church, especially in the light of post-Vatican II developments both in the church and in the world. For this reason, Catholic media on the African continent both mirror and follow the lead of the Holy See, which may be described as media-friendly and enthusiastic in the use of information technologies. Among the various means of social communication at its disposal, the Catholic Church in Africa has established a strong presence in the ministry of radio broadcasting. This is not surprising since the use of radio privileges most especially those in the rural parts of the continent. Radio remains an important medium of communication and a major source of information in Africa. It has the advantage of having the widest geographical outreach within the continent where factors such as costs, poverty, and poor infrastructure do not permit huge investments in other areas of mass media technologies, and where many people have very limited access to the internet and have little or no access to electricity (Samasumo 2022).

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