In Tongues All Can Hear

Communicating the Hope of Christ in Times of Trial

Pastoral Letter of Most Rev. Michael F. Burbidge, Bishop of Arlington

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"And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age" (Mt 28:20).

God is with us. This is the message of hope that we want to shout from the rooftops, that we want to beam over the airwaves, that we want to put on the front page of our publications and post on our social media accounts. Emmanuel: God is with us.

We face many challenges today. Disease. Abortion. War. Poverty. Injustice. Climate change. Isolation. The terrible polarization that is afflicting our country makes all these challenges worse. It is easy to feel abandoned. Rates of depression and anxiety are up for all age groups, but especially for the young.

Yet the Church steadfastly proclaims: God is with us. For two millennia, the Church has followed the example of the Apostles as gifted by the Spirit: proclaiming to each generation the Good News in word and deed. The means of communication may change over the centuries, but the message remains the same.

By word and by witness, this message to every generation is a declaration and an invitation. What is declared is that "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life" (Jn 3:16).

It is an invitation into a relationship with the Divine Healer, our Lord, and with his community of believers. The invitation is always to encounter the living Christ, to experience his loving kindness, to invite him into our hearts in order, in the words of the liturgy, "to love what you command and to desire what you promise" (Collect, 21st Sunday in Ordinary Time).

As Christians, this desire is in our DNA: communicating the hope of Christ in times of trial is what Christians do. Our calling is to help people come to know Jesus as Lord and Savior who is alive, by their side, in times of joy and sorrow.

In Our Beginning

"They were confused because each one heard them speaking in his own language . . . 'We hear them speaking in our own tongues of the mighty acts of God'" (Acts 2:5, 11).

To be Christian is to communicate both in deed and in word. It is our original mandate given to us by the Lord. In the final words of the Gospel of

Matthew, Jesus makes clear what the Apostles are to do: "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you" (Mt 28:19-20).

The Church was born with the "strong driving wind" of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:2), and the first manifestation of the Spirit's gift was the ability to "speak in different tongues, as the Spirit enabled them to proclaim" (Acts 2:4). The disciples immediately went out and began to tell the assembled peoples the Good News, and they were enabled to speak to each person in a language they could understand.

The first followers of Christ communicated by deeds as well as by words. Their example of care for one another, their joy and sincerity of heart marked their witness. Yet always they bore witness with their words as well, inviting the people and challenging the leaders, even at risk of persecution. When threatened by authorities to cease preaching in public about the Good News of the Lord, the response of St. Peter and St. John was that to stop communicating was not an option. "It is impossible for us not to speak about what we have seen and heard" (Acts 4:20).

God was with those early Christians, as he is with us. What began in a backwater province of the Roman Empire—with a message at odds with the dominant values of that empire, professing a God who humbled himself to become man and die shamefully by one of the cruelest forms of execution—became a faith that spread throughout the known world. The call to invite all people to an encounter with Christ has been the vocation of every generation of Christians. It is the Great Commission. How it has been fulfilled has evolved, but the mandate has never changed.

Perhaps the model of the early Christian communicator was St. Paul. A man who had first persecuted the early Christians, he became the archetype of the missionary disciple. He traveled relentlessly, preaching to Jewish and Gentile communities, debating Athens' worldly philosophers, addressing Roman authorities. He used the means available to him, traveling by boat across the empire to meet with the far-flung Christian communities and writing letters to encourage, instruct, and correct those communities when he could not be with them in person. From a great social distance and in an age where communications were defined by delay, St. Paul forged communities of great spiritual closeness.

The Church grew even when facing the harshest of persecutions. St. Ignatius of Antioch wrote letters instructing and encouraging the churches of Asia and Europe, even as he was being transported to Rome to be martyred. Despite the strategy of the persecutors, the courage and faith of the martyrs nourished rather than frightened their brothers and sisters in Christ.

A Revolution in Communications

From the days of the Sermon on the Mount through the invention of the printing press and on to radio and television, the dominant means of communicating looked remarkably similar. It was the few talking to the many. But then came the digital revolution. This revolution transformed communications. Print, radio, and television communications were upended along with the economic models that supported them for centuries. Websites; photo, video, and file-sharing services; social media; apps; and the hardware to support these inventions were developed in quick succession. These new digital tools for communication combined an ease of connectivity with a relatively low cost of participating. All offered new ways to evangelize and to build community. They ushered in a new age of the democratization of mass communications—the many, no longer just the few, could reach mass audiences.

These tools were remarkably democratic, giving anyone with a computer or, later, a cell phone the means to communicate worldwide. Because these tools

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were widely accessible and relatively inexpensive, it meant that the majority of people could report, evangelize, or bear witness on matters of faith. With the press of the button, one could potentially have an audience larger than any St. Paul could have reached in his day.

For this reason, early in the digital revolution the Church recognized that special effort would be necessary by all her members to use these tools effectively and wisely, so that true and accurate information would not get lost in a sea of misinformation and opinion. While the Church saw risks in this new technology, she also saw opportunity for new ways to preach the Gospel. Pope Francis articulated this optimistic view in the 48th World Communications Day message: "The revolution taking place in communications media and in information technologies represents a great and thrilling challenge; may we respond to that challenge with fresh energy and imagination as we seek to share with others the beauty of God."

It was clear that these robust new forms of communications were game changers in their almost limitless reach. A catechetical video posted in Denver or Bangkok or Nairobi could be seen in Washington or Birmingham or Rio. The ability to communicate over vast distances and almost instantaneously gives every communicator the potential reach and audience of which St. Paul could only have dreamed.

The digital world has also become a means of creating community. In Pope Benedict's last World Communications Day message in 2013, he talked about social networks as "helping to create a new 'agora,' an open public square in which people share ideas, information and opinions, and in which new relationships and forms of community can come into being." In this new public square, questions about the faith could be answered, ministries could be supported, and news and information of value to believers could be shared.

At the same time, early enthusiasm for blogs, chat forums, and later, podcasts and social media, was tempered by concern about an increasingly fractious and divisive digital landscape. The anonymity of the digital world allows people to say things online they might never say to another person's face. Tools for discussion and dialogue can all too easily become forums for malice and slander. Many publications have reluctantly turned off their "comm boxes" or comment forums because of the tone and content of the submissions. Words like "troll" and "cyber bullying" have entered the popular lexicon.

In his 53rd World Communications Day message in 2019, Pope Francis reminded us of the dangers as well as the opportunities of social networking. Social networking "can help us to better connect, rediscover and assist one another," he said, while exclusion, isolation, manipulation, and disinformation were some of the dangers he cited.

There also has been a growing awareness of how easily social media could be manipulated using bots and other shadowy influencers. Much attention has been focused on their interference in election campaigns, but racist, derisive, and confrontational social media posts are also being accompanied by fake alerts and false crises, provoking strong reactions before the truth or falsehood of an assertion can be established. A single nasty tweet by a lone individual might be amplified and exploited by automated systems manipulated by only a few people. Pope Francis released an entire World Communications Day Letter in 2018 on fake news, describing its "ability to *mimic* real news" and to appeal to our prejudices and emotions.

Pope Francis also saw fit to warn us of the "huge economic interests operating in the digital world,

capable of exercising forms of control as subtle as they are invasive, creating mechanisms for the manipulation of consciences and of the democratic process" (*Laudato Si'*, no. 24).

He and other church leaders and experts have urged all men and women of good will to nurture a love for truth, the creation of a climate of mutual respect in our digital interactions, and prudence in what we ourselves broadcast to others. In his apostolic exhortation to young people, the pope said not to "confuse communication with mere virtual contact" (*Christus Vivit*, no. 88).

There can be no wonder that Pope Francis recently "prayed that people would be prudent in their judgment of others, refraining from gossip and not believing lies and 'fake news' about entire categories of people" (Catholic News Service, April 28, 2020).

Despite warnings about the dangers inherent in some of the new media, ease of transmission has made social media—both good and bad—inescapable. The cell phone has become one of the most ubiquitous pieces of technology on the planet, and social media has literally billions of participants. What is being created appeals to the best and worst of human nature, and it is therefore critical that the Church engage this technology fully and prudently.

As Pope Benedict XVI said in his 44th World Communications Day Message, "The increased availability of the new technologies demands greater responsibility on the part of those called to proclaim the Word, but also requires them to become more focused, efficient and compelling in their efforts."

Our Present Situation

"May [we] be able to encourage those who are in any affliction with the encouragement with which we ourselves are encouraged by God" (2 Cor 1:4).

From the very beginning and through the generations, members of the Church endured periods of physical separation. Christians were apart in the distant communities of the first century, in isolation as prisoners for the faith locked away in cells and awaiting execution, or in remote communities far from a priest or the sacraments for extended periods of time.

"Our longing is not for a symbol but for the Real Presence of the Body and Blood of Christ."

The members of the Body of Christ, however, have never been spiritually isolated from one another. From the Letters of St. Paul for his distanced communities, to the striking image of Pope Francis standing alone in St. Peter's Square to proclaim to a world in lockdown that "Christ is risen and standing beside us," the People of God have always sought to be with one another in prayer. God is with us always. That is the message of the Gospel, the message of the saints, the message that animates us to this day.

When stay-at-home orders were issued in response to the growing pandemic, the People of God did not have the sacraments available as before. In the United States, we experienced a little of the sacrifice that is routine to those who live in remote localities like the Amazon region, where the sacraments may only be available once or twice a year. It seems providential that when a poll months before the pandemic found that many Catholics appeared to have only a symbolic understanding of the Eucharist, now, suddenly, we are all reflecting on what we lack and for what we hunger. Our longing is not for a symbol but for the Real Presence of the Body and Blood of Christ.

This longing arose, though, at a time of unparalleled access to new means of communication that also offer new means for us to be together. During this time of lockdown, the creativity of both clergy and laity has been manifest in many dioceses. At a time when many felt alone, the gifts of the Church were made available to them in new ways.

Most noticeable were the many Masses being livestreamed, starting with the Holy Father's. The daily, private Mass of the Pope had not been routinely televised. During the coronavirus crisis, however, his Masses became a daily means through which he was able to communicate messages of hope addressed to families, to children, to first responders, and to government leaders trying to manage the crisis. He used his homilies to urge compassion for the most vulnerable, and he spoke always of God's merciful presence.

The Holy Father modeled ways to unite us in prayer. Most famously, the extraordinary *Urbi et Orbi* message and blessing on March 27 of this year, when the world was riveted on his lone figure in rainswept St. Peter's Square, as he rebuked the darkness and challenged all of us with the words of Christ: "Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?" (see Mk 4:40).

He was not alone. Nor are we. Many parishes and dioceses livestreamed daily or weekly Masses, giving solace to many who participated virtually in Masses from their own parish. While Pope Francis stressed that a virtual Mass is no substitute for a Mass celebrated in community when that is available, still the ability to livestream Masses was a great blessing.

For the first time, many people learned of the traditional Catholic teaching of Spiritual Communion, the ardent desire and prayer to be united with Christ even when the Eucharist is not physically available. This prayer both fed their desire and heightened it.

Some creative pastors were able to make the sacraments available through other means as well. Confessors, remaining at an appropriate social distance, were made available in many parishes. Holy hours of devotion with exposition of the Blessed Sacrament took place in large parking lots, where worshippers were able to stay in their cars. Wherever possible and practicable, pastors proactively explored ways to keep the sacraments before the faithful in prayer, even if separated physically. Perhaps most powerfully, there is the witness of Catholic priests, deacons, women and men religious, pastoral ministers, and laity comforting and accompanying the suffering and the dying. Brave priests have continued to put themselves at risk in order to bring comfort and administer the anointing of the sick to those in hospitals unable to be comforted by family or friends.

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Catholic publishers, despite suffering financially, have made resources available for free so that Catholics could continue to grow in their faith.

In this time of physical separation, Catholic media, both old and new, have worked together to provide news, updates, prayers, and coverage of events. Dioceses that deliver newspapers directly to parishioners continued to make this resource available. Where this was not possible, digital alternatives to traditional diocesan newspapers filled the gap. Many parish websites and social media throbbed with information and updates. Everywhere, Catholic media continued to unite us by telling the stories of heroism and of great need, inspiring, and encouraging others to act.

The trauma of the pandemic, as well as the economic upheaval that has followed, has been and continues to be an opportunity for the Church to seize the moment. Two thousand years ago, on Pentecost, the Apostles locked themselves in the Upper Room because they were afraid. But quickly, the Holy Spirit descended upon them and inspired them with a vision of how they could communicate in a bold and new way. The Spirit has and will continue to enable the Church, even in a time of lockdown and isolation, to help us overcome our feelings

of fear, loneliness, and vulnerability by reminding us that God is with us, always!

Inspired by the great need all about them, Catholics have responded powerfully. People have heard a message of hope communicated in ways they could hear. Once again, Catholics have communicated the hope of Christ during a time of trial.

The Lessons of Our 21st Century Pentecost

"Our century is characterized by the mass media or means of social communication, and the first proclamation, catechesis or the further deepening of faith cannot do without these means . . . The Church would feel guilty before the Lord if she did not utilize these powerful means that human skill is daily rendering more perfect" (St. Paul VI, Evangelii Nuntiandi, no. 45).

Look to the future with commitment "to a New Evangelization. New in its ardor, new in its methods, and new in its expression" (St. John Paul II, Address to Latin American Bishops, March 9, 1983).

There are both new lessons to be learned and older lessons to be remembered as we contemplate this 21st century Pentecost moment.

First, the Spirit is inspiring and guiding the Church to speak anew in multiple tongues so that her message of hope and invitation can be heard by everyone. The pandemic accelerated the adoption of new technologies and new means of communication. Social media networks have sprung up in parishes around the world and throughout our country. Ways to connect those confined to home in our communities, those isolated by infirmity or age, are suddenly plentiful.

Homilies, spiritual reflections, and rituals can now be shared with a potentially much larger community, including those who do not know us or worship with us. This is a powerful moment of evangelization that must not be lost.

These tools can be used to mobilize people to get involved—whether it is to serve in a food pantry, to defend religious freedoms, to speak out against racism, or to walk in a Eucharistic procession.

They can help to reinforce community, to connect those who may feel alone and isolated to others. The power of praying the Our Father with Pope Francis or the Rosary with Archbishop José Gomez was testament to this sense of community that bound all of us together in prayer at a single moment.

Second, the Spirit is at work renewing the Church, including her structures of communication, particularly in enabling her own voice to be heard. The Church must use all the channels available to her if she hopes to teach, to inform, and to inspire with the message of Christ. New media can play an important role, but so can traditional media—television, radio, and print.

New forms of media cannot be the only tools we use. The Church has communicated and evangelized over the centuries, using all available means to mobilize and inspire, to inform and explain. Some tools are good for mobilizing people. Other tools are good for informing, forming, and educating at greater depth, teaching Catholics to see the world through eyes of faith. The vocation of the Catholic journalist and communicator plays an indispensable role in this regard.

There remains a deficit of knowledge about the faith among many Catholics. There is also a deficit of knowledge about how the faith applies to the world today. Threats to unborn life, threats to religious liberty, threats to the marginalized, and other threats have not diminished. Catholics and non-Catholics alike must hear what the Church has to say about these dangers. The voice of the Church must be heard even when it is criticized and attacked.

This is even more important at a time when polarization itself afflicts the Church and many voices seeking to speak for the Church divide and distract,

promoting their own political agenda or misconception of what the Church teaches. As Pope Francis pointed out, "Christians too can be caught up in networks of verbal violence through the internet and the various forums of digital communication. Even in Catholic media, limits can be overstepped, defamation and slander can become commonplace, and all ethical standards and respect for the good name of others can be abandoned" (*Gaudete et Exultate*, no. 115).

This is a critical time for the Church, beset as she is by many of the same stresses that are affecting secular institutions. Yet it is important that the Church maintain and develop the capacity to tell her story. This is not an appeal for propaganda, even less for fake news. We must invite people beyond man-made ideologies and toward a deeper understanding of what we mean when we profess that God is with us. It is true, as Pope Francis said in his 2018 World Communications Day message, that "a weighty responsibility rests on the shoulders of those whose job is to provide information." Describing their responsibility as a "mission," he stressed that "informing others means forming others; it means being in touch with people's lives. That is why ensuring the accuracy of sources and protecting communication are real means of promoting goodness, generating trust and opening the way to communion and peace."

Conclusion

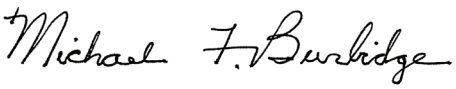
The mission of the Church yesterday, today, and tomorrow is to evangelize, to broadcast the Good News. From the letters of the Apostles to the cell phone today, the Church's mission must always be made new, because new ears always await to hear her message. Throughout her history, the Church has adopted new means of communication. As the world has changed, the Church has adapted, finding ways to tell a timeless story, to speak so that people can hear "in their own tongues" a message of hope that is ever new and ever true.

To evangelize is to communicate. To preach is to communicate. To share is to communicate. That is why communications demand the Church's full support. This is not an add-on or an optional expense. It is integral to who the Church is and to her mission. Almost thirty years ago, the Pontifical Council for Social Communications said:

> "The Church must continue, in spite of the many difficulties involved, to develop, maintain, and foster its own specifically Catholic instruments and programs for social communications . . . Catholic media work is not simply one more program alongside all the rest of the Church's activities: social communications have a role to play in every aspect of the Church's mission" (Aetatis Novae, no. 17).

This is our mission, and never more so than today when spirits are low and hope seems flickering. Now is not the time to remain silent. Rather, now we must join Pope Francis when he blesses a frightened world and quotes the words of our Lord, "Do not be afraid" (Mt 28:5).

For God is with us.



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Appendix: Ten Suggestions for Sharing the Joy of the Gospel

1. Communication is key: Communication is central to our vocation as Catholics, whether clergy, religious, or laity. To evangelize effectively, one must communicate effectively. We should be educated in the faith so we can communicate effectively.

2. The message must fit the medium: Who is our audience, and how can we communicate most effectively with them? Do we wish to inspire? Do we wish to inform? Do we wish to mobilize? There is no longer one audience, nor does one message fit all media. The Church needs an array of media to communicate effectively with the world today.

3. The medium must be worthy of the message: The Good News of the Gospel will set us free, but it is not to be marketed like a consumer product or adapted without thought to the razzle-dazzle of new technologies. It is not propaganda. It is not spin. While the Church embraces new means of communication, she must not be enslaved by trends nor edit her message to be more popular or fashionable.

4. Invite, don't push: Increasingly, people are overwhelmed by digital communications. Their inboxes are full. They do not have time for websites. Finding effective ways to get the Church's message in front of people without being aggressive is a constant challenge. Our challenge is always to invite: "Come and see." Or as we might put the invitation now: "opt in."

5. Bring together, don't tear apart: Whether it is a newspaper, a podcast, a Facebook post, or a tweet, remember it has the power to bind us together or drive us apart. Communication tools enable us to encounter one another if used gently and thoughtfully.

6. The personal is public: In today's media, be mindful of appropriate boundaries and realize that what we might think is a personal opinion can be misconstrued as the opinion of the Church, creating possible scandal or confusion.

7. Prudence is always a virtue: When communicating via the immediacy of social media, ask yourself if you would use these words or this tone if speaking face to face with someone. Social media enables the rapid response, but not necessarily the Christian one. It never hurts to pause, even to say a prayer, before responding.

8. It's a two-way street: Communication is not just talk. It demands listening. Both new and old forms of communication allow us to hear from others—letters to the editor, email addresses, texts. The power of all media is that they allow us to hear from our audience directly. The power of digital media is that they allow us to hear from our audience rapidly. It is incumbent upon communicators to commit themselves to listen if they want to be heard. This is what dialogue looks like.

9. Virtual is not the same as in-person: Pope Francis often warns that virtual community is not the same as flesh-and-blood community. A livestreamed Mass is not the same spiritual encounter as attending Mass in the presence of Christ and the community of believers. Likewise, digital communication is not a substitute for face-to-face encounters. Our communication should always be an opportunity for encountering and accompanying another.

10. Above all else, see Christ first, and strive to see Christ in one another: In this way, we live up to that most blessed title, "brothers and sisters in the Lord."

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