

New religious communication processes

“Creative destruction” in contents - case study

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We are living a time of intense renovation in what concerns the way the Catholic Church interacts with its citizens. In a certain sense, the “creative destruction” defended by Schumpeter (1942) also applies to the world of religion, once the new technologies have been replacing other ways of getting in touch with people.

New paradigms and the notion that speech should become closer, leads the Church to adhere to the new digital and interactive media . Thus, we are witnessing the internet as a missionary tool, whether through websites or through social networks like *MySpace*, *Facebook*, *Twitter* or *Youtube*, a theme already presented in studies at IAMCR (Balonas: 2010, 2011).

In short, religion is renewing its discourse with the outside world, creating new bridges of contact, seeking for more followers. Portuguese religious institutions are also aware of the power of these new mediators, reason why they have been hiring advertising and communication companies to implement new strategies for communication, targeting the younger. But this seems to be insufficient. A recent case study shows that the speech and the contents have to be rethought in an internal level, within the catholic community. It is no longer enough to change the way they communicate with the outside, they must also change internal communication trying to motivate all stakeholders in the complex process of adherence to religion.

We are now sharing a case study which reflects on the changes within the Church itself, which has required a strategic thinking. It is a case of vocational pastoral teams' activation, composed by catechism teachers and for people somehow connected to local churches. These teams are motivated and encouraged by the parish priest, who is responsible for them and also

advise them. These teams role is to sensitize young people to the religious life in their community. It is a communication in cascade. The priest is the pivot and the main promoter of this process. However, along the years, the Secretariat for Vocations, main responsible for this kind of action in the communities, has concluded that the priests considered this a very difficult task, in every aspects: the team constitution, the team motivation and its actions in the community. The solution came after consulting a communication company that has designed an internal communication strategy.

In short, this strategy was focused on the priest's action. The parish priest should be motivated for this function through a contemporary communication program, which includes worksheets to boost the Vocation Team. A Vocation Team Kit was conceived and produced in a clear, direct and persuasive language, presented in a portable format, with suggestive images and innovative design. Moreover, the project has the direct involvement of the Bishop, which has addressed a motivational message at the beginning of the Kit and has announced the program in internal meetings, directly to the priests. The aim of this case study is to bring contributions concerning the renewal of internal communication relevance in religious institutions.

Keywords: strategic communication, religion, motivation, renewal of content.

Creative destruction reaches religious discourse

Several reasons can help to explain the new ways catholic church is seeking, in order to reach their communities: the secularization process (Balonas, 2011), the multireligious offer (Pierucci, 1997) and the cultural change from obligation to optional issue in education (Brieresly, 1991), just to mention some.

Religious institutions are aware that they are more distant from communities. There are several reasons for this fact such as the change of the level of schooling, the relationship with parents no longer runs as before and traditional prayer places are any more socially required to attend.

On the other hand, the Catholic Church has always understood the relevance of symbols and of communication in its relation with the faithful. It is an ancient issue.

In 1967 Pope Paul VI launched the first World Day of Social Communications, calling attention to "all men of good will for the vast and complex phenomenon of modern media such as the press, cinema, radio and television (...) Thanks to these wonderful techniques, human society has assumed new dimensions: time and space were overcome, and the man became a citizen of the world, co-participant and witness of the events more distant and of the vicissitudes of all mankind. " ¹

Following tradition, Pope Benedict XVI dedicated the 47th World Day of Social Communications, celebrated in 12th May 2013 to the following topic: "Social Networks: portals of truth and faith, new areas of evangelization."² In the same text is reinforced that the development of digital social networks" are contributing to the appearance of a new agora, of a public and open square where people share ideas, information, opinions and where can conquer life, new relationships and forms of community."²

The importance given to social communications is particularly well expressed in the following words: "The ability to apply new languages it is crucial not only to be in tune with time but mainly to allow that the infinite richness of the Gospel find forms of expression that are able to reach the minds and hearts of all."² The fact that digital communication has images and sounds is considered as efficient as Jesus parables that requires "imagination and emotional sensibility of those that we want to invite to a meeting with the mystery of God's love's".²

¹ Pope Paul VI message concerning the 1st World Day of Social Communications 1967 accessed: www.agenciaecclesia.pt, 30th May 2011

² <http://www.news.va/pt/news/xlvii-dia-mundial-das-comunicacoes-sociais-2013-re>, accessed: 25th May 2013

Nevertheless, this awareness of the importance of communicating, isn't enough. It is extremely relevant to understand that innovations make the systems become obsolete and lead to its inevitable replacement. Schumpeter's concept – creative destruction – launched on the 40s³, seems to gain new glow, now.

“Creative destruction” is originally related to systems and to processes replacement as a reflexion of economic activities. According to this theory, a certain way of going, a product or a technology replaces the previous one, which becomes obsolete.

In other words, when the "new" is embedded in the business world or in society, there are systems and processes that have to be replaced. To introduce an innovation, something has to cease. On second thought, the creative destruction can be applied to all areas. Transposing to the religion field, as Benedict XVI has mentioned, the new agoras are the social media. They seem to take the place of traditional congregation places, like churches. Believing in this purpose, the Church is adopting, with increasingly reliability, the paths of the Internet, through websites and social networks, to reach the digital generation. It also appeals to the use of “technological extensions” (Kerckhove, 1995), such as iPod, iPhone, iPad or other tablets. The portal Pope2You, created by the Vatican, was launched during the 43th World Day of Social Communications' festivities, in May 2009. (Balonas, IMACR, 2011).

In the catholic world there are already many initiatives that reinforce those new “agoras”: “pray-as-you-go.org”, created by the Jesuits in England, it is based on a website with prayers that can be downloaded for iPod or other technological devices. The idea is to enable Christians to pray anywhere, at any time. In Portugal it was launched a similar website, in 2010. The Facebook of this project has, at that time, more than 16 000 followers⁴. It invites all Christians to pray on their way to work or university, on public transports or in the middle of traffic.

Not all websites are oriented for Christians. Muslims users has access to sites such as

³ Schumpeter 1942

⁴ <http://www.pray-as-you-go.org/>

www.muslimspace.com, www.naseeb.com or www.muslimsocial.com. Among the Jewish websites, we can point www.shmooze.com or www.koolanoo.com, among others.

Creative renewal

Sometimes, it isn't a matter of creative destruction but creative renewal. It is renovation in communication strategy, in its codes and formats. The truth is that Catholic Church always made use of symbols to get closer: "we know that the Christian tradition has always been rich in signs and symbols: think, for example, the cross, the icons, the images of the Virgin Mary in the nativity scene in stained glass and paintings in the churches. A consistent part of the artistic mankind heritage was accomplished by artists and musicians who sought to express the truths of faith."⁵ This ability to communicate through images, metaphors, hyperboles and other rhetorical resources is crucial to keep the community emotionally linked.

A recent example of this skill to engage, is the World Youth Days Kit. Designed to be distributed free of charge to young pilgrims, the kit reflects a language close to its universe, with cool backpacks (Pilgrim World Youth Days 2011 kit, Madrid) and attractive merchandising (World Youth Days, Rio de Janeiro, 2013).



Figure 1: Pelegrim Kit for World Youth Days 2011

⁵ <http://www.news.va/pt/news/xlvii-dia-mundial-das-comunicacoes-sociais-2013-re>, acedido a 25 de Maio de 2013



Figures 2 and 3: Merchandising and ribbon for World Youth Days 2013

The Church renews its way to communicate creatively with their audiences. Seeking for engagement rather than for obedience. However, this concern is starting to be felt internally, as we will see in detail.

Creative destruction at an internal level

Having Schumpeter's creative destruction concept in mind, we would like to emphasize another idea: the replacement of formats pointed as not effective for new communication's approaches, within the Catholic members, can lead to better results. Thus, we can deduce that the creative destruction can also occur at an internal level. A recent case study implemented by the Portuguese Secretariat of Vocations helps demonstrate this point.

The Vocation Team Kit case study

This case study called "Vocation Team Kit" is the result of a communication strategy for a communications and advertising firm, in association with the Portuguese Secretariat for Vocations and with the involvement of the Bishop. To understand the context, we will share the starting point: the priests from different parishes have to stimulate vocational pastoral teams, among many other tasks. For vocational pastoral teams we mean groups of people from the community who have a close relationship with the church and the local priest: catechists,

parents and members close to the priest. Under the priest guidance, this groups should develop a range of activities in the community related with Christian routines and even engagement of young people identified as potentially geared to religious life.

This will to act depends largely on the ability of the priest. To start his work, the priest receives a script which is the document that guides the teams' training action. However, the Secretariat of Vocations has noticed along the years a growing resistance of the parish priests in this team activation. The reasons given are related to the belief that it is difficult to engage people in the community.

Due to increasing resistance, it was considered necessary to find new ways to motivate the priest, believing that, provided with the right stimulus and support materials, could feel more accompanied on his mission. To accomplish this aim, a communication strategy for internal company communication was developed. The main concern was how to find a way to motivate the pivot of the action - the priest - and make the creation of vocational pastoral teams a matter of prime importance on the agenda.

The strategy was based on three pillars:

1. Hierarchical presence - the involvement of the Bishop;
2. The creation of an annual program - creating tasks for the priest to guide the team;
3. The definition of team work resources – something that could turn easy to start action on the field, through an image visually appealing and easy to read content.

Analyzing the first pillar, the Bishop involvement is structuring decision, because it emphasizes the importance of the establishment of vocational pastoral teams. In the script that is part of the kit, Bishop D. Manuel Clemente refers: "The families and Christian communities are an essential basis for vocations. Everything that is done to encourage and support this direction is timely and priority. "(2012)⁶

⁶ <http://www.seminariodobompastor.pt/aplica.asp?CategorialD=349&Cor=2>, accessed 26 may 2013

And the Bishop underlines the parish priest role: "The priest is primarily responsible for the pastoral care of vocations in the communities he presides. The most important thing you can do is take each of the faithful to discover what God wants from them: laity, consecration, priesthood? He can't and shouldn't do everything alone, it's good to be assisted by a team of vocations, also featuring with catechists, parents, responsible for movements, religious, etc."⁷

Finally, the Bishop focus the strongest argument: "I'm really convinced that many vocations haven't been awoken due to an absence of community discernment."

The Bishop's text is clear about the responsibility of the priest in this process in the text that is part of the script that includes practical guidelines about how to organize teams, in a simple and appealing language, contrasting with previous scripts with intricate texts and small type characters.

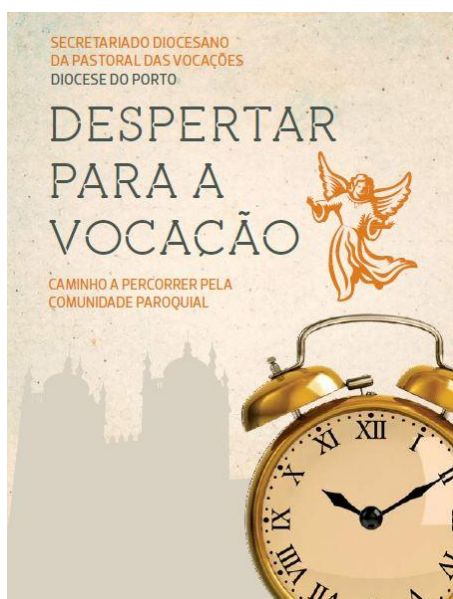


Figure 4: script cover "Awake up to vocation"

⁷ <http://www.seminariodobmpastor.pt/aplica.asp?CategorialD=349&Cor=2>, accessed 25th may 2013

The second strategy pillar element concerns the innovative integration of worksheets to guide the meetings that the priest must promote with vocations team. In the folder that contains the script, there are 4 worksheets for different phases of the year. The kit also provides a CD with a powerpoint template that allows the priest to use a projection to motivate the team.

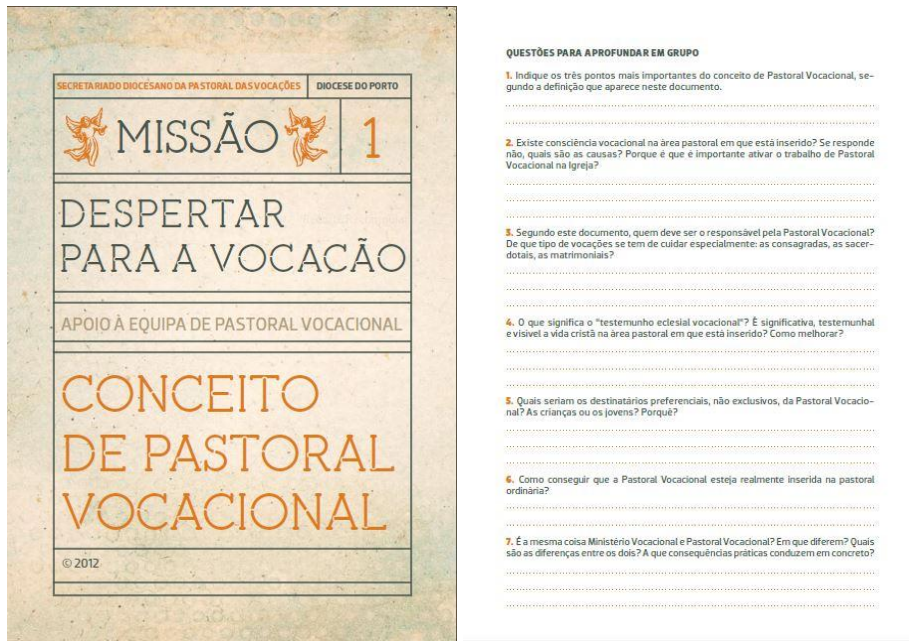
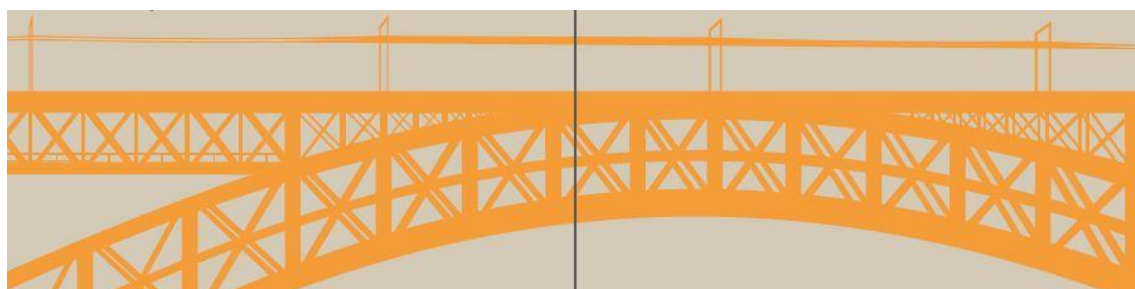


Figure 5: worksheet nr 1

Finally, we emphasize the creative approach. The kit is supplied in a polypropylene folder with rings, which allows priests to add information and create more worksheets during the year. The images are simple metaphors - as the bridge to signify dialogue, candles to represent the light of those who discovers a vocation, notebook which indicates task to accomplish and the alarm that symbolizes that it is time to implement the strategy.



Figures 6, 7, 8 na 9: kit's visual elements

The aim of this case study is to bring contributions concerning the renewal of internal communications a relevant element in religious institutions. Once this strategy is being implemented during 2013, it isn't possible to verify the impact of it.

Clues for the future

As mentioned in the script, part of the team vocational kit "new times dictate new ways to build bridges in our Christian community" (2012: 5). "We know that is not easy to assemble a vocational team and keep it going in its mission. Knowing the odds that such a task is revealed, we believe it is time to renew methods and speeches. (...) It is time to create dialogues more in line with today's society.

This example demonstrates the importance of contents renewal for religious institutions, through innovation processes. Applying, in some cases, creative destruction, and starting by reviewing their internal processes.

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