

How Do We Claim Bytes for Faith in the Mind of Post-Millennial Learners?: The Challenge of Communicating the Faith Today and Tomorrow

Leo-Martin Angelo R. Ocampo

My friend's son Cayden is barely two years old but he is already very proficient in using his tablet. Aside from playing various games and applications, he enjoys watching cartoon clips on YouTube. Unlike us who had to wait for our favorite shows to play on television, he is able to access content on demand. When he doesn't like a particular clip or finds it boring, he quickly switches to another without even finishing it. His parents are quite pleased with their purchase because when he has his tablet and there is good Internet connection, the boy becomes practically self-sufficient. They do not need someone to watch over him full time for as long as he has something to watch.

Meanwhile, with his parents busy at work, no one tells him what to watch or not, what to think of what he is watching, or what to believe or not. His tablet serves as a portal that lets him access a world of content where so there is so much truth and so much trash and the child is left to fend for himself with little or no adult oversight. In a sense, with tablet in hand, the innocent two year old has now become his own teacher and his own parent and is growing as we speak, accustomed to this set-up. What becomes of him and those who grew up like him who will be the learners of tomorrow? What challenge does this pose to us whose duty it is to communicate and hand on the faith to them? If you will allow, let us frame our preliminary musings today around three points.

From designed content to content designing

In the past, parents and teachers were responsible for "pre-designing" content for their wards. As designers do, they select and present the chosen material in a manner which is meaningful, relevant and helpful and thus gradually shape the beliefs and values of the young. Nowadays, with the advent of high-speed Internet, all "designed content" is fast becoming obsolete. Online streaming is gradually replacing radio and television. Not only can we read the "news" as soon as it happened, we can now watch it "real time" as it happens with no more editors or reporters. Moreover, these digital natives are used to having no manuals and exploring on their own. And used to being the ones to pick and assemble information and knowledge, they become the ones to make out and configure their own beliefs and values. Even with "parental control" features on their gadgets, children now are quick to learn how to go around these restrictions. Hence, in most if not all cases, insisting on a kind of censorship or control is not really an option. How do we teach this generation not at all used or even averse to being taught?

As early as today, we teachers may still prescribe textbooks or syllabi but find that the students have read and will read beyond them. With a strong Internet connection, a gadget can easily become a library and if we would allow it, it can open our classrooms to the whole world. At the same time, gadgets can also become an intellectual dumpsite.

Often, a trashy but entertaining clip on YouTube gets more views than an educational but lackluster material and such is the kind of matter that fills up their minds. This shows that democratization of access does not necessarily translate to diffusion of knowledge or the skill of discerning where true and profitable knowledge lies.

On the one hand, there is nothing intrinsically wrong in independently designing content for oneself. After all, this kind of learner empowerment is the express goal of emancipatory education. However, the blend of content available online and the glaring lack of ability to handle it prudently is becoming increasingly alarming as early as now. As such, from the role of designing content for them, our emerging task as teachers and as parents is to begin as early as possible to train the young to adequately design content for themselves. That is, to build what Fr. Eilers would call "communication competence" or the ability to engage and employ the various communication means at their disposal not only with skill and proficiency but also with discernment and wisdom.

From master to minister

With the democratization of access to information that we have mentioned comes an attendant flattening of the world when it comes to authority. Everyone feels like an expert but is not necessarily one. Gone are the days when teachers held a kind of absolute magisterium over their students, where dissent in the classroom was almost unthinkable, and "educators" were looked up to as erudites with dogmatic authority who lead out the ignorant from the cave of nescience to the light of truth. Nowadays, a certain Mocha Uson can be just as credible and authoritative in matters political as a professor with a double doctorate. In a world where credibility, even merely apparent credibility, is turning up to be the primary criterion for credence instead of veracity, asserting one's point based mainly on hierarchy or superiority makes of one a laughing stock.

Just about a week ago, theology became a trending topic in the popular Facebook page, "The UST Files." The issue was sparked by a professor of the course Marriage and Family who showed the students a video clip on "Creationism" that argued for certain moral positions. A student challenged the said positions, issuing into an argument, which would end with the teacher refusing to reply further and simply crying and walking out. While there were some who tried to defend the professor who probably felt slighted by the question or the manner it was asked, the said post drew overwhelming flak upon the said professor for not fostering freedom of thought in his classroom.

On the one hand, one may look at it positively and say that at least the student bothered to be attentive instead of tuning out. He even asked questions which could have been a chance to elaborate, clarify and deepen the discussion. We are not unaware that one of the special powers of digital natives is to automatically filter out and ignore information that they find irrelevant or useless. Thus, this incident may show that at least there is still some interest in matters of faith and morals among the youth. On the other hand, it behooves us to ask important questions. How open are we to welcome not just different but differing ideas in the classroom? A scenario like this, we may reasonably

expect, will become more and more frequent as students become more informed and feel more empowered to reply. Used to an interdisciplinary pedagogical approach, they will make connections we have not anticipated. With more information available to them, they will know more things that we ourselves do not know and bring them into the table. Accustomed to Facebook, each material presented would be a matter to instinctively like, react to, or comment on and refusal to acknowledge such reactions would be tantamount to bigotry. More importantly, how willing and ready are we to address dissent with the power of truth and persuasion instead of position and force? Whether we like it or not, we would be dealing more and more with students who know more about the faith from various sources available to them, both good and bad, but have much less faith as well. Certainly, we would need more than just the old methods of memorizing doctrines and mastering moral precepts. And instead of proud *masters*, our students would need humble *ministers* whose compelling and convincing credibility would come first of all from their Christ-like disposition of respect, openness, and readiness to listen.

Not just transferring but translating

Speaking of methods, one very easy way to adapt ourselves to these current developments would be to adopt the new means of communication. From printed books, make the Bible, the Church documents and other materials available online and let the students use the latest gadgets in the classroom. From traditional lectures, opt more and more for computer-based activities with paperless handouts, online examinations, and even alternative assessments that use the most advanced and sophisticated technology. All these measures represent a good beginning, initial steps, but if we remain merely on the exterior, it would not be enough. Something more is needed.

How much do we really understand the minds of our present and future students? How deeply can we enter their own culture so as to communicate the Gospel from within rather than from without? As Jesus used parables, how ready are we to use hashtags, memes, even hugotlines to present the Kingdom? Can we "giphy" the Gospel? One fine example we can consider would be a new version of the Bible called "Alabaster." On the one hand, it is a printed Bible with the same text and in that sense it is traditional. On the other hand, it makes liberal and creative use of photographs to connect with the "Instagram Generation" which is more readily captivated and better engaged by images than texts. If that is the Bible for us today, what should the Bibles of tomorrow be like? It is a prospect as daunting as it is exciting! The challenge for us to adapt the Gospel to the constantly evolving means of communication today as well as tomorrow is not merely one of transferring it to new media but of translating it in the language of new audiences.

At present and in the future, the minds of our students, will naturally be shaped by the gadgets they are constantly immersed in, having limited, precious and tightly-guarded storage capacities. Anything they find irrelevant or unimportant, boring or uninteresting, is automatically deleted or at the most put in the temporary folder for deletion as soon as grades are given. Thus, the struggle to claim and keep bytes for the faith and for Christ is very real and we must always be on our toes to find not just new ways but a new spirit.