

God Texting: Filipino Youth Response to Religious SMS

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Religious forwarded messages take the form of points for reflection and reminders of religious feasts. In other cases, the messages ask recipients to pray and re-send the same messages in exchange for Divine favor. This study explores the youth's first response to these messages. It aims to learn useful insights that may enhance pastoral ministry for young people, so immersed in cell phone use. The findings show that religious SMS help remind young people of God. But they do not attribute the messages to Divine Providence alone. Response to religious SMS results from an interplay of factors, including the sender himself.

Mobile communication has created the so-called “texting generation” in the Philippines. Its members both young and old prefer SMS (short messaging system) or “texting” than voice calls for reasons of economy and ease.¹ Since the mobile phone made head-way in the last century, it has become customary for users to exchange text greetings laden with religious messages. This form of greeting introduced a new way of *keeping in touch* among Filipinos. Messages like the one below would come unexpectedly, giving points for reflection coupled with well-wishes for the relevant part of the day:

Life nveR sEemS t0 bE dA wAy wE wAnt iT..buT wE sHud Live iT da bEsT wAy wE caN!..
dErS n0 peRfecT Life bUt wE cAn fiL it w/ pErFecT m0mEntS! GuD pM

The Catholic Church welcomes developments like this for its *pastoral* dimension, assisting the ministry of caring for people.² Religious thought, believed to be Divinely inspired, is now conveyed through the modern means of *texting*. This development responds well to the call for evangelizing in a way that adopts to the lifestyle and culture of modern times. Pope Paul VI:³

The Gospel, and therefore evangelization, are certainly not identical with culture, and they are independent in regard to all cultures. Nevertheless, the kingdom which the Gospel proclaims is lived by men who are profoundly linked to a culture, and the building up of the kingdom cannot avoid borrowing the elements of human culture or cultures. Though independent of cultures, the Gospel and evangelization are not necessarily incompatible with them; rather they are capable of permeating them all without becoming subject to any one of them.

Texting “religion” or religious thought not only *spreads* the Christian message, it *integrates* that message to the “new culture” created by the modern means of communication. Pope John Paul II:⁴

¹ Raul Pertierra et. al., “Txt-ing Selves: Cellphones and Philippine Modernity.” Manila: De La Salle University Press (2002). p. 150.

² Franz-Josef Eilers, “Communicating in Ministry and Mission, An Introduction to Pastoral and Evangelizing Communication” 3rd Edition. Manila: Logos (2009). pp. 192-198. cf. World Communication Day Messages of the Pope for 2002, 2009 and 2010. Available: http://www.pccs.va/pccs/documenti/gmcs2010/cd/gmcs_eng_1967-2010.htm

³ Pope Paul VI, *Evangeli Nuntiandi*, Apostolic Exhortation to the Episcopate, to the Clergy and to all the Faithful of the Entire World (1975). no. 20. The Holy See, Vatican. Available: http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19751208_evangeli-nuntiandi_en.html

⁴ cf. Pope John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, Encyclical on the Permanent Validity of the Church's Missionary Mandate (1990). no. 37c. The Holy See, Vatican. Available: http://www.vatican.va/edocs/ENG0219/_INDEX.HTM

... since the very evangelization of modern culture depends to a great extent on the influence of the media, it is not enough to use the media simply to spread the Christian message and the Church's authentic teaching. It is also necessary to integrate that message into the "new culture" created by modern communications. This is a complex issue, since the "new culture" originates not just from whatever content is eventually expressed, but from the very fact that there exist new ways of communicating, with new languages, new techniques and a new psychology.

Utilizing communication means like the cell phone for evangelization purposes is *mission-based marketing*. This marketing approach "adopts and customizes" Church and relevant teachings according to changing peoples and environment. This type of marketing differs from secular marketing involving tangible, commercial products or services. It uses contemporary communication styles, images, texts, and technology "while remaining faithful to (Church) doctrine."⁵

Using this approach introduces a paradigm shift in presenting the Gospel starting "where our audience is."⁶ Evangelizing through text messaging is then rather like "walk(ing) gently into the culture and/or experience of others respecting what already is present in their lives."⁷ It is an attempt to address basic evangelization challenges as posed by Pope Paul VI in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*:⁸

In our day, what has happened to that hidden energy of the Good News, which is able to have a powerful effect on man's conscience?
 To what extent and in what way is that evangelical force capable of really transforming the people of this century?
 What methods should be followed in order that the power of the Gospel may have its effect?
 Does the Church or does she not find herself better equipped to proclaim the Gospel and put it into people's hearts with conviction, freedom of spirit and effectiveness?

The content of religious SMS varies. Some can be compared either to *brand advertising* or *direct sales advertising* known in the business world. Brand advertising aims for recognition and remembrance of a brand name. No specific action is immediately required from audiences after exposure, except acknowledging an existing brand and considering it next time a purchase is made. Brand adverts (advertisements) usually show brand names (or logos), sometimes in contexts not directly linked to the product or service it stands for. The goal is simply to suggest the brand in audience minds. Examples include brand names of shampoo spray-painted on the light-rail train, or that of a men's clothing line hoisted as a welcome sign of a shopping mall.

Direct sales adverts, on the other hand, demand audiences to purchase. While brand advertising is subtle in conveying the message, direct sales advertising is straightforward and more aggressive. That aggressiveness sometimes undermines a particular brand's appeal to target consumers. Nobody wants to be told what to do. Presenting options, meanwhile, or suggesting ideas is quite different and is often more acceptable especially among conservative consumers. As a result, alternative methods of persuasion are now observed to fill in the market place using sound, images and rhetoric.

Like brand adverts, some religious SMS simply remind recipients of truths about the Christian faith. They seek to reinforce certain beliefs, or to renew Church affiliation. The immediate action required from the

⁵ Pierre Babin & Angela Ann Zukowski, "The Gospel in Cyberspace, Nurturing Faith in the Internet Age." Chicago: Loyola Press (2002). p. 154-155.

⁶ Ibid. pp. 150-151.

⁷ Ibid. pp. 150-151.

⁸ Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, Apostolic Exhortation to the Episcopate, to the Clergy and to all the Faithful of the Entire World (1975). no. 4. The Holy See, Vatican. Available: http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19751208_evangelii-nuntiandi_en.html

receiver goes only as far as reflecting on certain teachings. These texts can be considered *inputs for reflection*, offering encouragement and support as recipients go about daily living. Some examples:

When God takes something away from your grasp, Hes not punishing you but merely emptying your hand to receive something better... Gudmorning., ☺

In my existence, I realized dat hpiness is a very subjective factor in one's life...
Being happy doesn't depend on achieving wat u wnt, bt rather
mking D best out of wat is given.. Life isn't fair, it never was.. D only thing
dat can mke u completely happy is contentment.. Be content on wat u hve,
bt b sure 2 aim high & never stop blving u cn do better evrytime..
Bt if all else fails, dnt 4get an ordinary u has an extraordinary GOD
To back u up.gdam.

Some religious text convey wishes of Divine blessing, besides giving words of affirmation. Some examples:

Kindness is more important than wisdom, and d recognition of this is d beginning of wisdom...God bless your kind heart!

“Good people are like sunlight, filtering into the quiet corners of one’s heart, offerng bright mornings & fresh hope yet demanding nothing in return. Mayyou ALWAYS be the SUNLIGHT, refreshing evryone whose life you touch today.”
GOD BLESS U!

Another example of religious text functioning as brand advert is the popular sending of Bible quotes. A leading mobile company’s religious section does this as one of several add-on services. By texting a keyword, the service is activated and a message like the one below is almost instantly received:

Many are invited but few are chosen. – Matthew 22:14. Get a good laugh to pick up a dull day: Send DD Joke to 2333. Want something to chew on? Send DD Quote to 2333 to get a witty line! Test your trivia powers, Send Trivia to 2333 and see if we can stump you. Gotta question that needs a yes or no answer? Then send askme to 2333 to help you decide! Lonely? Wanna friend from another country? Send ifhelp to 2333 to get you very own International Friend

The religious part of the message is a random quote from the Bible, changing each time the service is activated. What is curious is the juxtaposition of the “religious” with other add-on services, including a prescribed cure to loneliness.

This random sending of Bible quotes recalls the days of *Bible-cutting* done in private moments to aid specific personal needs. The difference is that today a remote digital procedure does the pre-cutting on the recipient’s behalf. Spiritual aid is obtained even with no holy book at hand. The attempt to market the other add-on services, however, seem to place religious text on the same level as a joke, a witty line, a matter of trivia, and the excitement of meeting a foreigner-friend.

Another type of religious text functions like direct sales adverts, seeking a type of physical response from audiences. In commercial enterprises, adverts of this kind persuade consumers to buy. Religious text of a similar nature asks or suggests something else. It usually begins with a life (or problem) situation as in the examples below:

WORRY destroys ur THINKING, disrupts ur WORK, dstroys ur POISE & dsfigures ur FACE
so get rid of it! BIBLE SAYS.. “Why worry wen u can pray?” gdam! ☺

Take some time to smile when you're sad. to rest when you're tired. to love if you're feeling empty. & to let go if u need to. time endures. time heals. in this life, jst take s0me time for y0urself & always take time to PRAY GOD really works. Gdpm! GOD bless!

Other texts take the form of "chain letters" circulated in the pre-mobile era. These texts referred here as *chain texts* play on superstition and require re-circulation in exchange for Divine favor:

Make a WISH B4 U PASS DS PRAYER to as many as u can. "GOD THE FATHER THANK YOU FOR THE LOVE & ALL THE BLESSINGS U HAVE GIVEN ME & TRIALS THAT MADE ME WHAT I AM NOW. ON BENDED KNEES LIFTED UP UNTO U, SPARE ME MERCY & ANSWER MY PRAYERS. Amen! If 3 replied, your wish will be granted...

+

Send this CROSS to 9 people and gud luck wil follow immd8ly. Warning: dnt delete sun0d sun0d na blessing drting sau try u (translation: don't delete.. blessings will come.. you try)

Some chain texts come on religious feast days. Note that the instruction in the examples below is to re-send the same text to a specified number of people:

Mama Mary called me today & asked hu nids 2 b blessed.I have Her ur name. If u luv Her, send ds to 10 people and in 5 mins something good wl happen.. Plsoffer ds sacrifice, its Her birthday 2day.

MAMA MARY I LOVE YOU & HAPPY BIRTHDAY!!! Pass dis 2 15 pers0ns n ur f0nbok, xcept me.. And see d mircLe on Sept.8..PLs don't break d chain

There are those which do not simply promise good fortune in exchange for compliance. A threat of bad luck is included to ensure the "chain" is unbroken:

The baby JESUS helps those in need.. Send to 24 persons.Dnt 4get 2pass bcoz ds s true. Mrs. Ayson got a raise bcoz she passed on 24 copies. Mrs. Joy lost her job bcos she forgot 2 pass on. Jz pass ds b4 10 days. Ds is really true!- forward it for JESUS.

How do young people respond to these messages, and to religious text in general? How do they react when they first read them? Are they moved to pray or show acts of kindness? Do they experience the Divine? Do young people trash these messages once received? Or do they keep for re-sending to friends and family? Do religious SMS have meaning in their lives? These are some questions the present study aims to answer.

The respondents are 600 Catholic students in Metro Manila with mean age of 18 years old. Each student were given 62 possible reactions in question form e.g. "Do you remember God?", "Do you have the urge to pray?" and "Are you reminded of the Liturgical Season?" To these questions, the students answered either "Yes," "No" or "Sometimes." They also gave notable remarks to complement their response. The questions were grouped into the following categories and then, relative frequencies of the responses were tabulated:

1. Faith
2. Prayer life
3. Information
4. Disposition/ Attitude
5. Relationship with others
6. Relationship with sender
7. Reception of the message

Cell phone Studies

Recent studies on mobile technology focus on social effects i.e. how communication patterns and behavior have changed since the mobile revolution. Scholars in this growing field include James Katz, who founded in 2004 the *Center for Mobile Communication Studies* at Rutgers's University (New Jersey). This center was supposed to be a focal point for research and teaching the social, psychological and organizational consequences of mobile communications.⁹

Cell phone interactions are so privatized, according to Katz, so much so that individual users are able to build “walled gardens” of micro-cultures to which they belong. These cultures mainly involve persons in one's own mobile network. James Katz explains:¹⁰

Cell phones are enabling people to create their own micro-cultures; they are changing cultural norms and values, and demonstrating consumers' ability to modify and repurpose technology for their own use. I believe that cell phones, by allowing people to insulate their private interactions from the culture around them, will encourage a kind of “walled garden” of micro-cultures that is complex, but exclusive.

In *The Future of Microelectronics*, Baron and Curnow (1979) foretold of the coming of “information main rings” resulting from the advent of modern media. Similar to Katz's micro-cultures, information main rings are individual households, shops, offices, universities and persons who in the process of adopting information technology, serve as the building structures of the so-called “wired society.” Each *ring* comprises similar individuals, households, shops, offices, etc. bound by familial, peer or professional ties. In each ring certain communication norms are observed. Information, greetings, jokes and multi-media files are exchanged in distinct patterns; thus, the ring's synonymous relationship to a micro-culture.

In *New Tech, New Ties: How Mobile Communication is Re-Shaping Social Cohesion*, sociologist Rich Ling asserts that the mobile phone strengthens social bonds. Elaborating his concept of “anytime-anywhere-for-whatever-type of access” (communication), the scholar says, the “instant and perpetual access to friends and family regardless of where they are” coupled with various social rituals creates what he calls a “bounded solidarity.”¹¹

Citing Durkheim's concept of “ritual,” Ling says mobile communications essentially function as social rituals, which develop social cohesion among individuals living in a highly-structured, urbanized kind of environment.¹² Social rituals performed through mobile phones include the exchange of time-of-day greetings, rites-of-passage greetings as in birthdays or anniversary, religious feast greetings, and others. They are meant not just to pass on immaterial, irrelevant text. Ling says these “mediated ritual interactions” increase bonds of friendship, amity, and confirms membership in social groups in the same manner as the commonly-known rituals done in a co-present, face-to-face mode. In his book, the scholar says that ties within one's own circle of family and friends are strengthened by mobile communications.

Raul Pertierra and colleagues' nationwide survey on cell phone use shows that in the Philippines, mobile technology and texting strengthen the individual's private networks through “immediate and often ritualized

⁹ cf. The Center for Mobile Communication Studies (CMCS) website. Available: <http://www.scils.rutgers.edu/ci/cmcs/>

¹⁰ “Cellphone Culture” (Nov 2005). Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) Communications Forum (2008).

Available: http://web.mit.edu/comm-forum/forums/cell_phone_culture.htm

¹¹ Rich Ling, “The Mobile Connection: The Cellphone's Impact on Society.” San Francisco, CA: Morgan Kauffmann Publishers (2004). p. 85.

¹² Rich Ling, “New Tech, New Ties: How Mobile Communication is Reshaping Social Cohesion.” The Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press (2008). p. 43.

exchanges.”¹³ However, the messages can hardly be considered “instrumental and cognitive.” Rather, they are “symbolic and ritualistic.”¹⁴ They provide a certain degree of *grounding* along with society’s trek towards modernity. Such grounding comes from family and friends who through “telephatic tactility” offer “support, companionship (and) guide.”

The study also shows that Filipino users mostly *receive* inspirational messages (45.9%) from family and friends. This figure is quite significant compared to the humorous (16%) and informative (14.1) messages which are also usually received. In return, users *send* informative (40.6%), inspirational (32.3%), and humorous (13.6%) text messages to others in their mobile network. These messages help maintain *micro-cultures* and *information main rings* in the Philippines.¹⁵

In *Cell Phone Culture, Mobile Technology in Everyday Life*, new media scholar Gerard Groggin finds that although SMS or text messaging was introduced as a secondary feature of the 2G (second-generation) digital cellular system, it gained enthusiastic following and “created new cultures of use.”¹⁶ In Europe, where mobile technology all began, text messaging caught the imagination especially of young people. A culture of text messaging formed very quickly at the turn of the century says Groggin. This culture “grew out of the unique circumstances of teenage life, with its own terminology, customs and social norms.”¹⁷ Eventually, mobile phones are seen “as something that threatens the processes of cultivation and learning around which pedagogy and citizenship revolve.”¹⁸ Quoted by Groggin, F. Hurley says:

“...schoolkids are turning into a generation of illiterates – because of mobile phone text messaging. Many youngsters now write in the abbreviated gobbledegook, rather than standard English.”

This problematic feature of the cell phone may render the technology a failure to culture and moral development.¹⁹ However, a number of “successes,” which contribute as much to Groggin’s “new cultures of use,” is well worth considering. Apart of religion now being expressed through mobile technology, millions of Filipino families separated by the “overseas contract work” phenomenon are able to *reconnect* with their members. Cell phones prove to be useful for those left behind to touch base with loved ones overseas at least in a digital way. Along with email and instant messaging, mobile technology has paved the way for the rise of so-called “digital families.”²⁰

Theoretical Framework

Jesuit scholar Walter Ong traced significant developments in culture with the evolution of communication technologies. Ong’s theoretical exposition was described by Annenberg School of Communications professor

¹³ Raul Pertierra et. al., “Txt-ing Selves: Cellphones and Philippine Modernity.” Manila: De La Salle University Press (2002). pp. 149-152.

¹⁴ Like ritual communication, forwarded messages including religious texts rarely inform or convey new information. *Forwarded text* reveals something more about the kind of relationship between the texting parties, rather than the content they wish to share. Time-of-day greetings are ritualistic in nature and hardly as functional as, say, a text memo sent to a work colleague or classmate.

¹⁵ Raul Pertierra et. al., “Txt-ing Selves: Cellphones and Philippine Modernity.” Manila: De La Salle University Press (2002). pp. 165-166.

¹⁶ Gerard Groggin, “Cell Phone Culture, Mobile Technology in Everyday Life.” New York: Routledge (2006). p. 15.

¹⁷ Ibid. p. 74.

¹⁸ Ibid. p. 115.

¹⁹ Ramon C. Sunico, “Bad ba mag-txt?” (“Is it bad to text?”). Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism (June 2007). Available: <http://pcij.org/stories/bad-ba-mag-txt/>

²⁰ Jose Torres Jr., “Digital Families.” Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism (April 2005). Available: <http://pcij.org/stories/digital-families/>

Stephen O’Leary as significant in the growing interest of Western scholars in online religious communications. Because the cell phone and SMS technologies are not “stand-alone technologies” but in fact online technologies, they fall well into the category of so-called “computer-mediated communications” (CMC) to which Ong’s treatise apply.

In *Orality and Literacy* (1982), Ong distinguishes between two important stages in cultural evolution from pre-literacy (he terms as “primary orality”) down to the introduction of writing, printing technology and electronic media (“secondary orality”). He does so by differentiating *sensorium*, which is the complex of human senses and material practices utilized by people in a particular era to communicate – decode, encode, convey, and interpret information. In pre-literate cultures (“primary orality”), oral speech dominates all communication. In this stage, both vocal and aural senses as well as sound make up the sensorium, document rituals, and convey myths and narratives important for the development of identities of individuals and the community.

Then came the introduction of writing which, according to Ong, “divorce(d) the production of a communicative act from its reception. This made it possible to address audiences remote in time and space and turned communication from a public act requiring the presence of others into a private, solipsistic activity of writing and reading.”²¹ This part of human history along with the subsequent invention of printing technology, says Ong, narrowed down the sensorium to include the sense of sight for reading the written and printed word.

The sensorium expanded in the stage of “secondary orality,” with the introduction of electronic media – radio as a medium – uses once again the aural sense as in pre-literate cultures and allows yet again the simultaneous production and reception of messages. Film as well as television uses the aural and visual senses in addition to other perceptual senses. “In the new electronic media, the total sensorium again includes sight and sound, voice, image and music.”²² This stage, according to the scholar, persisted to the age of CMC and computer networks.

O’Leary observes that “this new medium (combines) aspects of orality and literacy into a new, hybrid form of communication that, in the words of one networker: *‘is both talking and writing yet isn’t completely either one. It’s talking by writing. It’s writing because you type it on a keyboard and people read it. But because of the ephemeral nature of luminescent letters on a screen, and because it has such a quick sometimes instant – turn-around, it’s more like talking’...*”²³

Interestingly, Ong’s exposition (described by O’Leary) includes that which applies specifically to SMS. In his description of “writing,” he says “(it) restructures consciousness” and “makes possible increasingly articulate introspectivity, opening the psyche as never before not only to the external objective world distinct from itself but also to the interior self against whom the objective world is set.”²⁴ O’Leary says this increased awareness of one’s self and the world in which the self is situated leads to among other things “alienation of this self from the external world” or in other words, individualism that some scholars say has increased as a result of, first, industrialization at the turn of the 20th century, and then of the new millennium buzzword “globalization.” Today, with the strides in media convergence and digitalization, individualism especially that of youth has caused an increasing alarm among Church leaders.²⁵

²¹ Stephen O’Leary, “Cyberspace as Sacred Space.” In *Religion Online, Finding Faith on the Internet*. NY, Routledge (2004). p. 39.

²² *Ibid.* p. 40.

²³ *Ibid.* p. 41.

²⁴ *Ibid.* p. 39.

²⁵ cf. Final Statement of FABC-OSC Bishops’ Meet (1996, 1997 and 1999) and BISCOP IV (2002). Available: <http://www.fabc.org>

The religious implications of Ong's insight are "profound" because what religions do offer now as solution to the problem of, say, individualism is in fact "an after affect (albeit "to some degree" O'Leary says) of the psychological changes wrought by literacy."²⁶

In texting cultures, we see yet another impact of the written word laid down in SMS format. If this technology, like other CMC's, allows increased self-alienation or individualism in Filipino society, might religious SMS be a cure to reverse the process, and work for, say, unity and altruism in society? Can the Church utilize religious text and offer it as solution, to possible "negative effect/s" of cell phone and texting? These points will be answered in the discussion of the survey results.

Another theory used as framework for this study is J. L. Austin's "speech-act theory" (1970). A *speech-act* or *performative utterance* effects whatever it explains. This communicative act contains words conveyed to "not merely describe an existing state of things, but rather creates a new relationship, social arrangement, or entitlement in speech-act terms... these are instances when saying *is* doing."²⁷

Thus, the words of the priest in preparation for Holy Communion, when bread and wine are consecrated and a Scripture passage is read, bring about the miracle of *transubstantiation* believed by Catholics to be the sacred body and blood of Jesus becoming really present in the consecrated "fruits of the earth and work of human hands." Performative utterances are also exchanged in rituals, in marriage for example, where the exchange of "I do's" results in the sacred union of husband and wife before God and community.

Similarly, religious SMS are performative utterances of texters. In fact, the sender exercises ownership of the message, passing it on to selected family and friends as if uttering the very words, and meaning them – like talking though text. The phrase "*God bless u!*" in the example above is actually a well-wish similar to when it is said in a personal, face-to-face setting.

When receivers re-send forwarded messages, a role reversal actually occurs. Receivers become senders, performing the same function as deciding which message to send and to whom. Knowing what it is like to *send* forwarded messages, it then becomes common for receivers to not only attribute the message to Divine Providence, inspiring when inspiration is needed most, but to the sender as well – his *real* message, intention, ulterior motive (if any), etc. In the students' responses, the latter was found to have a bearing on their relationship with senders and ultimately, on their reaction to the message.

This dynamic between sender and receiver suggests that the texting parties are acquainted or related to each other in some way. In fact, texting has been found to only complement relationships that have already been formed *offline*, in the physical world outside the cell phone circuit; or *online*, in the virtual sphere via mobile chatrooms perhaps. In the Philippines, no evidence has been found of physically located social relationships "significantly shifting into the virtual" through SMS.²⁸

Studies also show that cell phones only reinforce the affective but hardly contribute to increased knowledge. "(The technology) is mainly employed to convey affect rather than cognition. Texting may involve phatic-communication, lead(ing) to communities of intimacy, but it is less likely to generate structures of knowledge."²⁹

²⁶ Ibid. p. 39

²⁷ Ibid. 42.

²⁸ Raul Pertierra et. al., "Txt-ing Selves: Cellphones and Philippine Modernity." Manila: De La Salle University Press (2002). p. 140.

²⁹ Ibid. p. 141.

Results and Discussion

Faith

Religious SMS helps young people *remember* (God). Seven out of ten (73%) said “Yes,” they are reminded of God. The survey showed no significant difference between male and female responses in this regard. On a general scale, both sexes show reverence for religious text and believe God is actually embodied in the text.

A male respondent says, “*Religious messages such as Bible verses and reminders about God’s love (are) one good thing and needs to be paid attention to.*” Young people believe that God is actually guiding them thru text message. A female respondent: “*They (religious texts) brighten up the day and reminds you that Jesus cares.*” Another male respondent: “*Religious messages are good especially they remind you of God thru text messages. It can help you at some unexpectable times.*” Religious SMS also help students examine the state of their relationship with God. “*Sometimes I think that it (religious text) helps us reflect with the status of our faith from time to time,*” a female student said, “*and reminds us to remember God more.*”

These findings show that religious texts are actually being read and not just trashed outright. Most young people find the urge to reflect on the text’s meaning and re-send it to others. A female student says, “*It helps me reflect about the things I have done.*” Religious texts are “*inspiring,*” a male student says, “*and can teach you a lesson if you have done something wrong.*” Another female student says, “*Religious messages make my life more worth than the ordinary message. It sometimes uplifts your faith in God.*”

<i>Item</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>Sometimes</i>	<i>Yes</i>
I remember God	5 percent	22 percent	73 percent
I feel assured of God’s presence in my life	18	26	56
I feel God is talking to me	30	40	30
I feel God is calling me	33	39	28
I remember Mother Mary	36	36	28
I remember my guardian angel	50	33	17
I remember my patron saint	61	28	11

Table 1: Faith Responses

While they do remember God, young people only “sometimes” believe that God is actually “talking” to them, that God is “calling” them via text. This happens only circumstantially, the survey shows, when the text itself directly applies to a particular spiritual need. That explains the leveled distribution of responses to the points: “I feel God is talking to me” and “I feel God is calling me” (40% and 39% “Sometimes,” respectively).

Note-worthy, however, is when “Yes” and “Sometimes” responses are combined. A majority of youth then say they remember God and that God is talking/calling them. Ninety-five percent at least on certain occasions *remember God* while seven out of ten feel that *God is talking* to them, or *calling* them. This shows that young people respond selectively to religious texts. A male student says, “*For me, it depends whether the religious message makes sense to me or not. If it does not apply to me, I immediately delete it.*”

Young people also see texting as a modern and convenient way to convey religious thought. A male respondent says, “*It is good that cell phones can be instruments to make us closer to God.*” Another male respondent: “*Religious messages are good form of letting people know more about God because it is an easy and fast way to do it.*” Although both views are not expressed in numeric figures in the survey, they indicate that the youth generally feels positive about the fusion of faith and technology. A female student said that her view of the meaning of cell phone and texting has changed because of religious text: “*Text messages change*

the idea of what text for the youth is today. It tries to imply that God also knows technological advancement.”

A notable five percent, however, said they do not remember God at all. Religious text is void of spiritual meaning. Male respondents are found to be less inclined to think otherwise. One of whom said: *“(Religious text) does not affect my life in any way. It takes more than a text message for me to have an urge for religiosity.”* Another male student sees religious texting simply on the level of continuing corporeal relationships: *“They prove nothing but still, it feels good that someone remembers you.”* A female student regards religious text as a thing of the past, like an article of fashion losing appeal over a period of time: *“Religious texts have become a cliché.”* Another female respondent said religious texting is *“Spam on phone!!!”*

But for most young people, religious texts remain to be an inspiring reassurance and bringer of comfort. Nearly six out of ten (56%) feels God’s presence in their lives. A male respondent considers it a blessing to receive religious texts: *“I feel blessed when I receive religious messages and I hope religious messages can inspire more people especially young people.”* A female student says, *“Religious text gives something to me and lets me pause for a time to talk to God and be blessed receiving them.”*

Prayer Life

Religious texts produce a rather less significant urge in young people to pray. In the survey, there was little indication of any desire to attend Mass, read the Bible, spend time in Eucharistic Adoration, go to confession or pray the Rosary. Only a fraction of young people feel motivated to do so as shown in the table below. This may be the case because religious text generally comes when least expected, when the receiver is pre-occupied with other activities and therefore indisposed to prayer.

This survey attempts to capture feelings, thoughts and urges following exposure to or upon reading religious text. Whether those feelings, thoughts and urges are actually translated into actual behavior is beyond our scope. The survey, however, shows evidence that religious text could possibly lead to latent behaviors. The desire to pray, for example, becomes evident with more than a third (36%) having the “urge to pray privately” and a quarter (25%) having the “urge to attend (Holy) Mass.” Thirty nine percent also said they feel closer to God. A male student said religious texts are *“very reflective, makes you feel closer to God.”*

<i>Item</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>Sometimes</i>	<i>Yes</i>
I feel closer to God	25 percent	36 percent	39 percent
I have the urge to pray privately	29	35	36
I have the urge to attend Mass	45	30	25
I have the urge to read the Bible	55	33	12
I have the urge to visit Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament	60	27	13
I have the urge to go to Confession	66	25	9
I have the urge to pray the Rosary	68	25	7

Table 2: Prayer Responses

The above responses may indicate a slack in young people’s prayer life at the same time. At least half of them said outright “No” they would not go to Mass, read the Bible, etc. But it may be useful to point out that not all religious text admonishes or encourages prayer. Some texts, like brand adverts, simply offer points for reflection. But even when admonished to, young people do seem to exercise autonomy over deciding when and how to pray.

Giddens' notion of *intensified reflexivity* is evidently at work here. The scholar says people in late modern societies increasingly seek freedom from "strictures of nature and certain forms of community."³⁰ This happens as technologies develop and options in many of life's processes abound. People engage in internal interrogation, weighing alternatives and ultimately making choices about their own destinies. "The world increasingly is not bounded by fixed and unchangeable limits, but is rather recognized as malleable and the outcome of human decisions."³¹ Young people will not be told to pray. When, how and where to pray remains to be a personal decision.

Wilbur Schramm (1954) already discussed the active participation of recipients of communication before the advent of digital media. His model of communication resulted from a classic study that corrected the misunderstood power of communication senders to simply influence receivers.³² According to Schramm, receivers of communication perform decoding, interpretation and encoding much as senders do. Thus, "audiences must first draw meaning from communication events and from experience, integrate the meaning with previous learning, and then formulate the result into some expression."³³

Gerhard Maletzke (1963) also listed factors affecting audiences' reception of media messages.³⁴ These factors include the receiver's self-image, personality structure, membership in social groups and the social environment. That means *offline* experiences, or events and experiences detached from media (and cell phone use), also count. The receiver's perception of a medium through which communication was received as well as the perceived constraints from that particular medium, whether television, radio, etc. are also included in Maletzke's list. But as we shall see later, the mobile user's perception of senders also affect the reception of religious texts.

Because these factors interplay and produce unpredictable responses among different audiences, William Thorn terms these factors as *filters* and groups these filters into *social filters* and *psychological filters*.³⁵

Apparently, these concepts are at work in the way students receive, interpret and respond to religious SMS. A male student said he will not be moved to pray by religious text *alone*. He said, "(It takes more than a text" for him to be drawn to piety or any practice of religion. Another male student aired the same view, saying religious texts are "good supplement only; still needs someone to talk with it." Young people seemingly need reinforcement to ignite and keep their prayer lives aflame.

Information

<i>Item</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>Sometimes</i>	<i>Yes</i>
I am reminded of the Liturgical Season	17 percent	25 percent	58
I feel more the essence of the Liturgical Season	19	32	49
I have the urge to buy a religious book/article related to the Liturgical Season	75	19	6

Table 3 – Information Responses

³⁰ Frank Webster, "The Information Society Revisited." In Leah Lievrouw & Sonia Livingstone (eds.), *The Handbook of New Media*. London: Sage Publications (2002). p. 30.

³¹ Ibid. p. 30.

³² cf. Franz-Josef Eilers, "Communicating in Community. Introduction to Social Communication" 4th Updated Edition. Manila: Logos (2009). pp. 30-31.

³³ William Thorn, "Models of Church and Communication." In Paul Soukup (ed.), *Communication, Culture & Theology – Media, Culture and Catholicism*. Kansas City: Sheed & Ward (1996). p. 85.

³⁴ Ibid. p. 87. Refer also to Mick Underwood, "Mass Media: Maletzke's Model." UK: Communication, Cultural & Media Studies (2008). Available: <http://www.cultsock.ndirect.co.uk/MUHome/cshtml/media/mc.html>

³⁵ Ibid. p. 87.

Religious texts have moderate effects as far as reminding young people of major religious feasts like Christmas, New Year and Easter. More than half of the students (58%) confirm this finding. Others get the same information from the media and the offline environment.

Text greetings may be a good reminder of religious feasts by taking liturgical seasons as theme. Even then, text messages do not significantly heighten the feast's festive spirit. Just about half of the respondents (49%) feel *more* the essence of the celebration through religious text. Three out of ten (32%) said they only "sometimes" feel the same way. This happens most likely when they are greeted by people they expect to be with during the season like relatives overseas. In that case, "digital families" use religious text as bonding mechanism besides voice calls, online chatting or email.

One out of four youth, meanwhile, feel the urge at least on occasion to purchase tokens like religious books as a result of religious text. This may be felt especially during Christmas/New Year when gift giving is in a frenzied mood. This last point determines whether religious texts contribute positively to marketing Christian merchandise. In twenty five percent of cases, they do, the survey said. Overall, this part of the study confirms the notions of ritualized greetings that sustain "walled gardens" of micro-cultures already built in the physical environment. There is no evidence gathered indicating that *virtual* micro-cultures can be built or can spring up from text messaging alone.

Religious texts rarely cover Solemnities, Feasts or Memorials of Saints in the Catholic tradition. Most, if not all, focus and explicitly mention "God" and/or "Jesus." For example, the Solemnity of the Blessed Virgin Mary coinciding with New Year celebrations (Jan 1) is not widely circulated thru text. Quite the opposite, New Year greetings referencing to "God," "The Lord," etc abound and sent within individual mobile networks.

An exception is the Virgin Mary's birthday on September 8, and Immaculate Conception feast on December 8. In this case, however, religious text is more of the nature of *chain text* rather than being informative or helpful input for reflection. This may point to the tendency among Filipinos to associate the Mother of Jesus with superstition rather than genuine devotion or faith expression. A similar tendency is observed during the Feast of the Black Nazarene in early January, whose accounts of miraculous interventions cause millions to congregate and follow the massive procession around the age-old image's main basilica in Manila.

Some priests and religious sisters admit crafting religious texts and forwarding them to members of their personal mobile network. Initiatives like this, however, are observed to reach only their fellow ordained and very seldom, if at all, the lay people. Of the 600 respondents of this survey, all lay members of the Church, only one student receive religious texts from friend-seminarians. This youngster is hoping not just to be reminded of Church holidays but to be inspired by the messages as well. She says: "*They're ok (religious messages) as long as they're inspiring, and not just a reminder of upcoming Church holidays. I have friends in the seminary so I regularly receive religious texts.*"

Disposition/ Attitude

Over half of the youth surveyed said they feel happy to be Christians after reading religious texts. Four out of ten also said they feel at home with the Christian faith. Females are as disposed to be happy Christians (55%) as their male counterparts (54%). *See Table below.*

Except for this and the last two points ("I feel afraid of the after-life," and "I develop sexual fantasy/ies"), both male and female youth show leaning on the "Sometimes" response. This is likely due to the youth's psycho-spiritual state at the time of exposure to religious text.

When asked whether they feel afraid of death, three out of five said “No.” Majority of them also did not show concern about the after-life (67%). These findings may indicate young people’s optimism towards their destiny in general. They are either assured of their ultimate end after death; or they simply do not believe that there is an after-life. If the latter is true, this survey confirms a 2002 survey showing a significant number of youth (aged 7-21) who do not believe in eschatology, which happens to be a basic Church teaching. This had caused a leading church leader to call for a re-examination of catechetical programs in parishes and schools.³⁶ The same call may still be valid.

<i>Item</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>Sometimes</i>	<i>Yes</i>
I feel happy to be a Christian	19 percent	26 percent	55 percent
I feel at home with my Christian faith	27	32	41
I feel inspired	24	39	37
I feel happy	27	39	34
I feel confident	35	39	26
I become inclined to change my life	35	39	26
I feel confused	53	30	17
I feel sad	54	36	10
I feel afraid of death	59	28	13
I feel afraid of the after-life	67	24	9
I develop sexual fantasy/ ies	87	10	3

Table 4: **Disposition/ Attitude**

The survey shows one in four young people are inspired by religious text (37%). Female respondents, however, tend to be more inspired (39%), than their male counterpart (33%). A female student says: “(Religious text) inspires me to do well in school and gives me confidence that I can do my job no matter how hard the times may be.” Another female student: “Religious messages are very inspirational and it usually help me when I am down.”

To “be inspired” in general terms, however, can be triggered by Divine/supernatural causes or by the sender of religious text. In the latter case, receivers may conjure up notions of affinity, even romance with the other person. This may explain why a tiny fraction of the students “develop sexual fantasy/ies” from religious text (3% said “Yes,” and 10% said “Sometimes”). In a related study done in the Philippines, cell phones are found to allow not only religious sentiments to flourish but also intimacies beyond familial bounds. Raul Pertierra explains:³⁷

Cell phones have extended the scope for social relationships. They have facilitated the inclusion and incorporation of the stranger into people’s private lives. This incorporation has encouraged the rise of the sexualized subject. Young Filipinos have made the greatest use of this technology for incorporating and exploring new and radical identities. Cell phones are so intimately associated with the body that they become extensions of it. The body, the self, and the cell phone constitute an amalgam of the organic, the spiritual and the material. Together they embody identity as incorporating carnality, desire and materiality.

Relationship with Others

³⁶ “According to the survey, 88 percent (of the 1,400 respondents from all over the Philippines), believe in God or in a Supreme Being; 76 percent affiliate themselves with the Catholic Church; 42 percent believe in heaven; 21 percent believe in life after death, and 21 percent believe there is hell; 73 percent trust priests, and 70 percent trust nuns.” - Bishop Teodoro Bacani, “Figures to disturb the Church.” In “Opinion Today,” Manila: “Today” newspaper (January 24, 2002).

³⁷ Raul Pertierra et. al., “Txt-ing Selves: Cellphones and Philippine Modernity.” Manila: De La Salle University Press (2002). pp. 149-150.

Young people's inclination to do good to others after exposure to religious text was explored in the survey. And it was found that the urge of doing exactly that is evident in majority of respondents. This finding suggests that sending religious messages, fitting to the youth's situation, may help build a society of altruism and genuinely giving individuals. It further indicates that appropriate messages passed on digitally may avert self-alienation or individualism as a result of increased exposure to CMC's, as Ong and O'Leary suggest. Young people can be moved to do acts of kindness even though an overwhelming majority resists donating money to charity (62%), and increasing offerings at Holy Mass (70%). In this regard, religious texts may not be effective instruments for soliciting donations.

<i>Item</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>Sometimes</i>	<i>Yes</i>
I have the urge to give encouraging/ kind words to others	19 percent	33 percent	47 percent
I have the urge to re-send the message to family and friends in need	22	34	44
I have the urge to offer a helping hand to others	25	35	40
I feel others should change their lives	33	34	33
I have the urge to forgive my enemies	33	39	28
I have the urge to give to the poor on the street	49	36	15
I have the urge to donate to charity	62	30	8
I have the urge to increase my offering at Mass	70	23	7

Table 5: **Relationship with Others**

As to whether the youth thinks that the message received apply to others and that others should change their lives according to the content of the message, the survey shows equal distribution among the three responses. "Yes" and "Sometimes" responses combined (67%) show more than two-thirds of young people agree on this issue.

This is evidence of the "Third Person Effect" hypothesis at work albeit on a partial basis among young text users. This hypothesis posits that media audiences see other people as more affected by media messages than themselves.³⁸ The content of religious text is perceived to apply to other people, not to the recipient directly. A female student says, "*Religious messages help people to reflect in their own selves and doings in life and be more closer to God.*"

At the same time, however, students in the survey also wish that other people gain the same help and inspiration they themselves have gained from religious texts. To achieve this, the students re-send forwarded messages to persons thought to most likely benefit from or appreciate the same religious thought. Seventy-eight percent ("Yes" and "Sometimes" responses combined, 78%) said they re-send religious messages to selected family and friends.

Female students are slightly more inclined to re-send religious texts (48% answered "Yes" to this question; 34% answered "Sometimes"), compared to their male counterparts (37% answered "Yes"; 34% answered "Sometimes"). A female student: "*Religious text messages sometimes lighten people's mood especially when the receivers received it in the most crucial moment of their lives.*" A male student: "*Sending religious*

³⁸ cf. Bengt Johansson, "Third Person Effect, Only a Media Perception?" Nordicom (Nordiskt Informations Center foer Medie (March 2010). Available: http://www.nordicom.gu.se/common/publ_pdf/180_081-094.pdf

messages is not bad at all. It might even help people who are in need of spiritual enlightenment.” This finding is an example of how SMS are offered as “gifts” to others.³⁹

Relationship with Sender

Forwarded messages are *closed-ended*, didactic messages that either instruct, teach, encourage devotion or spread superstition. As observed, they rarely initiate extended text exchanges and at best, only invite a reciprocal action. A simple *Hello, hw r u* or *Hey wazzup, wat u doin*, on the other hand, triggers conversational exchanges that are cyclic, dialogic, and more “personal.”

In spite of the seemingly countless forwarded messages being circulated, six out of ten (59%) survey respondents still consider original messages as more personal. Half of the students (51%) think “an original message is more helpful.” On certain occasions, the fraction of students who feel this way increases to seventy-six percent (“Yes” and “Sometimes” responses combined). A male student says, “*It is usually just forwarded but the thought and purpose is not intended by the sender (be)cause it is not made by him personally.*”

Eighteen percent and twenty-four percent respectively, however, said “No,” an original message is *neither* personal *nor* helpful. This may mean that the act of forwarding messages may be perceived as redundant and meaningless after years of continuous practice. A female respondent says: “*Sometimes it does not have any meaning anymore since it is only a FORWARDED MESSAGE*” (all caps and underline by the respondent).

As to whether the students feel any closer to the sender of religious text, the answer is not overwhelmingly positive (32%, “Yes”; 36%, “Sometimes”). From the students’ remarks, at least some young people attribute religious SMS to the sender, and not entirely as a Divine act. They size up the sender according to sincerity and credibility. A male student says, “*Sometimes inspiring but sometimes irritating! Sometimes these are sent for the sake of texting alone! (not for the meaning!!).*” A female student: “*Religious messages should be taken into consideration, but it’s better if the sender meant the message, and knows in his heart that what he says to his brothers and sisters is accountable to him.*” A female student says, “*They’re inspiring but sometimes they’re taken too far. It would be better if the sender really lives (the message) through his faith.*” A male student: “*I pray they are sincerely conveyed.*” Another male student says, “*Once sent to the person, he should really reflect on it and as he passes it to others, it should be as saying it personally with care and sincerity.*” These remarks recall Pope Paul VI when he talks about *witnessing* as having more impact in modern day evangelization rather than teaching.⁴⁰

<i>Item</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>Sometimes</i>	<i>Yes</i>
I feel that an original (not forwarded) message is more personal	18	23	59
I feel that an original message is more helpful	24	25	51
I feel closer to the Sender	32	36	32
I wish the Sender sends an original message	36	32	32

³⁹ Raul Pertierra, “Transforming Technologies: Altered Selves.” Manila: DLSU (2006). pp. 96-113.

⁴⁰ “Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses.” - Pope Paul VI. In *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, Apostolic Exhortation to the Episcopate, to the Clergy and to all the Faithful of the Entire World (1975). no. 41. The Holy See, Vatican. Available: http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19751208_evangelii-nuntiandi_en.html

I have the urge to send a similar message to the Sender	35	36	29
I have the urge to buy any token as gift to the Sender	71	21	8

Table 6: **Relationship with Sender**

Young people also tend to suspect that forwarded texts actually come from mobile phone companies. These business enterprises are thought to use forwarded texts to encourage more texting and increase text spending. A male student says, the exchange is part of a “*commercialized scheme*” and “*lack(s) sincerity.*” Another male student says, “*They are business messages, unless personally made by the sender.*”

Sincerity and credibility are factors motivating students to send a similar message back to the sender. This finding is shown in the leveled response of the students to the question (“I have the urge to send a similar message to the Sender”) with a slight leaning on the “Sometimes” response (36%). Female respondents are more inclined (70%) than males (41%) to reciprocate the favor to the sender. As to reciprocating *off-line*, giving a tangible gift to the sender, the students gave an overwhelming negative response (71%). Buying itself involves monetary outlay and this is something young people seemingly try to avoid.

Reception of the Message

This section discusses that part of the survey which examined if students find certain religious messages disturbing and if they, in any way, distract themselves from reading it. The results indicate that young people do not avoid religious texts. But after reading, seven out of ten said they continue *doing* what they are doing (68%). In other words, they pause to check incoming messages, and return to their preoccupations.

Alongside this finding, however, some 60 percent of the students (“Yes” and “Sometimes” responses combined) also feel “the urge to be alone and reflect.” This may indicate yearning for certain quietude amid the hustle and bustle of student- but also of city-life. This may not be uncommon because like their matured counterparts, young people do also engage in a search for life’s true meaning, and in fact, this process of searching is continuous in spite of the many distractions in their social and physical environment. Religious text, in this case, may help bring back the need to think about what really matters in life.

Seven out of ten (71% combined “Yes” and “Sometimes” responses) said that on certain occasions they delete the message immediately after reading it. The same fraction of students delete the message after sending it to others. Sixty-five percent said that on certain occasions they “save the message for sending to others later.”

Chain text and young people’s reaction to it were also studied here. In the survey, young people show absolute disliking for this type of text particularly those that threaten with bad luck. Only a few eight percent comply with chain text instructions, while six out of ten (57%) dismiss the threats as non-sense. Students, male and female alike, negatively describe chain text as “gimmick,” “waste” of effort and pre-paid load, “bull crap,” “waste of time,” “don’t have any connection with God,” “distorted,” “not in accordance to the Catholic faith,” “fraud,” “disrespecting the Name of God,” and “nonsense.” A female student: “*..some (chain texts) really helps (but) saying that if you don’t pass this, someone will die.. etc.. completely contradicts the essence of being religious.*”

Another female student: “*I don’t believe chain texts because I have my own faith in God. I can show my faith in God thru prayers and not thru cellphone.*” Another female student: “*People do chain texts to entertain themselves. What you believe in is what you believe in. No religious text could ever alter that.*” Another female student looks beyond the level of belief and focuses on a personal relationship with God: “*Chain texts*

and religious messages are not the basis of your faith. They are all non-sense text messages. I don't believe that those texts will lead you closer to God. The important thing is your personal relationship with God."

<i>Item</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>Sometimes</i>	<i>Yes</i>
I continue what I am doing	4 percent	27 percent	68 percent
I dismiss threats of chain texts as non-sense	22	21	57
I have the urge to be with friends	30	39	31
I have the urge to talk to a friend	32	36	32
I delete the message after sending it to others	29	43	27
I delete the message at once	29	47	24
I save the message for sending to others later	35	39	26
I have the urge to be alone and reflect	37	40	23
I have the urge to listen to pop/ rock music	43	34	23
I have the urge to distract myself with television	56	32	12
I have the urge to distract myself with radio	58	32	10
I have the urge to distract myself with (a) movie	62	28	10
I dismiss the religious text as non-sense	65	23	12
I have the urge to distract myself with web surfing	65	25	10
I have the urge to listen to Gospel/ Christian music	66	24	10
I believe the promises/ threats of chain texts	70	18	12
I comply with chain texts	66	26	8
I have the urge to buy a religious article for myself	74	21	5

Table 7: **Other Responses**

A female student looks at chain texts as distorting the Christian faith and constituting a new faith expression. She says, *"I somewhat feel insulted because it created/ became some sort of a new 'belief' that influence(s) people, especially those who are 'superficial."* A male student looks at deception involved in sending chain texts. *"(They) are nothing but frauds,"* he says, *"and deserve a place called 'trash can.' Chain texts use irrational explanations and use religion in such a non-sense, disrespecting the Name of God."*

Another female student relates chain texts with the sender, not with God. She says, *"Chain text messages are composed by people who does not have anything to do with their lives. It does not affect me neither threaten me. God could tell me what to do and He is the only one that can punish me, not the sender."* Another female student says, *"People only send chain texts for them to be saved and become lucky not because they really believe in God."*

Conclusion

This survey shows two overwhelming "Yes" responses to religious SMS. Under *Faith* category, **"I remember God"** ranked number one, followed by **"I continue what I am doing"** under the *Reception of the Message* category. The youth gave a "Sometimes" response to the following:

Faith

I feel assured of God's presence in my life
 I feel God is talking to me
 I feel God is calling me
 I remember Mother Mary
 I remember my guardian angel

Prayer Life

I feel closer to God
 I have the urge to pray privately
 I have the urge to attend Mass
 I have the urge to read the Bible
 I have the urge to visit Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament

Information

I am reminded of the Liturgical Season
 I feel more the essence of the Liturgical Season

Disposition/ Attitude

I feel happy to be a Christian

I feel more at home with my Christian faith
 I feel inspired
 I feel happy
 I feel confident
 I become inclined to change my life
 I feel confused
 I feel sad
 I feel afraid of dying

Relationship with Others

I have the urge to give encouraging/ kind words to others
 I have the urge to resend the message to family and friends in need
 I have the urge to offer a helping hand to others
 I feel others should change their lives
 I have the urge to forgive my enemies
 I have the urge to give to the poor on the street

Relationship with Sender

I feel an originally crafted message is more personal

I feel an originally crafted message is more helpful
 I feel closer to the Sender
 I wish the Sender sends an originally crafted message
 I have the urge to send a similar message to the Sender

Reception of the Message

I dismiss the threats of chain texts as non-sense
 I have the urge to be with friends
 I have the urge to talk to a friend
 I delete the message after sending it to others
 I delete the message at once
 I save the message for sending to others later
 I have the urge to be alone and reflect
 I have the urge to listen to pop/ rock music
 I have the urge to distract myself and watch TV
 I have the urge to distract myself and listen to the radio

“No” responses were given to the following:

Faith

I remember my patron saint

Prayer Life

I have the urge to go to Confession
 I have the urge to pray the Rosary

Information

I have the urge to buy a religious book for myself

Disposition/ Attitude

I feel afraid of the after-life
 I develop sexual fantasy/ies

Relationship with Others

I have the urge to donate to charity
 I have the urge to increase my offering at Mass

Relationship with Sender

I have the urge to buy any token as gift to the Sender/ others

Reception of the Message

I have the urge to distract myself and watch a movie

I dismiss the religious message as non-sense
 I have the urge to distract myself and surf the Net
 I have the urge to listen to Gospel/ Christian music
 I feel afraid of the threats of chain texts
 I comply with the instructions of chain texts
 I have the urge to buy a religious article for myself

The findings suggest that youth reactions to religious SMS result from the interplay between the youth's “online,” as well as “offline” experiences. Their psycho-spiritual state when the religious text was read was also suggested as a factor affecting response. This needs further investigation. However, evidence has been gathered pointing to students reacting positively only to messages that apply or has significance to their present situation. They pass on messages as a form of “gift” to others, offering the same spiritual support and inspiration they themselves have gained. This process of gift-giving builds and sustains “walled gardens” of micro-cultures as well as strengthens social bonds.

Religious text is also said to interact with what the students already know from other media sources, attendance in Church, as well as knowledge shared with family, peers and other social groups. Such knowledge includes the seemingly wide-spread notion that God is embodied in religious text, that God communicates via text, as well as that shared by a few seeing mobile technology is an unlikely, if not inappropriate, purveyor of religious thought. Text forwarding is also thought as a marketing scheme instigated by mobile companies for commercial purposes.

Young people exercise a great deal of autonomy in reading (interpreting), and reacting to religious text. They delete messages that are insignificant, especially chain texts which according to them are bogus faith expression. Students are aware that genuine faith springs from a personal relationship with God. Although God is thought to be speaking through text, young people still tend to attribute the gift more to the sender than Divine Providence. The way messages are read sometimes depends on the sender's sincerity and credibility. The way senders are known to live the message sent affects response.

The survey also found that young people are generally less inclined to increase donations to the institutional Church, and would rather help other people through concrete acts of kindness. This finding points to the ineffectiveness of mobile technology as tool for solicitation. On the other hand, it shows that computer-mediated communications may not altogether heighten the spread of individualism in societies. Texting, as evidenced by the students' response, may help form altruistic and genuinely-giving individuals.

Religious SMS can serve to complement religious instruction. Religious SMS alone is not enough to make young people better Christians or better informed of their faith. Although we have seen that a significant number of students remember God through SMS, the comments given suggest a need to reinforce inspiring SMS with similar inspirations in the offline world.

Even with religious texts, young people still seek to forge *connection* with other people. An embodied kind of communication that is both dialogic and intimate is what young people ultimately desire. *Connectivity*, which only serves very functional and pragmatic purposes, is what forwarding *forwarded texts* basically represents.⁴¹ But for young people, cell phones and SMS should not only help them to occasionally keep in touch with those listed in their mobile networks. Technology should help maintain relationships and that entails keeping lines of conversation continuously open and alive.

The above findings confirm the results of a previous study suggesting that young people do not appreciate *passivity* in SMS communication.⁴² They seem to care less about interacting with a computer server that electronically sends quotes, nor with a sender, who in spite being a human person, mechanically does the same. There has to be a *warm body* on the other side of the line. If the sender is known to the receiver, an originally crafted message is better appreciated. Somebody outside the cell phone circuit, if not the sender him/herself, should also be available to talk about the content of the religious message, about the youth's spiritual journey and search for life's meaning in general. All these have ramifications on pastoral ministry for young people.

This study looks at the youth's *initial* reactions to religious text. The purpose is to gain insight into cognitive and affective processes resulting from exposure to religious messages using the mobile phone. The methodology employed, however, is somewhat limited. It could not make certain, for example, if the *remembrance, urge* or *desire* experienced by the respondents were actualized in a *latent* behavior. The results can therefore be only considered indicative and by no means final especially as the wave of technology development shifts to more advanced mobile gadgetry.

⁴¹ "Connectivity" and "connection" have been distinguished quite clearly by theology professor John P. Jewell as one that involves technical means (connectivity); in this case, the cellphone. Connection has something to do with relation and relationship, the building blocks of community. cf. John P. Jewell, "Wired for Ministry: How the Internet, Visual Media, and Other New Technologies Can Serve Your Church." Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press (2004). pp. 15.25.

⁴² Anthony G. Roman, "Texting God: SMS and Religion in the Philippines." In "*Ad Veritatem, Multi-Disciplinary Journal of the UST Graduate School*" Vol. 6, No. 1 (October 2006). Manila: UST Graduate School (2006). pp. 13-38.

Future studies can validate the above findings, and complement what may be found lacking. For example, the reactions listed in the survey questionnaire can be augmented, and even supported with interviews. Other statistical tools may also be employed for a more scientific handling of gathered data. It is hoped that the present study provides impetus for further research in the area of religion and mobile phone technology.

* * *