



a new
challenge

Koinonia and the Church in the Digital Age

If Jesus had been born in 1980 and began his public ministry in 2010, would he have “friended” the twelve apostles on Facebook instead of visiting the Sea of Galilee?

While this question might at first seem comical, it reflects concern about how the church as the Christian community relates to the world in which it exists today. The world is very different from the world of Jesus’ ministry. The way many people experience interpersonal communication, develop and maintain relationships, and share information is strikingly different from the ways of previous generations. In an era marked by advances in technology, communication, and virtual space, we must be attentive to how much our church community is being influenced or shaped by its new environment. To understand some of these matters

Daniel P. Horan OFM has written on Franciscan theology, philosophy, and spirituality. He writes from Holy Name College; 1650 Saint Camillus Drive; Silver Spring, Maryland 20903. <horandp@gmail.com>

230

in what we may call the “digital age,” we must look first at what unites us in faith and then at how our changing world affects that unity.

What Is *Koinonia*?

Early in the Acts of the Apostles, we are told that members of the nascent Christian community “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship (*koinonia*), to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (Ac 2:42). In Greek, *koinonia* was one of the marks of Christian identity, but what does it mean? It literally means “communal-ness” (community, communion, “in common”) and thus fellowship. In the Christian context, however, this is more than club membership or casual social connections. The New Testament scholar Luke Timothy Johnson suggests that this understanding of *koinonia* includes our unity in Christ, which explains how the Christian community was able to

maintain unity amid the challenges it faced in the first centuries. In a 1999 lecture at St. Louis University, Johnson offered four aspects of this Christian fellowship: fellowship among persons, in writing, in material resources, and in convictions.¹ Even in diverse cultures, regions, and languages, Christianity was unified through these four aspects of *koinonia*.

The fellowship *among persons* is seen in the way networks of New Testament figures, including the apostles

The fellowship in writing is most clearly seen in the way that early Christian texts, were shared among the early believers

231



and their successors, helped to unify the various communities of believers. Johnson believes that these personal connections helped to maintain coherence in the early Christian movement.

The fellowship *in writing* is most clearly seen in the way that early Christian texts, which would later be canonized as Scripture, were shared among the early believers in different locations. The exchange of these compositions, sometimes letters and sometimes longer narratives, concretized the common experience of the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. The communal reflection on these compositions proved to be an important means of developing *koinonia*.

The fellowship *in material resources* united the first Christians in a seemingly calculable way that was understood more deeply as symbolizing a spiritual connection with other believers. We see in both the Acts of the Apostles and in the Letters of Paul references to offerings for the benefit of the local community (“no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common,” Ac 4:32), and the greater Christian community spread throughout the land (“concerning the collection for the saints . . . on the first day of every week, each of you is to put aside and save whatever extra you earn,” 1 Co 16:1-2). Sharing financial resources represented spiritual *koinonia*.

The last form of fellowship is that *in convictions*. Johnson notes that in the New Testament we see conflicts arising over interpretations of some matters, but that some convictions are never contested. Three of these are monotheism (identifying the one God as the God of the Torah), knowledge that Jesus was human and died, and belief that Jesus was now living with God and would share in God’s triumph in the future.

All four forms of *koinonia* that Johnson highlights contribute to the unity amid diversity in the early church. We see that they have continued to unite the church.

The Possibility of Digital *Koinonia*

With the understanding that this fourfold *koinonia* continues even today, we can now look at how it relates to us in our technologically advanced and technologically permeated world. It seems there is nothing that does not have a digital or virtual counterpart. Much of today’s communication takes place on the Internet in such sites as Facebook and MySpace. Interacting in a completely digital environment where simple laws of nature, common social mores, and geographical limits are no longer applicable is becoming more common through programs like SecondLife. These new forms of communication and social interaction allow the users to create, modify, and experiment with their identities in unprecedented ways. These new “identities” can participate in what are often called “online communities.” Is it possible then to express *koinonia* in a digital format, to have “church” or a community of believers come together in an authentic way online? It would seem at first glance to be a possibility.

The clearest congruency between *koinonia* and the digital age is likely found within the context of the fellowship *among persons*. The Second Vatican Council’s Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen gentium*, says: “All of the faithful, scattered though they be throughout the world, are in communion with each other in the Holy Spirit” (LG §13).² Earlier in *Lumen gentium* we are told that the church “transcends all limits of time and confines of race [and is] destined to extend to all regions of the earth” (LG §9). Transcending the



boundaries of temporality and human differences suggests that connecting and communicating with others through digital media and the Internet is indeed a contemporary manifestation of fellowship among persons.

Additionally, the “blog” (short for “weblog”) and other digital media make written compositions and reflections on normative religious texts more readily available. Even in graduate theological schools, the ubiquity of technologies such as BlackBoard or WebCT has reshaped the way students of Scripture and theology read about, reflect on, and share their faith. It would seem that Christians are no longer limited to parish Bible study, adult catechesis, or other forms of faith-sharing face to face. Instead, the communication of biblical and theological reflection now transcends the previous spatial and temporal boundaries. You can read about, reflect on, and share your faith at any time and from nearly any place.

The fellowship *in material resources* in contemporary Christian communities occurs largely by way of the Internet. Technology enables the faithful to share their material resources directly or indirectly with other communities at the click of a computer mouse. When natural disaster, crime, or war affects the people of God on any continent or at any time, the Internet has allowed Christians to assist others instantaneously. This has been the case in recent years with aid to victims of the Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004 and victims of hurricane Katrina in New Orleans in 2005. The sharing of material resources in these instances also represents the spiritual unity of the people of God, spread around the world though they are.

The final dimension of *koinonia* that Johnson has highlighted for us, fellowship *in convictions*, can also be

seen in the new technologies of the digital age. From the beginning of the Internet, digital “communities” formed to share ideas and information. Early on, this occurred in what were called “chat rooms” and “message boards,” where one could connect with others and contribute to a continuing conversation about a particular subject. Today the successors to those early formats might be Facebook “groups” and personal blogs. Centered on commonly held beliefs and convictions, these digital “spaces” allow people to connect with others without regard to temporal or geographic boundaries.

Given the apparent compatibility of Luke Johnson’s fourfold definition of *koinonia* with the technological advances of our digital age, it seems we could advocate a form of “digital *koinonia*.” There remains, however, a piece of the puzzle that is not accounted for in this digital *koinonia*. The church is not united in this form of fellowship alone, but is also a Eucharistic community.

From Facebook to Eucharist

However great the possibilities for increasing *koinonia* among the Christian faithful, we must recall the passage from Acts cited above wherein the community was also devoted to the breaking of the bread. Cardinal Walter Kasper, in his book *That They May All Be One*,³ reminds us that the church is not simply an organization or club in which we have become some sort of member, and that we are brought into participation in the mystery of Christ as a part of Christ’s Body through the sacrament of baptism.

The participation—the set of relationships we enter through baptism and maintain through *koinonia*—comes to what Kasper calls “the summit,” namely, participation in the Eucharist, a theme from *Sacrosanctum concilium*,



the council's Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy. In this light we can understand Christian *koinonia* as being both a communal or material unity and a sacramental unity. Kasper is in line with Johnson's fourfold *koinonia*, but reminds us that this *koinonia* is inherently sacramental, rooted in our shared baptism and Eucharist.

Understanding *koinonia* as being fundamentally sacramental while also communal, we see two sets of relationship in the church's *koinonia*. The first one Kasper calls the horizontal dimension of *koinonia*. It is what we have seen in Johnson's fourfold framework: fellow-

We can understand Christian koinonia as being both a communal or material unity and a sacramental unity.

ship among persons, in writing, in material resources, and in conviction. The second set Kasper describes as the vertical dimension: the explicitly sacramental fellowship of believers, who in baptism are united to Christ and thus brought into the

life of the Trinity. This dimension, the vertical or sacramental, cannot be replicated on Facebook, MySpace, SecondLife, or any other technological medium. People cannot have their SecondLife avatar baptized online and cannot participate in the celebration of the Eucharist online either.

In light of the ideas of Luke Timothy Johnson and Cardinal Walter Kasper and in line with the vision of the Second Vatican Council, the church in this digital age of ours is clearly aided in living its *koinonia*, but not, of course, in the matter of baptism and the Eucharist, with their water, bread, and wine. The horizontal dimension

of *koinonia* could very likely benefit from more engagement with online technologies that transcend some of the usual limits of place and time. At the same time, there is a need to move beyond this digital *koinonia* to fully include the sacramental and vertical dimension in the celebration of baptism and Eucharist.

Had Jesus "friended" the Apostles on Facebook, he would have very likely sent an "e-vite" to each one for an in-person gathering shortly thereafter.

Notes

¹ Luke Timothy Johnson, "Koinonia: Diversity and Unity in Early Christianity," *Theology Digest* 46 (1999): 303-313.

² All references to conciliar documents are to *Vatican Council II*, ed. Austin Flannery OP (New York: Costello Publishing, 1992).

³ Walter Kasper, *That They May All Be One: The Call To Unity Today* (New York: Continuum, 2004).



Questions for Personal Reflection and Group Study

1. In what ways do you experience *koinonia* in today's church?
2. How do you see technology impacting the way we live out our call to Christian discipleship? Are there other positive or negative dimensions associated with this reality?
3. What are the ways we might better use technology to support authentic communion within the Christian community today?