The event of the Second Vatican Council has been rightly described as the event that “can certainly be considered, from the point of view of the history of salvation, as the cornerstone of the present [twentieth] century.” Its importance therefore commands our attention and merits a frequent revisitation in order to continually appreciate its impact on our today in the church, itself an endeavour in charting and envisioning the future of the church.

For the church in Africa, the council would eventually turn out to be a powerful evangelical irrigation, further bifurcated into two streams in the form of the Synod of Bishops’ Special Assemblies for Africa. Along with the Second Vatican Council, these assemblies have become pivotal and defining moments for the church in Africa. Thus, within the purview of evaluating and understanding the impact of the Second Vatican Council in the church in Africa, there is an intricate connection with the aforesaid two synods.

It has been argued that the desire for a similar event like the Second Vatican Council in the form of an African council that is well suited to the peculiar needs and nature of the growing faith in Africa is what eventually led to what have now become the two Special Assemblies for Africa. It is a desire to “do for Africa what the Second Vatican Council did for the whole Catholic Church.”

The Emanating Perspectives

Those fresh bursts of the Spirit that birthed from the council also brought new visions and perspectives, even if such “newness” is best seen as a fruition of what has always been in the church from the beginning. Ranging from a novel ecclesiological self-understanding, to a greater emphasis on the universal call to holiness and to a deeper search for communion and dialogue, the council set itself out as an epochal event in the life and meaning of the church.

The aforementioned renewals that the Second Vatican Council brought in its stride also included renewal in moral theology. The novel ecclesiological self-understanding, for instance, necessitated the growth and fine-tuning of moral theology and moral discourses. If the council now better reveals the church as a sacrament, it is obvious that it must “continue to search for ways to bear effective witness to Christ in the world,” since a sacrament “is both a sign of God’s presence in the world and a cause of salvation.” A revision of moral theology was therefore a necessary follow up to the church’s reflexive vision. Hence, it was inevitable that the quest for more vibrant moral discourses—a movement that had, in fact, already begun in the period prior to the council—would find a more secure footing with the coming of the council. On one count, there came a massive renewal of moral theology, creating a shift from a legalistic adherence to manuals of moral pathology, to a gaze on the human person as a subject of grace. On the other count, the church developed large ears, an ecclesia audiens, in order to allow for a more attentive listening, as a mother with several children within her fold would, invariably creating a vision of a church that is now poised more than ever to attend to the call to aggiornamento.

While aggiornamento and ressourcement were crystallizing, the council touched on a particular theme, then accorded “subtle” attention, that would become a salient issue for the future, particularly within the landscape of moral discourse. Social communications and the instruments of media would eventually become pulpits where morality is constructed and adjudicated.

**Means of Social Communication: An Emerging Culture**

Living up to the Christian tradition of keeping watch and discerning the spirit of the times, the fathers of the Second Vatican Council recognized the growing importance of the means of social communications, which the church “welcomes and promotes with special interest.”

But the council fathers equally recognized that just as these media, “if properly utilized, can be of great service to mankind, since they greatly contribute to men’s entertainment and instruction as well as to the spread and support of the Kingdom of God,” so also can they be employed “contrary to the plan of the Creator.” To avoid falling into the gulley of this treacherous dichotomy, the council had recommended that all who employ the aforesaid media “be acquainted with the norms of morality and conscientiously put them into practice.”

It is important to note that this exhortation to a moral attentiveness in the ambience of the media was issued years before the coming of the Internet and its host of social networks. *Inter Mirifica*, together with the document on the sacred liturgy, were the earliest documents of the council, made available in 1963. If at this time the council fathers already foresaw the undulating pattern of “a great service” and “a loss” in the arrival of modern means of communication, we can imagine the preoccupation that would arise with the deluge of the social media—henceforth Online Social Networks (OSNs)—that were to arise some decades later.
Meanwhile, in 1994, thirty-one years after the promulgation of *Inter Mirifica*, the issue of moral attentiveness to the means of social communication again resurfaced in the Special Assembly for Africa of the Synod of Bishops. The assembly, as the apostolic exhortation notes, deliberated on the means of social communication, which are in fact “means of spreading a new culture which [itself] needs to be evangelized.” The august assembly, following the cue of the earlier council, had precisely noted that these means of social communication were frequently becoming “sources of a distorted vision of life and of man, and thus fail to respond to the demands of true development.”¹⁰

The second Special Assembly for Africa also reiterated these moral concerns that the first assembly and the council had raised. At this time, the post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Africae Munus* used a more apt name to describe the fast-developing means of social communication, choosing to describe them as information technologies.¹¹ These technologies, which were by now fully ingrained in all sectors of livelihood and all over the globe, were fully exhibiting themselves as capable of being powerful instruments for unity and peace, but also for destruction and division. From a moral standpoint they can offer either a service or a disservice, propagate truth as well as falsehood, propose what is base as well as what is beautiful. . . . The media can be a force for authentic humanization but just as easily prove dehumanizing.¹²

Incontestably, there was growing evidence of the need to pay attention to this new cultural phenomenon that came to be popularly known as “social media.” In hindsight, now that one sees the almost-enchaining stronghold of contemporary information technologies on humanity, it is evident that the abovementioned concerns and cautions of the council fathers and the Synod of Bishops’ Special Assemblies for Africa are well justified. Not only have these potent information technologies gone beyond the sphere of communication; they have since become a mediation and a culture. Not in the least surprising, youth is the group that is most vulnerable to the culture of social media. But whether we identify ourselves as “digital native” or “digital migrant,” the evolution of information technology culture to a morality-construction milieu is a salient issue we face in contemporary times.

**The Changing Face of Moral Discourse in Africa: Constructing Morality Online**

The fact of an emerging culture of information technology that is increasingly making an incursion into moral life is as true in the global setting as it is in the region of Africa. While it is true that means of social communication have always been sources of moral concerns, as we have indicated above from the teachings of the universal council and the two special assemblies for Africa, the emerging role that information technologies have now taken marks a paradigm shift from the usual incursion of these media instruments. Particularly with the coming of OSNs, the caution is no longer about social media becoming a culture by itself but the way in which it is taking over the arena of moral discourse in its entirety. With the deployment of the Internet and its allied networks, the construction of morality gradually begins to lose its traditional *loqui*—namely, the church, both universal and domestic, and the family; it has now waded over to the mediating pulpits of Internet networks. While this development is a global phenomenon, one can argue that it has impacted much more significantly on the African continent, and thus on the church in Africa, as well as on the other so-called traditional cultures, for the reason that these cultures are founded mainly on oral traditions. The emergence and seeming omnipresence of a high-tech tradition, with

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its multifaceted moral challenges, creates an imbalance within cultural–social worldviews, and this invariably has reverberations across the moral landscape of such traditional cultures.

Examples are replete here. In the area of human sexuality, for instance, the vigorous debate that has ensued on the issue of sexual orientation and gender in Africa is instructive. These issues would not ordinarily, at least within the African milieu, generate much furor in a culture that is pretty clear about the complementarity of sexes, the few incidents suggesting otherwise notwithstanding. However, with the presence of OSNs, moral debate on such issues has not remained the same. In Nigeria recently, these issues constituted a big trend in discussions on different social networks that have since become versatile means of communication and loci for the construction of values. Of course, the merger of mobile phones with the power of the OSNs detonates into countless shades of values and meanings afloat in the moral sky of individual consciences.

Again, from the area of human sexuality comes the allied issues of contraception, abortion, and beginning of life. While in the past the church’s teachings and apostolic truths were easily taught and received, in the contemporary African milieu in which the OSNs easily circulate, contrary messages and arguments are becoming much more than a mere inconvenience. Discordant values increasingly barrage the faithful, leaving them less focused than they were prior to the advent of OSNs. Even though such issues seem to be rarely discussed by African Catholics (especially the youth) in contemporary times, this should not be taken to mean that the cacophony of ideas being disseminated online and via OSNs are not creating significant effects. On the contrary, the very fact that such issues are hardly raised by our young ones and middle-aged Catholics is, in and of itself, a cause for concern.

Taking our attention off the impact of OSNs on views of human sexuality, one notices a similar trend with regard to moral discourses in the area of human dignity. It might sound preposterous and unbelievable, but even though the war against the onslaught of the dreaded Boko Haram in Nigeria has been somewhat waged via the OSNs, there have been indications of a latent support on the very same networks by some who think the scourge happened because of the insensitivity of the government to the festering poverty and ignorance among the people, particularly those of the northeast. Such people opine that Boko Haram is an ideology of a group driven to the wall and having no other options, blindly and wrongly appropriating the Kennedy-attributed maxim, “those who make peaceful revolution impossible will make violent revolution inevitable.” One needs only to review the piles of comments and posts on these networks to notice such a latent but dangerous position. Again, the remote possibility of such a glib position receiving even the least assent turns up the dark underbelly of OSNs as a contemporary “pot” where African ethics or otherwise are being brewed and where morality is being construed. Of course, on the other count and as one would expect, the terrorists themselves were also alleged to have made use of the far-reaching power of the OSNs for communication, raising anew the twin problems of security versus privacy. It is a whole

13 In 2013, the Nigerian government signed into law the same-sex marriage prohibition. While some see the unanimous vote on the bill as a sign of the single voice of the people, the very fact that the issue gained so much attention as to require a law on the same already makes a point. However, the discussion of the appropriateness of the law that criminalizes such a marriage within a climate that Orobator refers to as a “culture of silence” is itself worthy of a separate discourse. Agbonkhianmeghe Orobator, SJ, “Ethics Brewed in an African Pot,” Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics 31 (2011): 10.

14 It is interesting to note that the 1994 United Nations Cairo Conference, which had population and development as its focus, and suggested a link between poverty and a moral stance against contraception/abortion, came shortly before the OSNs debuted and became major sources of trading moralities. From thence, debate on contraception, abortion, etc., have been on the rise in the continent.

15 In hindsight, the case of the notorious Detroit-bound, would-be bomber, Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, a Nigerian who lived in London from where he got in touch with those who radicalized him, speaks volumes. Terrorism Monitor argues that his recruitment was sought through online private chats. His birth into this dangerous life was fueled by a “psychological and intellectual dilemma” that found a perfect nursery in the OSNs, which birthed him into the community of the “cyber ummah.” See Murad Batal Al-Shishani, “How I joined Jihad: Nigerian Bomber Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab in His Own Words (Part Two),” Terrorism Monitor 9, issue 9 (March 3, 2011).
imbroglio of moral complications showing moral discourses in contemporary time could not possibly be limited to their usual locales anymore.

Looking to the south of the continent, the recent exacerbation of xenophobia in South Africa lends another insight into how the locales of moral discourse in Africa are quickly shifting to the OSNs as popular platforms. There are several reports of how, virtually overnight, the wildfire of OSNs stoked the tension that has always reared its head in Durban and other South African cities. Allegedly tied to an incendiary statement by the Zulu King Goodwill Zwelithini (which he has since denied), foreign nationals came under violent attacks, many losing their properties and some losing their lives. As is customary with such news, the OSNs spread it abroad, sometimes painting a picture that the average South African hates the foreigner, whereas in actual fact, there were many South Africans equally rising in defense of foreigners.

Whatever be the case, online “ethicists” were already constructing their own values for and against the unfolding event, significantly relying on the news-making waves on the social networks and other social media.

Of course, when such moral constructions come from the pulpit of the Internet, where there is a place for each person and for all opinions, it becomes apparent that there is no real authority, properly speaking, upon which to base a determination of what is right or not, or what is true or false, and this is a cause for serious moral concern. Oftentimes, the effort needed to create one’s own moral discourse online is relegated to just a profile, essentially turning the Cartesian cogito, ergo sum to something like “I am online, therefore I am.”

Thinking of how these individual, disparate moral constructions and their immediate, unreflected values are exported onto the online grid to spawn a new definition of agenda-setting within moral discourses in Africa compels a focusing on the environment of social media. The unreflected moral contours in discourses that have to do with HIV/AIDS, the Ebola pandemic, the Boko Haram/Al-Shabaab terrorism, and xenophobia only work to increase the sense of urgency.

Another major sector in which the construction of values and morality online is becoming a source of worry and should indeed be a source of concern for the church in Africa is the unprecedented level of religious proselytism that OSNs and their lifeblood, the Internet, have promoted in Africa. Sure, the human person is religious, and the African person, much more so, as Mbiti would argue. The concern, however, is not so much the myriad churches and religious centers springing up and dotting the landscape of Africa but their teachings and tenets that compete for the attention of Christians who make use of these OSNs. The Catholic Church, once the principal voice in the promotion of values in Christian circles, is just one voice among many in the church in Africa today.

With a scenario such as this, one can understand why moral theology necessarily has to pay greater attention to the environment of the social media where the dialectic of morality and the question of rectitude in OSNs is an evident reality facing the cyber community. As Avery Dulles argues, “the Church cannot wall itself up in a cultural ghetto at a time when humanity as a whole is passing into the electronic age.”

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16 The claim of Loren Landau as far back as 2005 that “South Africa is a highly xenophobic society” shows that the issue of xenophobia is not new in South Africa. See Loren Landau, Xenophobia in South Africa and Problems Related to it (Johannesburg: University of the Witwatersrand, 2004), 3. The post-synodal apostolic exhortation as far back as 1995 named xenophobic attitudes as part of the ravages that the supposed “global village” still suffers. See Ecclesia in Africa, no. 79.
Some Practical Ways Forward

What we have attempted to indicate in this paper is not just a Luddite exclusion of the goods that OSNs represent and the possibility of their use for an authentic contribution to moral discourses in Africa. Rather, we have simply indicated that the construction of moral discourses, in Africa particularly, is undergoing a significant influence from the least expected sector—the social media. Since the Second Vatican Council event that gave ample reasons to take a critical look into the means of social communication, these media have now developed even beyond the imagination of the sacred council, expanding their frontiers into moral constructions. What we are witnessing is a classic case of our collective *Gaudium et spes, luctus et angor*. OSNs have proved useful in engendering moral constructions in Africa, but they have also had a negative impact. The question remains: Where do we go from here? How can the truths of apostolic moral teaching be further advanced and protected in and through these media?


The Family

To initiate a fitting answer to these questions above we suggest a visit to the illuminating thoughts of Benedict XVI in *Africae Munus*, his post-synodal apostolic exhortation on the church in Africa (2011). The Holy Father, aware that the family is the basic fabric of human society, an ambience in which “the features of a people take shape” and “members acquire basic teachings,” but also particularly aware of the special position of the family in the African setting, called for families to “make a real contribution to the human and Christian upbringing of their children.” The papal exhortation is important not merely because of the moral authority behind it, but because of the exigency that characterizes its tone. At a time of rapid change that presents real challenges for the traditional cultures in Africa and the entire globe, the Holy Father calls for a recognition once again of the primal position of the family as an institution of formation and an agency of introduction of the human person into the society. Thus, even if the Internet culture and the myriad OSNs are bringing in a novelty and having an effect thus far unknown in the lives of growing youth, the obligation still falls on this incipient unit of life—the family, which is described as the “domestic church”—to stand up to this culture. It is the family’s obligation to protect the young from the subtle and sometimes not too subtle relativism of a new ethics that such a culture proposes.

It is not without a reason that the church is paying much attention to the family, particularly as history is playing out in the reality in Africa today. Let us bear in mind the turbulence that the traditional setting of the family in African cultures is going through in the wake of postmodernity and the advent of a “global village.” The youth of

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21 This study is essentially a confluence of theological–anthropological insights, making an in-depth use of the empirical methods of the social sciences to back up theological studies and analysis. A merger of these methodologies fittingly puts into vision the call that the Second Vatican Council had made about an employment of “humanistic and scientific training” in order to appreciate ecclesiastical studies. See *Optatam Totius, Decree on Priestly Training* (October 28, 1965), no. 13, [http://www.vatican.va/archive/ hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651028_optatam-totius_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/ hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651028_optatam-totius_en.html). Drawing from this resource is appropriate in this case since the issue of moral construction online, even though most popular among the youth, is an increasing reality even for the less young. By the day, the African continent continues to pass from the oral tradition to the technology-inclined tradition. See also my dissertation’s Appendix II for an insight into the usage of OSNs by age group.

22 Benedict XVI, *Africae Munus*, no. 42.


Africa are constantly exposed to values that are foreign to their home culture, consequently becoming uncritical recipients and imitators of such cultures. What is unfortunate is that, while imitation of some “imported” values may be useful since there is a uniqueness to each culture that is gift, not everything that is offered by these cultures is helpful or useful.\(^{25}\) To emulate the practices of other cultures is not necessarily something to be viewed as a negative; in fact, this may enrich the human person since no particular culture has the wholeness of truth. But again, looking at it from the other angle, no particular culture is devoid of human frailties. Thus, oftentimes, the problem is that a number of African youth import practices of other cultures from the Western world without the requisite “cultural-sieving” that ought to accompany such an importation. Being formed in the anthropological values of one’s own culture, a direct importation of “foreign” practices often leave the youth disillusioned and affected by ways of life that they have never been used to and that they have largely misunderstood.\(^{26}\)

There is therefore the need in Africa for an exaltation of the position of the family to its traditional setting, playing its major role as the first \textit{domestic church} and working steadfastly to revive its role as the cradle of the initial values of life to be learned. Parents cannot afford to fall into the postmodern temptation of disconnection in which the day-to-day exigencies of life make youth who are still in need of proper family formation bereft of consistent guidance. Whatever the youth become in life has a lot to do with the level of formation they have received in the family while growing up. And inasmuch as peer pressure in schools and elsewhere does affect the moral stance of adolescents, a correlation is always manifest between the level of fidelity of the youth and the authenticity and sturdiness of moral formation they receive while growing up. The family as the domestic church is never a mere appellation but the most important institution for introducing the younger generation into the rugged and unbalanced moral turf of society.

The Church

In an African context, the position of the church is of no small significance. We have argued that generally speaking, religiosity is a key value for the African person. It thus means that the church has the potential to take the lead in offering fruitful direction to the African person for whom religiosity is essential. Formation of conscience, which brings true development of the human person, and conscious efforts that impact on the development of these young ones through various formation programs, need to be intensified at different levels. Catechetical formation, symposiums, seminars, and workshops are additional ongoing formation tools that need to be increasingly used in order to help the youth chart their path toward healthy development in life. A good number of these initiatives are already in place, but such efforts need to be intensified and should never be seen as superfluous or excessive. Just as themes of faith are gazetted and worked into our curriculum of catechesis, so the issue of online moral construction has to be given a central place in the church if such a catechesis is to remain relevant in an age when Facebook has become the city center and OSNs have replaced the erstwhile traditional play square. Of course, this direction is not entirely novel; it is a development of the sound of caution the fathers of the Second Vatican Council made five decades ago.

\(^{25}\) Pope Francis already warned of this issue, taking Africa as a specific example. He notes that “the encyclical \textit{Sollicitudo Rei Socialis} pointed out years ago that there have been frequent attempts to make the African countries ‘parts of a machine, cogs on a gigantic wheel. This is often true also in the field of social communications which, being run by centres mostly in the northern hemisphere, do not always give due consideration to the priorities and problems of such countries or respect their cultural make-up.’” See \textit{Evangelii Gaudium}, no. 62.

\(^{26}\) Babatunde Longe et al. have argued that the African traditional setting is undergoing a rapid breakdown of its traditional values. The need to make strenuous efforts against an enculturation into the new culture that the contemporary technologized world has brought to the life of Nigerian youths is most evident. The world of technology appears thrust upon the average Nigerian youth, who finds such a world intriguing, a complete revolt against the world of restriction and order in which he had grown up. The youth is able to circumvent the usual cultural support, guidance, and limitations of society, easily disappearing into the whirlwind of the cyber. Babatunde Longe et al., “Exposure of Children and Teenagers to Internet Pornography in South Western Nigeria: Concerns, Trends & Implications,” \textit{Journal of Information Technology Impact} 7, no. 3 (2007): 196 ff.
Schools and Formal Centers of Learning

Special programs specifically dedicated to the theme of the ongoing construction of moral discourses online, and the overall import of the use of OSNs, should be encouraged in schools. School curricula need to be developed in such a way that they take cognizance of this fact. It appears though that such an awareness and focus are taken for granted, perhaps due to an understanding of the OSN’s ambit to be private, a virtual personal postal address that is left to the wishes and caprices of the user.

This is, however, a mistake. Much more than mere personal communication, OSNs represent a world that can involve millions of crystallizing ideas at a single point in time. Evidently, the OSN phenomenon merits attention and serious study; it cannot be taken for granted. To reiterate, we need to formulate and include courses, seminars, and discussion fora within the programs offered by schools and other formal education agencies.

With the arguments advanced above, this necessity is even more pressing in an African context, which, true to the papal caution, is increasingly becoming one of the “cogs on a gigantic wheel of the world . . . which, being run by centers mostly in the northern hemisphere, do not always give due consideration to the priorities and problems of such countries or respect their cultural make-up.” 27

Conclusion

The environment of the OSNs, as locus for moral construction, is at times devoid of necessary value parameters. However, this should not create a panic reaction that discourages the usage of such media. In spite of the challenges that exist, a more human and Christian path to follow in confronting the challenges is to take up the gauntlet of John Paul II to “enter this new forum, armed with the Gospel of Christ, the Prince of Peace.” 28 This also takes into perspective the call of the post-synodal exhortation to foray more into this environment in order to evangelize it. 29 The consideration of this issue should not, therefore, take the usual line of dichotomizing polemics: to make wise use of these technologies, conscious of the moral challenges that they present, or to keep away from them in order to ensure human life is lived in authenticity.

That the construction of moral discourses in Africa has now found a contemporary altar in the Internet and the OSNs is indubitable. But that the purity of such moral discourses can be better enhanced by the contributions of institutions such as the family, the church, and the schools is an argument with roots that reach back to the future-envisioning fathers of the Second Vatican Council.

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