New Media and Normal Mysticism
An Unexpected Gift for Ongoing Spiritual Formation

Eileen D. Crowley

The author describes a collaborative process called “communal co-creation” in which church members create media for liturgy as another step in the process of becoming Christian. The use of projected images for prayer and meditation can help participants in liturgy to become more attuned to “the divine in the daily.”

Few Catholics know that on the very same day in 1963 that Pope Paul VI promulgated the first constitution of the Second Vatican Council, the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (Sacrosanctum Concilium; hereafter SC), he also released a decree on media and social communications entitled Inter Mirifica, the Decree on the Mass Media. This latter decree reflected upon the rapidly evolving forms of electronic communications media that were transforming cultures into media cultures. The title of that decree (“Among the Marvelous Things”) comes from its opening statement that declares media to be among humanity’s “marvelous” technical inventions (#1). In continuing to reflect on the insights of Inter Mirifica, John Paul II noted in his 1990 World Communications Day Speech: “[T]he council fathers saw [that] . . . it was for God’s faithful people to make creative use of the new discoveries and technologies for the benefit of humanity and the fulfillment of God’s plan for the world.”

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Communio et Progressio (Unity and Advancement), a 1971 pastoral instruction on the application of Inter Mirifica, affirmed media as “gifts of God” (#2). Again, before his death, John Paul II addressed an apostolic letter to those working in communications and closed it with this declaration: “Do not be afraid of new technologies! These rank ‘among the marvelous things’—‘inter mirifica’—which God has placed at our disposal to discover, to use and to make known the truth” (The Rapid Development, January 24, 2005).

Through decrees, letters, and speeches, the universal and local church has reflected upon the pitfalls and possibilities of media in their various manifestations in our lives: the press, radio, the cinema, satellite communications, broadcast television, cable transmissions, video programs, community-produced media, educational media, computers, and the Internet. Despite Communio et Progressio’s “vision of communication as a way toward communion” (#5), the intersection of worship and media has so far been left theologically unexplored.

**Participation in Liturgy and Media Co-Creation**

Intriguingly, church teachings about liturgy and media do reflect a common underlying premise: participation. Participating in activities that bring people into communion with each other—in the work of liturgy and the work of media—can bring us into deeper communion with our Creator as well, and to participation in “something of God’s creative activity” (Ethics in Communications, #31).

Participation is a crucial concept and expressed goal in SC. This document makes clear that in worship “full and active participation by all the people is the aim to be considered before all else; for it is the primary and indispensable source from which the faithful are to derive the true Christian spirit; and therefore pastors of souls must zealously strive to achieve it . . . in all their pastoral work” (#14). Striving to lead worshipers toward this goal has proven to be a tall order for church leaders, ordained and lay. SC explains the urgency of their making this effort. For people to experience and to derive that true Christian spirit, worshipers need to come to liturgy “with proper dispositions” so “that their minds should be attuned to their voices,” and so that they can be ready “to cooperate with divine grace” (#11). Ideally, then, worshipers need to “participate” before, during, and after liturgy in a life that becomes a life of ongoing worship.

In recent decades, members of some Catholic and mainline Protestant churches have begun to participate in a volunteer activity that has the potential to contribute to that ideal. Involving both liturgy and media, this activity leads from one into the other and back again. In these faith communities, members produce their own “new media” for worship—that is, any creative combination of...
projected or displayed images, computer graphics and animation, video, film clips, and image magnification. When this media production is done in the context of spiritual and liturgical reflection and formation, I call the entire process “communal co-creation.”

From my research I can report that this collaborative process differs from community to community in how communal co-creation actually happens and in who becomes involved. However, I submit, wherever this process takes hold and wherever the baptized of every age, educational and social background, and life circumstance are welcomed into creating media for liturgy, communal co-creation is a gift. Such faith communities are inviting members to take another step in the lifelong process of becoming Christian.

Communal co-creation has the potential to offer the faithful an opportunity to prepare themselves to worship in a way similar to the preparation children, teens, and adults experience through Lectionary-based catechesis. As those who have been involved in Lectionary-based catechesis can attest, the more worshipers prepare themselves to listen to the proclamation of Scripture on Sunday, the more they actually hear the Word. The very process of creating media for worship likewise enhances the possibility for worshipers to “come with proper dispositions” more “attuned” and ready to “cooperate with divine grace,” not only in their worship, but ultimately, in their media-saturated daily lives. For, as the 1992 pastoral instruction on media Aetatis Novae (“Dawn of a New Era”) explains: “Today, much that men and women know and think about is conditioned by the media; to a considerable extent, human experience itself is an experience of media” (no. 2).

Communal Co-Creation in Three Churches

In the late 1970s, the 150 founding leaders and families who built the worship space for the Catholic Community of the Good Shepherd in suburban Cincinnati, Ohio, knew they could not afford to commission much art, but they thought they could provide a form of stained-glass window. As one long-time parishioner recalled, “The thought here was that we could have all kinds of inspirational images through the media.” They built a nine-by-eighteen-foot multimedia screen above their altar. Since 1977, teams of volunteers have created for every Sunday liturgy postcommunion media meditations to accompany the postcommunion song that the cantor sings. The team members base their media reflection upon the Scripture of the day, the liturgical season, and the postcommunion song. In addition to producing media meditations for Sunday Eucharist, parish volunteers have also created slide-based meditations for weddings, reconciliation services, confirmation, First Communions, and Advent, Lent, and Holy Week liturgies.
In the late 1990s, staff and parish volunteers at St. Joseph’s Church in Roseburg, Oregon, began projecting images for meditation and lyrics for the encouragement of greater participation on Sunday and during liturgies at other times during the year. Originally purchased for youth ministry liturgies, the media projection equipment has been a hit with all age groups, especially with the older members who find it easier to read the large projected lyrics. Different parish groups—adults, teens, and school children—have taken the responsibility for locating images to accompany the weekly Lenten Stations of the Cross. For evening prayer, photographs from parish photographers have served as icon-like images for extended silent contemplation. And, the pastor reports, no family would now think of celebrating a funeral without including a prelude accompanied by images that the family members had selected of their deceased loved one.

In Waupun, Wisconsin, the pastor of Union-Congregational Church first used media to focus attention on mission activities and to increase financial support for them. The collection rose considerably that year. In the late 1990s, the pastor and a core team of volunteers developed a new media-saturated Sunday preaching service. Projected media has also appeared, as deemed appropriate, in Communion and other services. While the media-rich service was originally designed to attract teens and young adults, the approach has proven equally attractive to members of all ages. As part of their regular worship preparation process, the core team reaches out to invite other media-savvy members—for example, two teenage cousins, a parent and child, a family, or an individual—to be “freelance producers” of homemade music videos. These producers put religious and secular images to country, rock, pop, folk, blues, and contemporary Christian songs. The videos, based on that week’s Scripture or theme, may be incorporated into the liturgy at various points. All members are welcome to attend the annual parish retreat where they can reflect on how God communicates through today’s popular media. As a result of her involvement with this media ministry and her experience of this media-based preaching service, one woman reported that, as she is listening to the radio or watching TV or a film, “Now I’m always looking for God.”

**Spiritual Attunement in Liturgy and Life**

My research indicates that when worshipers encounter popular and homemade media in their worship, they experience differently the diverse media in their daily lives. They encounter it with new eyes and ears. They become more attuned to the divine in the daily. Their worship life can lead to the kind of attunement Jewish liturgical scholar Max Kadushin calls “normal mysticism.” This changed perspective enables
a person to make normal, commonplace, recurrent situations and events occasions for worship. . . . These daily commonplace situations are not only interpreted in the act of worship as manifestations of God’s love, but they arouse in the individual . . . a poignant sense of the nearness of God (Kadushin, 168).

In the course of interviewing more than a hundred church leaders and worshipers who had contributed to the communal co-creation of new media for worship, I heard over and over again how they, like the woman in Wisconsin, now find themselves always looking for God in the photography, video, film, and music they experience in their daily lives. They report how much more engaged they now find themselves to be in worship, too. They are becoming “full, conscious, active participants” in the liturgy of the church and the liturgy of the world.

New Possibilities and Demands

To be sure, no liturgy requires the use of today’s new media. It is just one option that a parish or school can choose, or not. That decision must be a local one. If chosen, though, new possibilities and new demands follow.

One possibility is that people typically excluded from liturgical ministries—such as members living with disabilities and others on the margins of parish or school life—can find a place in this process. Visual and media artists can be welcomed not only to offer the artistic fruits of their gifts, but also to inspire and to teach those less skilled. At various times, such a process might draw in and call upon the skills and ideas of techno-savvy teens and young adults, movie and TV buffs, graphic designers, computer techies, musicians, art historians and teachers, amateur and professional photographers and videographers, poets, and other willing souls eager to tap into their imagination. Collaborating together, regular members of a core team, freelance producers, and other contributors can create, to use Mother Teresa’s phrase, “something beautiful for God” and for God’s people.

One critical demand is for ongoing training and spiritual formation of leaders and volunteers alike, a need no different from that of other liturgical ministries. This spiritual practice calls for solid leadership. Communal co-creation must be built upon a solid spiritual foundation of scriptural reflection, liturgical mystagogy, and catechesis. Leaders need to ensure that, over time, participants receive formation in liturgy, Scripture, ethics, and media aesthetics. Together, leaders and liturgical-media-ministers-in-the-making need to develop not only technical skills but also analytical skills to discern whether they are on the right track about using media in worship at all. Most importantly, all participants would need to share the vision of SC that liturgy is the work of all the people, not just those on the pastoral staff.
“Thus says the Lord: ‘I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?’” (Isaiah 43:16a, 19a). The unexpected gift of communal co-creation of new media for worship has indeed already sprung forth in local churches, Catholic and Protestant, scattered across the U.S., Canada, the UK, Australia, Singapore, Korea, and elsewhere. If seen as an ongoing spiritual practice, this process offers Christians opportunities not only to use the gifts God has given them but also to experience the gift of normal mysticism.

**References**

*Aetatis Novae, Communio et Progressio, Inter Mirifica, Ethics in Communications,* and other Church Documents on Media are available on the Pauline Media website:

Apostolic Letter on the Media, “The Rapid Development,” is also available on the Vatican website:
http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_letters/index.htm


World Communications Day speeches are available from the Vatican website:
http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/messages/