

“GO INTO THE ENTIRE WORLD AND PREACH THE GOSPEL TO THE WHOLE CREATION” (MK. 16:15): REALIZING THE UNIVERSAL MANDATE IN THE NIGERIAN CATHOLIC CHURCH THROUGH THE DIGITAL MEDIA

Evaristus Ifeanacho, PhD

*Department of Religion and Human Relations
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka*

Abstract

When Jesus Christ finished his ministry on earth, his apostles continued the work of evangelization as he enjoined them with the mandate of realizing the universal mission of letting the Good News reach the ends of the earth. The realization of this mandate to the ends of the earth was practically unrealizable because the means of communication was still in their archaic form. Evidence abounds in the Acts of the Apostles how they tried to carry out their missionary journeys in various parts of the Greco-Roman world. Be that as it may, even in the Nigerian Catholic Churches of today that mandate has not yet been realized in every corner. However, with the passage of time, the means of communication in all its ramifications has continued to improve noticeably. More especially, communication technology has continued to witness tremendous progress from analog to digital devices. One could ordinarily presume that the spreading of the Good News will be easier. In the research qualitative methodology was employed to make some literary investigation on the subject matter. The researcher unravelled how far this evident progress in social communication has been gainfully employed in the propagation of the faith in Nigeria. More so, the research exposed the downside in use of social media in the preaching of the gospel. It was discovered that notwithstanding the enormous help the digital technology has continued to offer in the spreading of the gospel, the universal mandate has not been fully realized.

Keywords: universal mandate, mission, media, televangelism, digital media

Introduction

Christian faith is nourished by listening to the word of God and putting it into practice. This word cannot be listened to unless it is preached. For “how are men to call upon him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without a preacher? And how can men preach unless they are sent?” (Rm. 10:14-15). Evidently, the *fides ex auditu* (faith comes from hearing, Rom. 10:17) presents an imperative of going to communicate the truth of the gospel to others. It inaugurates the ardent desire of letting others hear the Word. In the

words of Sorondo (2023), “our first mission as Christians is to speak, to proclaim the message of Christ, to which we are witnesses and for whose teaching we are responsible.” The kernel of this message remains the commandment of love. It is love that embraces all without discrimination. According to Francis (2020), “the love of Jesus knows no boundaries or barriers. The Lord demands of us the courage to have a love that does not count the cost, because the measure of Jesus is love without measure.” For as Oxenham wrote, “in Christ there is no East or West, in him no South or North, but one great fellowship of love throughout the whole wide earth.” This task of realizing the universal mandate is a mission meant for every Christian in his/her own daily witnessing to the gospel. The Church as an institution guides and directs the faithful through the proper channel for carrying out this task. Formerly, the means of communicating the truth of the gospel were arduous but now with the digital media, the world becomes a global village and the transmission of messages becomes easier though not without its attendant challenges. Francis (2023) maintains that, “neither is it accomplished once and for all. It is the fruit of a journey in which each generation is called to travel a piece, reading the signs of the times in which it lives.” It is in this new digital context that we have to explore how this missionary mandate is to be more fully and more fruitfully realized.

The Inner Logic of Mark 16:15

Mark 16:15 is located within the canonical part of Mark 16. It pictures the missionary mandate given to the apostles. However, this is not the only place in Scripture that has the Great Commission. Biblical passages like “I am sending you” (John 20:2), “Be my witnesses to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8), and “Go make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:19-10) all state that same command as Mark 16:15 (<https://home.snu.edu/~hculbert/mark1615.htm>). It gives a synthesis of the theology of proclamation that knows no bounds. Henry (1978) in that regard affirms that “hitherto they had been sent to only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel (Matt. 10:6) and were forbidden to go into the way of the Gentiles, or into any city of the Samaritans; but now they are authorized to go into all the world, and to preach the gospel of Christ to every creature, to Gentiles as well as to the Jews; to every human creature that is capable of receiving it. These eleven men could not themselves preach it to all the world, much less to every creature in it; but they and the other disciples, with those who should afterward be added to them, must disperse themselves several ways, and, wherever they went, carry the gospel along with them. They must make it the business of their lives to send those glad tidings up and down the world with all possible fidelity and care, not as an amusement or entertainment, but as a solemn message from God to men, and an appointed means of making men happy.

“The Disciples Went out and Preached Everywhere” (Mk. 16:20)

The disciples received the great mandate zealously and more zealously weathered the storms of the challenges and most zealously made great missionary expansion. In fact, in the words of John Paul II (1993), “this is the command which began the great expansion of the Church from the first group of disciples in Jerusalem to the great Christian family spread throughout the world.” Testimonies abound in the Acts of the Apostles about how the apostles traversed the Greco-Roman world *terra marique* (by land and by sea) preaching the Good News of salvation. More so, John Paul II (1990, Para. 11) insists that, “newness of life in him is the “Good News” for men and women of every age: all are called to it and destined for it.” The early Christian communities bore eloquent testimony with their lives especially through communal living (Acts 2.44-45). It is noteworthy Pius XII (1957, Para. 43) averred that, in the early Church's missionary expansion, we find alongside the apostles, other individuals, groups, and communities that were also involved in the work of evangelization. For instance, the church of Antioch, having been evangelized began to also to send out missionaries (cf. Acts 13:2-3).

Based on this, John Paul II (1990, Para. 11) affirms that:

This is why the Church's mission derives not only from the Lord's mandate but also from the profound demands of God's life within us. Those who are incorporated in the Catholic Church ought to sense their privilege and for that very reason their greater obligation of bearing witness to the faith and to the Christian life as a service to their brothers and sisters and as a fitting response to God. They should be ever mindful that ‘they owe their distinguished status not to their own merits but to Christ's special grace; and if they fail to respond to this grace in thought, word and deed, not only will they not be saved, they will be judged more severely’ (LG 14).

In fact, for Ifeanacho (2009) the Church...exists in order to continue this mission of Jesus Christ; a mission of proclaiming the Good News to the ends of the earth.” More still, Benedict XV (1917) affirms that “if we consider the immediate disciples of the Apostles, St. Clement of Rome, St. Ignatius of Antioch, St. Polycarp or the apologists, such as St. Justin and St. Irenaeus, we find that in their letters and their books, whether in defense of the Catholic Faith or its commendation” they aimed at preserving the Word against contamination from any form of erroneous doctrine. Other missionaries also worked assiduously towards the spread of the gospel. Among them were: Patrick for the Irish people; Augustine for the English; Boniface and Anagar brought the Faith to the Germans; and Cyril and Methodius were the apostles of the Slavs; and Francis Xavier, was tireless missionary in Japan. In the Nigerian church, mention must be made of Joseph Lutz, Joseph Lejeune, Albert Bubendorff, Lindane, Joseph Shanahan, Charles Heerey,

Brendan Whelan and many others. In this way the Church has unceasingly continued to spread the gospel every time and everywhere. For, the Fathers of Vatican II (*Ad Gentes*) it is her “essential task,” and the Church is “missionary by nature.” In the words of Paul VI (1975, Para. 14), “evangelizing is in fact the grace and vocation proper to the Church, her deepest identity; she exists in order to evangelize.” In fact, with these words of the missionary mandate, Benedict XV (1919, Para. 1) teaches that Jesus Christ committed to the Apostles the holy charge of carrying the gospel message to the ends of the earth. As the preaching of the gospel was progressing, it became obvious that there is need of erecting structures where believers could gather for worship and fraternal interaction. In that regard, John Paul II (1990) asserts that:

The Church ... serves the kingdom by establishing communities and founding new particular churches, and by guiding them to mature faith and charity in openness toward others, in service to individuals and society, and in understanding and esteem for human institutions. The Church serves the kingdom by spreading throughout the world the “gospel values” which are an expression of the kingdom and which help people to accept God's plan (para.20).

Realization of the universal mandate: the Catholic Church's commitment

In an effort to let this divine message reach the ends of the earth, the Church through the Apostolic letter of Benedict XV, *Maximum illud* (On the Propagation of the Faith Throughout the World), *Rerum ecclesia* (Encyclical letter on Catholic missions) of Pius XI, *Evangelii praecones* (Encyclical letter On Promotion of Catholic Missions) of Pope Pius XII, *Princeps pastorum* (Encyclical Letter On the missions, native clergy, and lay participation) of John XXIII and other subsequent ones made enormous effort towards churning out fruitful methods of propagating the Good News. Such efforts for Benedict XV (1919, Para. 14) include the training of indigenous clergy and insisting that the missionary has to learn the local language to facilitate communication. In the policy of training indigenous candidates for the sacred ministry “lies the greatest hope of the new churches. For the local priest, one with his people by birth, by nature, by his sympathies and his aspirations, is remarkably effective in appealing to their mentality and thus attracting them to the Faith. Far better than anyone else he knows the kind of argument they will listen to, and as a result, he often has easy access to places where a foreign priest would not be tolerated.” It is important to note that the training has to be painstakingly done and not in a haphazard manner. Sequel to that Benedict XV (1919) upholds that,

it is absolutely necessary that they be well trained and well prepared. We do not mean a rudimentary and slipshod preparation, the bare minimum for ordination. No, their education should be complete and finished, excellent in all its phases,

the same kind of education for the priesthood that a European would receive. For the local clergy is not to be trained merely to perform the humbler duties of the ministry, acting as the assistants of foreign priests. On the contrary, they must take up God's work as equals, so that someday they will be able to enter upon the spiritual leadership of their people (Para.15).

This is totally in congruence with the teaching of the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council (Optatam Totius, Para. 6) who insisted that “notwithstanding the regrettable shortage of priest, due strictness should always be brought to bear on the choice and testing of students. God will not allow his Church to lack ministers if the worthy are promoted and those who are not suited to the ministry are guided with fatherly kindness and in due time to adopt another calling.” This process of evangelization is an all-inclusive and all-involving assignment. It is not to be monopolized by any particular group because no particular group no matter the piousness of their intention can fruitfully and faithfully realize this universal mission singlehandedly. Therefore, John XXIII (1959, Para. 41) in the same vein teaches that “all Christians must compete in pious rivalry, and give constant proof of their concern for the spiritual well-being of other people by defending their Faith and teaching it to those who either do not know it at all, or do not know it well enough and therefore misjudge it.” This formidable commitment by the Church aimed at bringing this mission to fruition took a new dimension with the rapid growth in the means of communication. In that line, John XXIII (1959, Para. 21) made a prophetic call when he remarked that “care must be taken to advance “the use of modern means of communication in spreading Christian doctrine.” However, before we exam the impact of the digital media, we must pay allegiance to traditional antiquity as far as communication is concerned.

Inquiry into the Traditional Means of Communication

It is an obvious fact that the modern means of communication did not stem from the blues. In all its advanced form, it no doubt originated from the content of the public traditional communication already in existence. It is therefore an improvement of the existent communication paraphernalia. These traditional media of public communication are grouped into informal transference media and the formal transference media. Initially the propagation of faith passed through the informal transference or what is referred to as oral transmission. It depended so much on personal contact between individuals. He who has received the message tries to share it with his neighbor in an attempt to convert him or her. An outstanding example of such informal transference is family visits during which one tries to exchange information regarding his faith with his immediate family members, or extended family members. It can also be done within a large audience like the kindred

or village meeting. Other organized gatherings that characterize the traditional African *modus vivendi* attract huge attendance of people from far and near thus create occasions and intervals for interaction and general exchange of information. Gatherings like marriage and funeral ceremonies, recurrent festivals etc. are also propitious moments for transmitting of gospel message.

On the other hand, formal transference media system is concerned with the more systematized dissemination of 'official' information between the traditional administrative organ and the people (subjects). Such means is used for the announcement of official gatherings. In that case, the town-crier becomes the agent who through the use of wooden gong and other related instruments disseminates information regarding religious gatherings.

Nonetheless, the advent of information technology changed the entire landscape of communication by making it much easier through the use of digital media.

Digital Media in the Proclamation of the Gospel

The *fides ex auditu* is inaugurated particularly by the missionary mandate to the apostles "Go into the whole world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation" (Mk.16:15). Since the Church continuously makes effort to profit from the unstoppable technological advancement, the preaching of the gospel finds new methods of communicating the unchangeable truth of the gospel. The effective preaching of the gospel to all creation demands arming oneself with the proper skill for communicating the truth of the Gospel. Fundamental to proper communication is a contemplative listening to the Word of God. We listen to understand our audience in the concreteness of their daily lives; in the feedback they give to the homily. As Francis (2016) has it, communicating means sharing, and sharing demands listening and acceptance, and to listen is much more than simply hearing. It therefore involves a learning process founded on divine grace. In the light of that of constant search for suitable skill, man's search for knowledge draws him into various learning processes embedded in education. Getting acquainted with proper communication skills demands a disposition to learn and improve oneself. Therefore, Okafor (1992:17) avers that "learning is one of the inevitable concomitants of man's nature." However, it has to be an education founded on unmitigated freedom, ardent search for the truth and geared towards an integral development of the whole person. For, Congregation for Catholic Education (2002, Para.39) holds that "through study and research a person contributes to perfecting himself and his humanity." By so doing, one uses his/her knowledge to subdue the earth" (Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, Para.53). John Paul II (1990) extols the unifying force of the means of social communication when he teaches in his encyclical letter *The Mission of Christ the Redeemer* that:

The first Areopagus of the modern age is the world of communications which is unifying humanity and turning it into what is known as a 'global village'. The means of social communications have become so important as to be for many the chief means of information and education, of guidance and inspiration in their behavior as individuals, families and within society at large (Para. 37).

In these words, he laid bare the importance of the means of social communications in different facets of the human society. However, it remains an incontrovertible fact that most often the arrival of some new technologies meets us surprisingly unprepared. Before we know it, we are already into it and we begin to fiddle with it in an attempt to uncover the inner wonders embedded therein. We begin then to learn as we use. It is important to note that education remains the bedrock of sound and balanced communication on the one hand, and solid opinion-making. In this regard, John Paul II (1995, Para. 124) upholds that, "the modern mass media are not only instruments of communication, but also a world to be evangelized. In terms of the message they transmit, it is necessary to ensure that they propagate the good, the true and the beautiful." To that effect, preaching the good news of salvation can also be done through the social media. In that way, the dissemination of the gospel becomes faster and covers wider range of people. In that vein, Grosso (2018) affirms that, "social media allow us to communicate with hundreds of thousands of people with one click — so what better place to spread this message of hope and love than Facebook (or Twitter or Instagram)? Using social media to witness to Christ, and hopefully, to evangelize in his name, starts by treating social media as an end in itself, not just a means to an end." In the same vein, we must use social media to minister to and feed our Christian communities by offering them content that will help them encounter Jesus in some way. Whether it is an inspiring or comforting quote from Scripture, live streaming Masses, crusades, meetings and other related events or catechetical videos that share the richness of religious tradition. In fact, social media in the context of religious faith is used to offer something of substance to friends and followers.

In fact, there is nothing more authentic, no narrative more powerful and no message more challenging than the Gospel. Let us strive to share it through our example of loving witness on social media.

Use of Social Media in Evangelization

The Catholic Churches especially in the urban areas in Nigeria make use of the social media in preaching the gospel. Pastors of souls are enjoined to follow proper guidelines in order to ensure their proper use. When these modern means of communication are wisely employed, it enormously facilitates the spreading of the Gospel. In them according Paul

VI (1975, Para.45) the Church finds a modern and effective version of the pulpit. Thanks to them she succeeds in speaking to the multitudes. In fact, Mathambo (2018:77) rightly observed that “the emergence of social media has provided yet another avenue through which religious organizations and the community can respond to the concerns and issues of the people by providing a sense of community through the sharing of religious inspirational messages.” Bearing in mind that the Catholic Church has to respond to the signs of the time, it behooves her to always seek for more improved means of reaching out more with highest speed. In fact, for the effectiveness and efficacy of the new evangelization, John Paul II (2011, Para.72) affirms that it is necessary to have a profound understanding of the culture of the time which is terrain of social communications. Sequel to that, knowledge and use of the media of any kind is indispensable.

To that effect, Benedict XVI (2010) affirms that:

Discovering new methods of transmitting the Gospel message is part of the continuing evangelizing outreach of those who believe. Communications today take place through a worldwide network, and thus give new meaning to Christ’s words: “What I tell you in the dark, utter in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim upon the housetops” (*Mt*10:27) (Para. 113).

Undoubtedly, social media have a lot of advantages as far as preaching the gospel with them is concerned. According to Grosso (2018), social media allow us to communicate with hundreds of thousands of people with one click. He went further to insist that it is extremely important to use our social media outlets to invite people to Mass, adoration, confession and Catholic events, but we cannot only use our social media in this way.

In the Catholic churches in urban areas in Nigeria untiring effort has to be made to use the social media to minister to and feed the Christian communities by offering them content that will help them encounter Jesus in some way. Whether it is an inspiring or comforting quote from Scripture, live streaming Masses or events, or catechetical videos that share the richness of our Catholic tradition, we need to offer something of substance to our friends and followers.

Grosso (2018b) maintained that if we share meaningful content, we can use social media to bring people into an encounter with Christ every single day. The social media outlet like Facebook when properly used plays an important in the propagation of religious faith. It keeps the members of the congregation connected as members of the same body the Church. It equally provides easy access to churches and their spiritual services and events. When Facebook and other related social media platforms are adopted, individuals, religious leaders and congregations will through these networks bolster religious participation. In fact, the use of social media for religious communication has brought

growth in many urban Catholic churches in Nigeria and individual worshippers. Undoubtedly, the digital technology as affirmed by Cloete (2020:259) “provides the church with more tools and opportunities to reach more people with the gospel and is therefore seen as having a positive influence on church activities and institutional structures.”

Challenges in the use of Digital Media

Notwithstanding the obvious advantages of the use of digital media (e.g social media) in preaching the gospel, it is necessary to state that there are also obvious challenges to be confronted. Pastors of souls must take adequate care to educate their followers on the proper use of the social media especially in the ambient of evangelization. Corroborating that fact, Sorondo (2023) appraises the speedy development that has taken place in the information technology which goes a long way to enhance sharing of knowledge, promotion of economic development and the offering of new possibilities in many other areas. On the other hand, its downside has continued to negatively influence its users for behavioural, economic, political and religious purposes. There is therefore a necessity of knowing the limits of the application of the digital technology especially in the celebration of Sacraments of the Church. Physical presence in that context takes priority over virtual attendance. Virtual is restricted to those that are incapable health-wise, imprisoned, or debarred by distance. Unfortunately, at times there is an abuse in the sense that those that do not fall into these categories presume that they can also profit from such opportunity. To that effect, Benedict XVI (2007, Para. 57) avers that it is important to know that “those who hear or view these broadcasts should be aware that, under normal circumstances, they do not fulfil the obligation of attending Mass. Visual images can represent reality, but they do not actually reproduce it. While it is most praiseworthy that the elderly and the sick participate in Sunday Mass through radio and television, the same cannot be said of those who think that such broadcasts dispense them from going to church and sharing in the Eucharistic assembly in the living Church.” In the same context of the challenges, there are some obvious facts to be brought to bear as it concerns some obvious shortcoming. Such are:

i. Danger of toolification: According to Emelu (2024) toolification presents a cultural and psychological shift to tool dependency that goes to define our lives by the tools we have or use. It reflects the fact of considering the new as always better. Such tendency unconsciously compels individuals to a mad craze of loyalty to the latest technological affordances, regardless of how functional the predecessor actually is. In this context, skills and need are sacrificed on the altar of use and want driven by the desire to be current and

not miss out. Therefore, the use of digital media in the Church has to be geared towards creative and innovative use and not mere consumeristic acquisition.

ii. Deepfake and its manipulative tendency: Transmission of the faith through education involves communication; and if it is not properly communicated, reception becomes difficult. To this effect, the Church appreciates the values of science and technology made evident also in the means of communication and describes them as “positive values, which...can provide some preparation for the acceptance of the message of the Gospel.” (Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, Para.57). Sequel to that, the “Church sees the media as gifts of God.” (Vatican II, *Inter mirifica*, Para.1). However, the virus of fake news and deepfake is ravaging the communication landscape. It makes it arduous to decipher the truth in almost every piece of information. Deepfakes Francis (2024) enthused involve “the creation and diffusion of images that appear perfectly plausible but false ... or of audio messages that use a person’s voice to say things which that person never said.”

iii. Harmful publicity: It is obvious that the social media help in no small measure in promoting the preaching of the gospel among believers and informing non-believers on the teachings of a particular church, it could also be used to send destructive publicity. Since many do not evaluate the content of what they send or the truth of what they read, the same users who used it for promoting the faith could also use it to send out poisonous comments that could destroy the integrity of the priest/pastor or the overall image of the church. As Benedict XVI (2011, Para.143) rightly warned, “Everyone knows that the new information technologies are capable of being powerful instruments for unity and peace, but also for destruction and division.”

iv. Distortion of information: Manipulation of information through the digital media has become a cankerworm that is eating deep into the information industry. It makes it difficult to ascertain the truth or falsehood embedded in any information. Therefore, one needs extra capacity of evaluation in order to be able to assess any information passed through the social media. Most often information is distorted in order to gain political advantage, religious incitement, personal gain etc. In the case of religion, it is most often done to hoodwink old followers or to attract new ones. Generally, it is aimed at deceiving others. Some pastors indulge in the act of stage-managing miracles, arranging prefabricated testimonies, spewing out baseless prophecies in order to make impression on the gullible masses that will be easily swayed towards believing them.

v. Infobesity: This is generally caused by poor information “diet”. It is a situation where different forms of information are consumed lock, stock and barrel. Information-wise it creates a bloated-up situation of confused mixture of information. Such overload

of information is also referred to as infosaturation and infoxication. Eppler and Mengis (2004) affirm that infobesity occurs when information received becomes a hindrance rather than a help, even though the information may be potentially useful. One of the major implications of infobesity for information seekers Awuor (2019) observes is the fact that they have to face a whole range of challenges to locate the required information which results into information fatigue and associated anxieties. Such situation actually generates enormous difficulty in understanding an issue and effectively making decisions. The resultant effect is that gathering information that will help in evangelization oftentimes becomes a herculean task. In most cases, one is saddled with indecision in trying to sift out the necessary from the irrelevant information.

vii. Infodemic: According to World Health Organization (2020), this new vocabulary in the health sector is used to describe too much information including false or misleading information in digital and physical environments during a disease outbreak. It causes confusion and risk-taking behaviors that can harm health. With growing digitization – an expansion of social media and internet use – information can spread more rapidly. This can help to more quickly fill information voids but can also amplify harmful messages.

The exponential growth in social media users has aided and abetted an equally exponential growth in the generation of all kinds of information. Everyone is authority in his/her own information, whether the information is true or false. Informed and uninformed information are muddled up in the bushel of information. The pastors of souls if they are not properly schooled in fact-checking and critical evaluation will most likely derail in the bid to get useful information. Those involved in the work of evangelization should be properly groomed in digital media literacy so as to be always abreast with the goings on in digital technology.

Conclusion

It is important to remember as that proclamation is not accomplished once and for all. It is rather the result of a journey that is taken piecemeal by different generations; each trying to adhere to the signs of the times. So as the Gospel of Jesus Christ departed from the eastern shore of the Mediterranean two thousand years, the journey has continued till today and will continue with renewed and added ardor. The message remains unchangeable, it is the means and method of the proclamation that vary from time to time because *Ecclesia semper reformanda* (the Church must always be reformed). In our own time the means of communication has been digitalized and the Church has continued to gain from it and to equally weather the storms of the challenges therein. Although the digital revolution has in some respect disrupted Christian worship, it has also created

contemporary brands of Christianity which embraced digital technology to evangelize and guide large, growing and physically distant congregations.

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