

Some Practical Results of Using Digital Media as a Means to Communicate the Life-giving Message of the Orthodox Faith

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Introduction

Here are a few notes from people who have responded to our media efforts:

Dear Father...

I've been meaning to reach out to you Fr and tell you that you made Orthodoxy accessible to me. Before then I had assumed that it was a form of Christianity to be found only in a museum... You normalized Orthodoxy for me. Your podcasts were the first I ever listened to here on AFR. My 3 kids and myself will be catechumens very soon. I thank God for you. With love from South Africa!"

Dear Fr.,

I am a lifelong Orthodox Christian from NJ. I have been listening to your podcasts for two years and they bring me closer to the Orthodox Way. You are a comforting presence on my drive to work everyday. Thank you for all you do for us.

Hi Fr.,

Between 2 and 3 years ago I asked a couple of questions about salvation in Orthodoxy, and you were kind enough to address them on a Sunday evening's episode of Faith Encouraged Live. You were one of the first sources I'd seen on YouTube when I started studying the Orthodox faith in 2015, nearly 20 years after reading a few Orthodox books in seminary and studying church history.

*It's been a long journey, but I was made a catechumen this past Sunday at (a local) Orthodox Church. At 57, it's a case of 'better late than never.'
Thanks for all you do,"*

These are just a few of the messages we have received since we started our use of digital media to share our Orthodox Faith with others.

Faith Encouraged Ministries started out as an outreach on YouTube, sharing our weekly homilies with those who had requested to receive them. That was in 2012 and since then we have had almost 300,000 views of our YouTube channel and added over 230 videos with over 3500 subscribers to our YouTube channel. We also produce a weekday program called Faith Encouraged Daily that is both written and recorded for audio. Since 2015, we have produced over 850 five-minute daily devotionals based on the lectionary of our Archdiocese. In addition, we produce a twice monthly internet radio program called Faith Encouraged LIVE that airs for 90 minutes and allows for call in comments and questions. Since September of 2014, we have done over 65 live call in programs.

In addition to our media work, we've recently published the book, "A Faith Encouraged" and produced a 16-part video series called "A Journey to Fullness." This video project was designed to assist local parishes in introducing the Orthodox Faith to seekers and inquirers and to further catechetical instruction to our faithful.

Our Media Ministry Purpose

The purpose of this media outreach is two-fold: First, To allow the Orthodox Faith to show up in the digital and media worlds so that seekers can at least have the option to know about the Orthodox Faith; and, Secondly, To encourage our Orthodox faithful to constantly learn about their faith and to have their faith strengthened by a daily interaction with the Holy Scriptures.

Our experience confirms what many studies about Faith and Digital Media are saying: More and more people are consuming media on their smartphones and internet devices. This is especially true of our youth.

As a former Protestant pastor and someone who worked in Evangelical Protestant media ministries in the United States, I know firsthand that heterodox groups are spending a great deal of time and money developing content for the Digital Media world. One of the last ministries I worked for had an annual budget of 92 million dollars! We spent half of that budget buying airtime on radio and TV stations around the world to spread the message that we were proclaiming. We translated our media products into over 50 languages, and even had ministry offices in Europe and the Middle East!

And increasingly our own Orthodox faithful are consuming these religious media products. The reality is if we do not show up in this media world, we passively communicate that our message is not as relevant or applicable to the lives of the faithful as these heterodox voices. We cede the media ground to those who would

unintentionally, or even intentionally, distort the Orthodox Christian Message. We can speak out against these ideas and messages all we want, but unless we then provide the media tools to our faithful priests and congregations to offer the fullness of the Faith, we are leaving vital tools unused and ministry responsibilities unmet.

Of course, this is not our intention. Normal Orthodox history is filled with the creative and beautiful use of all kinds of communication devices to share the timeless beauty of Orthodoxy with everyone. Our chanting, our iconography, our writings, our preaching, our architecture, and dozens of other examples all serve to communicate the sublime theology of Orthodoxy to everyone regardless of their education, their economic status, their culture, or their background.

Unfortunately, Orthodoxy today is perceived to be missing from this wider technological world. Why should this age be any different than all the ages before when we Orthodox assumed all these tools were meant to be redeemed and sanctified by their use to share the Gospel, even if the evil one had used these tools to blind humanity!

Challenges and Opportunities

What we have discovered at Faith Encouraged Ministries is that the consequences of this media presence gives us opportunities and challenges. The opportunity is to strengthen the Faithful and give them a language to talk to their non-Orthodox family and friends about their Faith. The opportunity to proactively communicate the Orthodox Faith so that the detractors of the Orthodox Faith are not the only voices others hear. The opportunity to introduce the timeless beauty of Orthodoxy to an increasingly seeking Western world. And to invite these seekers to find their local parish for worship and catechism.

Our own experience with these opportunities have led to the repurposing of ideas I used in my former media efforts. Excellence in communication principles are true across the board. This means we have been committed to ensuring that this media outreach is not merely a one-way stream. We encourage our listeners to communicate with us through email or responses to our blog posts. We have assistants who are dedicated to reading these responses and communicating with those who reach out to us. We value their feedback and direct them, when necessary, to other resources and to their local Orthodox parish so that they are never under the false impression that the disembodied “voice” is all they need. We strive to create a serious and comprehensive communications model and plan to address the purpose of our outreach in the first place: to connect men and women with parish communities where they can grow in their devotion and discipleship as Orthodox Christians.

This means a commitment on our part to build strong communications across the spectrum of those who participate in our work. An annual Communications Audit is just one tool we employ to make sure we are following the normal Orthodox commitment to creativity, excellence and devotion. The reality is modern media consumers are used to and expect a sophisticated level of media production and an attention to excellence.

We also understand that the use of this media work requires appropriate funding. So, we have created effective models to allow those who believe in our vision to support the work of the media ministry. By creating opportunities for individual donors to participate in the funding of our projects, we offer these persons a tangible way to be active in a shared ministry goal. This serves to actually invigorate these faithful in personal commitment to ministry and creates a real sense of accomplishment among our supporters. But this also necessitates having support personnel to make sure our donors are kept informed about the ministry and how their support serves to make the ministry possible. These are principles that have been learned and practiced by most non-profit organizations. This also means that we are committed to transparency in reporting funding and spending to ensure that the integrity of the ministry serves the reputation of the Faith. Annual reports with financial details and episcopal oversight serve to maintain the focus necessary to do media ministry well and with integrity.

This leads us to other challenges such as how to deal with offering pastoral care remotely to seekers who have questions, to the Faithful who have questions and have pastoral concerns, and to detractors who wish to dispute the message of the Faith. Of course, this is not a new problem. The writings of the Fathers and the Saints often tell of spiritual fathers who wrote letters to their spiritual children who were far away. And church history is full of encyclicals and communications meant to inform and protect the Faithful from heresy and false teachings.

Our unique challenge in today's technology is the immediacy of the media, the ubiquitous nature of the media, and the obscurity this media tends to foster.

For the Digital Media world, the immediacy of it all requires serious contemplation and discipline. This is the greatest challenge we have experienced in our own use of these media tools to serve the message of the Church. In this modern communication world, the luxury of time is often missing. Messages fly about in seconds in what used to take months! Images appear in moments in what would have taken days of painstaking work to produce. The speed at which all of this bombards the Faithful is certainly meant by the Evil One to overwhelm us, to flood the mind and intoxicate the soul with the

delusions of the passions. And that is exactly what happens all too often to our own faithful.

But that should not suggest to us this media should be avoided or abandoned because it is used wrongly. It should do for us what all these challenges have always done: Drive us humbly to consider how we can take that which was meant to do evil and turn it to good.

Conferences like this offer us opportunities to learn from one another. Our Orthodox theology offers us protection from allowing the passions to rule us in our responses, and regular participation in confession with a spiritual father keeps us focused on ministry instead of ego.

Another challenge that requires us to respond is the ubiquitous nature of the media. Our smartphones have become miniature TV studios. All one has to do is look at the many content creators on YouTube, and then learn that some of these content creators are actually generating millions of dollars in revenue to see the vast implications of this reach of media into our everyday lives. While we may complain about such, and we may even wish this were not the case, an escape from reality is not the Orthodox Way. To be sure, our spiritual fathers are right to warn us of the unruly passions that are excited by this media flood in our lives. We are called to help our faithful cultivate the power of silence for their spiritual health. But, we also must “In meekness instructing those that oppose themselves; if God peradventure will give them repentance to the acknowledging of the truth” as St. Paul instructs us in 2 Timothy 2:25. We Orthodox cannot justify an escape into our own delusion or denial and allow spiritually suffering people to be consumed by the monster of media without a glimmer of hope from us!

A final challenge we take seriously is the occasion this anonymous media provides to hide from others and ourselves. This purposeful obscurity invites all kinds of passions to run undisciplined in our lives. The ability to create a false persona online deepens the sickness of individualism in our world and deludes the user into thinking he has escaped notice. Not only does this create delusion in the user, but it reinforces a growing problem in our digital media world of actually fostering isolation and the crushing power of loneliness. While the media has claimed to create “online” communities, the reality is one of devastating isolation and the actual depersonalizing of ourselves and others. This feeds the sickness of hatred and tribalism that runs rampant in our world. The false promise of this digital media to “bring us together” then creates feelings of loss and disappointment that only reinforces the isolation and spiritual illness.

This is why the central aspect of our use of this media is to foster face to face communion. At every opportunity we reinforce the necessity of parish community, of the face to face relationship with a confessor, and of Eucharistic and liturgical participation to mitigate the dangers of this disembodied media.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Digital Media world is not going away. If anything, it is growing at such a rate that only a purposeful and creative focus is going to allow us to make sure Orthodoxy is faithfully communicated to an ever-shrinking media world. Our Faith has always been creative and committed to communicating the Gospel by every means available. In fact, the history of the Orthodox Christian Faith is settled on the reality that Orthodoxy has always had a Public Voice, a Public message of life and hope and salvation.

The challenge is as it has always been, learning the sober wisdom of the Faith so that we can properly discern what our Public Voice is to be and how to properly discern the generation we are called to serve with this life-creating message. Only then will we approach the growing technological tools available to everyone in a peaceful and joyous gratitude to God for giving us the ability to “speak the truth in love” to the whole world.

St. Paul reminds us “For God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind.” 2 Timothy 1:7

Our people are not helped by us reacting timidly to the challenges before us, nor is this the normal Orthodox response to the darkness of our world. We Orthodox have a long and treasured history of taking even the tools of the Evil One and turning them for the good of humanity and the glory of God, “for the life of the world.”

This Digital Media World requires our best creativity, compassion, and fidelity to insure the timeless message of the Faith does what it has always done in every generation: Make men and women by grace what Christ is by nature!

Thank you.