

COMMUNICATING CHRIST TODAY: CONNECTING WITH THE MILLENNIAL AND 'GEN Z' MINDSETS

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Communication involves several components that we need to seriously consider: first of all, the *sender* who encodes the *message* by choosing the *medium* through which the message is relayed from the sender to the receiver. The *receiver*, in turn, analyses the message in his context and interprets it in ways both intended and unintended by the sender. Finally, the *feedback* indicates how well the message was received. Any attempt to communicate Christ today starts from understanding the mindset of today's generation of young people. This short essay will focus on this.



A generation is a group that could be identified by their year of birth and significant events that shape their personality, values, expectations, behavioural qualities, and motivational skills. Sociologists call the *Baby Boomer* generation those born between 1943 and 1960. The *Generation X* are those born between 1961 and 1979. *Millennials* (also called *Generation Y*) are those born between 1980 and 2000. The *Generation Z* are those born after 2000.

The *senders* are the Salesian pastor-educators and youth ministers. The *receivers* are the youth and young adults today who are mainly millennials and Generation Z. Hence, this presentation will focus on understanding their mindset in order to discover ways of communicating to them our *message*, Jesus Christ. We cannot close our eyes to the reality of the 'digital divide', which reflects the huge and growing social inequality between those who have easy access to the Internet and those who do not, especially many young people. Thus, an important response to this essay is to compare what is presented here with the reader's own context.

THE MILLENNIALS

Today millennials are about 41-20 years old. They learnt using technology and became dependent on it at an earlier age than other previous generations. Younger millennials could not even imagine life without smartphones and internet. They belong to a generation that is so connected through social media. They live in an age when one post could reach countless peoples across linguistic, cultural and geographic barriers. This has created in them the desire to have all the information they want that will provide instant answers and instant feedback.

Millennials want to be involved by being given the opportunity to share their thoughts because they like to share ideas and choose the best one. They want to be part of the conversation by listening and speaking. When their opinions are listened to, they feel valued and will be ready commit themselves to something they feel part of. Millennials want their faith to be holistically integrated into their life, including technology.



Millennials are the *app* generation. Apps have become a means for them to communicate, process information, purchase goods or even read Scriptures and pray. They are tech savvy who use apps up to two hours a day. They want to be discovered. They are optimistic and desire to share, with preference to communicate with texts. They are focused on the 'now' but tend to be idealistic.

THE GENERATION Z

Today those of the Generation Z are those who are 21 years old and younger. They are the first who have the internet readily available to them. They are digital natives because they have been exposed to the internet, social networks and mobile systems from earliest age. They use social sites to socialize without distinguishing friends they meet on-line and friends in the physical world. For them, the virtual world is as real as the physical world. They are always connected; for them there is no offline anymore. They are vigorous contributors and high consumers of on-line content. They prefer on-line social sites to communicate and interact with people especially using images. They prefer to participate and remain connected via technology at their fingertips. They are creative, realistic and focused on the future. They have a broad awareness about important issues and events and have a great desire to search for the truth. But they want to choose and discover the truth for themselves. In fact, the search for truth is at the centre of their characteristic behaviour and consumption patterns.



Those of the Generation Z use the social media networks like Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, Instagram, Tiktok, Tumblr to obtain information about the social concerns, health and nutrition, spirituality, etc. But they are also heavy users of anonymous social media platforms like Snapchat, Secret, Whisper, where any incriminating images disappear almost instantly. With vast amount of information at their disposal, they are more pragmatic and less idealistic than the millennials. Their high on-line reliance could risk to too much sharing of personal information in the virtual world and to internet addiction. Their character is moulded by what they post about themselves on-line and what others post and assess about them. A great majority of them in all continents declare themselves to be religious but not necessarily identifying themselves to a religion: they believe without belonging, others belong without believing. Those who claim not to belong to any specific religion normally come from families with no religious faith or who are lukewarm Christians. They are much less religious than the millennials.

THE SOCIAL MEDIA

It is true that the social media could in some way hinder authentic interpersonal relationships. These could also be used as a platform to distribution and access to materials that could cause moral, social and spiritual harm. The truth of the matter is that any medium has the potential to be used for evil. It is true that the social media has been used, for example, to globalise populism and to help spark revolutions like the Arab Spring and the yellow vest protests in France. Yet, the social media has also allowed people to stay connected globally, empower each of us to update each other what is happening in our lives, share powerful ideas, and invite people to know Jesus Christ. The social media have become our virtual courtyard. Therefore, it is important that we move

from demonising the medium, to educating young people to its proper use and to developing its potentials to evangelise.



COMMUNICATING CHRIST

Credible witness is an important condition for communicating Christ. In the virtual world, witness implies *visibility* (we visibly manifest our Catholic identity), *truth* (we ensure that we are bearers of the truth and not of fake news) and *credibility* (the images we present reinforce the message we want to communicate). Faith needs to be presented to millennials and to the Generation Z in new and engaging ways. This, in turn, will open possibilities for them

to share their faith with their peers. We should resist the temptation to bombard the social media with religious messages and images. This will actually drive away a big number of young people. *Initial proclamation* is not about Christian doctrines to be taught. It is about fostering an overwhelming and exhilarating experience which is capable of stirring up the desire to search the truth and an interest in the person of Jesus. This, ultimately, leads to an initial adhesion to Him, or the revitalisation of faith in Him. Initial proclamation is that spark that leads to conversion. This choice for Christ is the *feedback* to the *message*. It is then followed by the process of evangelisation through catechumenate and systematic catechesis. Without initial proclamation that brings about a personal option for Christ, any effort to evangelise will be sterile. Initial proclamation is the foundation for a new evangelisation. Thus, the challenge for every Salesian pastor-educator, for every youth minister, is not making content for the social media. This is a temptation that has to be resisted strongly. The challenge is to train and accompany millennials and Generation Z themselves so that they can create faith-based content for themselves and their peers on the social media that can stir interest in knowing the person of Jesus Christ. Indeed, today the social media is a privileged forum to communicate Christ to young people. It is up to each of us to use it with missionary creativity!

FOR REFLECTION AND SHARING

- **What is the mindset of the young people in my context?**
- **What can I add or correct to the essay based on my own experience?**
- **I share a best practice in my context in communicating Christ to young people using the social media.**



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