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Texting God. SMS and Religion in the Philippines

Introduction

No digital technology has probably caught the imagination of Filipinos more than the cellular phone. Five years since SMS-capable (short messaging system) units appeared in the market in 1999, the use of cellphone spread more than did other media like personal computers.

„The Philippines is now the texting capital of the world. Meryll Lynch reported that for the first quarter of 2001, there were approximately 7.2 million cellphone subscribers in the Philippines: 2.9 million (40.6 percent) of them were held by Globe Telecom, 3.4 million (48.5 percent) by Smart Communications and 788,000 (10.9) by Pilipinas Telephone Corp. (Smart’s sister company). For this period, the average SMS transmission was about 65.4 million a day. In 2002, Nokia estimates that there are around 10 million cellphones in the Philippines, transmitting about 100 million text messages a day.“ (Pertierra et al., 2002, p.88)

„The Philippines isn’t called SMS capital of the world for nothing. Ever since the beginning of SMS, it has become a vital part in the Filipino lifestyle. The SMS also helped overthrow the corrupt Estrada government in 2001. By 2005 the major telecommunications companies expect that the number of mobile phones/subscribers will rise to 49 million, almost 60 percent of the population.“ (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Communications_in_the_Philippines)

Among the published writings on cellphone and its social impact is one by social anthropologist Raul Pertierra and his colleagues (2002). The book „Txting Selves, Cellphones and Modernity“ reported the results of a survey of some 700 cellphone users from all over the country. In it are stories of varied cellphone uses from the pragmatic kind - how it aids business and professional work - to the pursuit of social, legal, and political causes. What is revealing in this 2002 study is the effect of the technology on the „self“ - how certain people are empowered by it and how low self-esteem apparently got the necessary boost through cellphone use (pp. 63–86). This paper tries to examine yet another use of the cellphone, that is, the spread of Christian faith or what the Catholic Church calls „evangelization“ not by voice calls but by texting.

The Philippines is known to have the largest Catholic population in Asia - second to East Timor. Eighty percent of its 77 million population pledges allegiance to the Holy See in the Vatican. With the many SMS services offered to Filipinos including religious services, it is interesting

to know how young Catholics in the country use their cellphones. Are religious SMS services used and if at all, how far are they being used? Or do young Filipinos show a leaning towards alternative, secular SMS services?

For this paper, a survey was conducted with 482 students of the University of Santo Tomas, a Catholic university in the capital Manila. A questionnaire was administered from September-December 2004 to 186 male (38 percent of the sample) and 296 female students (62 percent) whose age ranges from 15 to 24 years. Interviews were also conducted. The sample is a purposive sample therefore, the statistics given in the analysis are indicative rather than conclusive.

The results, however, are quite revealing and might help pastoral ministry with the young. It was found, for example, that only one third of the sample subscribe to religious SMS services. One third of the students additionally subscribe to „mobile chat services“ - the mobile version of Internet chatrooms where strangers meet and discover friends and romantic matches. But a full third of chat subscribers, or one-tenth of the sample, apparently find more than just romantic matches but sexual partners as well.

In the survey it appears that young Filipinos are in need of *relating* with other people. Relating goes much further than mere *connectivity* provided by cellphones. The study points to mutual sharing and openness as having positive consequences for ministry than mere sending of Biblical and inspirational quotes to young people.

The one-way sending of quotes, however, should continue as it is helpful for evangelizing work. But complementing this with some form of interpersonal exchange will have a greater impact on young people's lives. Connection, relation, openness and dialogue are the building blocks of *community*, and community after all is what it means to be „church“.

Cellphone and the Self

Communication scholar Rich Ling describes in „Mobile Connection“ (2004) the relationship of teens with their cellphones as providing security, allowing „anytime-anywhere-for-whatever-reason type of access,“ and bounding tightly together their respective social networks. „Its use as a type of lifeline and its use in coordination of everyday life are nothing if not functional and instrumental“ (p. 85). The university survey confirms this, even suggesting that the cellphone has become an extension of the self.

All of the respondents were found to have cellphones. Eight out of ten

have owned a cellphone for more than two years, and have changed their units at least twice within that period. Practical uses of the technology given include „Linking to family“ (100 percent) meaning that young people these days are in better contact with their parents. Conversely, parents now have a better way of tracking down the activities of their youngsters.

Seven out of ten (70 percent) respondents cited the convenient use of the unit's alarm clock in keeping appointments and beating deadlines. While cellphones help them „meet new friends“ (68 percent), they also bring relative ease to meeting the demands of academic life. A majority of the respondents said that cellphones are a „necessity.“ More than half of the young people surveyed said their cellphones are „a part of me“ (54 percent), and a good „companion“ (52 percent). This means today cellphones are no longer an accessory but something like clothing. Leaving home without it is unthinkable. „You feel naked without a cellphone,“ an informant said.

Pertierra and his colleagues (2002) gave two reasons why it is necessary for Filipinos to own a cellphone. One reason has to do with the inadequate landline telephone facilities especially in remote parts of the country. Another reason, and this has more relevance to this study because the sample population is right in the capital city, is the need for *mobile communication*. Unlike stationary landline installations, cellphones offer the ease of anytime, anywhere communication.

A third reason is the need for a companion in an increasingly individualistic world. Filipinos seek a kind of „grounding“ amid the hustle and bustle of the modern world. That certain grounding is sought in being constantly connected with parents, relatives and friends using the cellphone.

„Cellphones do not provide any viable answers to the problems of modernity but they give us the means to share our anxieties, uncertainties, trivialities and even banalities with others. They help us navigate and make sense of the virtual, real and imaginary worlds that we inhabit.“ (Pertierra et al., 2002, p. 151)

Communications Professor Paul Levinson refers in „Cellphone“ (2004) to humans becoming *mobile hearths* in the wake of modern media like cellphone. Mobile hearths are able to receive and produce messages defying both time and distance. „The result of all these capacities instantly at hand is that the contents of our minds, including ideas, impulses, strategies, become a fingertip away from implementation. In a world of *omni-communication*, thoughts and ideas are easier to enact.“ (pp. 52-53)

SMS: A New Way of Communication

Mobile phone users in the country, especially young people, are generally hooked into texting. In the university survey, only eight percent of the students expressed disliking for the cellphone's SMS feature. Forty-four percent take a neutral stance, being neither affected positively nor negatively by texting. But close to half of the sample population (48 percent) say they actually „enjoy“ exchanging text messages.

In early 2000, academicians discussed how SMS might influence the proper introduction of young people to the English language. The way messages are encoded into the tiny device, in most cases ignoring proper syntax and spelling, was seen as revolutionary if not highly irregular.

The practice involves truncating letters so that meaning is deciphered on the basis of sounds produced pronouncing the remaining letters of supposed words. A text message with the letters „wer r u nw,“ for example, asks the recipient of his or her whereabouts („where are you now“). The text „mt u @ d ofc 6pm“ gives specific details of a planned meeting between the communicating parties („meet you at the office 6 pm“). Morning and afternoon greetings are simply encoded „G'am,“ „gud am,“ „G'pm“ or „gud pm.“ „Smileys“ are often included to compensate for the lack of means of showing emotions. Information technology experts call these „emoticons“ or icons that represent emotions. Thus, a smile can be encoded as „:-)“ or the German umlaut for the letter „u.“

Some people, especially older groups and those that are adept in American English, insist on the correct spelling of words. But they lose the advantage of encoding as much information as needed, not to mention the economy of lesser punches in the cellphone keypad.

Communication scholar Walter Ong sees this age of computers and cellphones as part of the „secondary orality“ stage in the development communication technology where the dominant „sensorium“ or the „material practices of communication in each culture“ involves sight and sound, voice, image and music. (O'Leary in Dawson and Cowan, 2004, pp. 38-41) This stage dates back to the onset of printing technology and has the aspects of both orality („primary orality“ of preliterate cultures which principally uses sound) and literacy. In a computer-dominated world like ours, these two elements „are combined into a new, hybrid form of communication that, in the words of one networker, is both talking and writing yet isn't completely either one. It's talking by writing. It's writing because you type it on a keyboard and people read it. But because of the ephemeral nature of luminescent letters on a screen, and because it has such a quick - sometimes instant - turn-around, it's more like talking“ (Coate, 1992)“ (ibid.)

Cellphone as Inspiration

In the 2002 nation-wide survey by Pertierra, eight out of ten respondents (79.7 percent) said the arrival of a text message „gives pleasure.“ In the university survey, thirty percent of the students say the arrival of a text message „makes me feel important,“ and a third (33 percent) admits to being „inspired“ by it. While the latter response may conjure up romantic connotations, we cannot entirely discount its religious dimension. In fact, many of pre-typed messages, so-called „forwarded messages,“ have strong religious bases, or are themselves inspired by some religious thought. Even simple morning greetings are loaded with references to the Divine as the following examples show:

<p><Example 1> 7 RULES 2 BE HAPPY: 1>never hate. 2>don't worry. 3>live simple. 4>expect a little. 5>give a lot. 6>always smile. 7>have Christ n ur heart God bless</p>	<p><Example 2> Without „JESUS CHRIST“, days are „moanday“ „tearsday“ „wasteday“ „thirstday“ „fightday“ „shatterday“ & „sinday“ so allow Him to be w/ „U“ everyday..! GOD BLESS U</p>	<p><Example 3> Frenshp s Imposible 2 kip w/in urself ... It will always xtend as far as it can reach 2 touch harts ... Exactly d way u touchd myn ... tnx 4 d frenshp ...</p>
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The 2002 Filipino study also revealed that nearly half (45.9 percent) of the total number of forwarded messages received daily are „inspirational,“ and half (24 percent) fall under a so-called „informative“ category. Only 16 percent of the messages are labeled „humorous.“ These often comes with sexual references regarded as funny and during national political exercises, satirical treatments of prominent political figures.

Faith via SMS

The late Pope John Paul II, staunch promoter of modern media use for evangelization, delivered his 2004 Midnight Mass and Christmas Day messages via cellphones in Italy. This was made possible through collaboration with the Italian state-broadcaster and two popular cellphone operators in the country, *Vodafone* and *Telecom Italia Mobile*. Although the service was enabled for third generation cellphones only, it shows the utility of the medium for faith-based communications. (Curnow, Robyn: "Dial-a-Prayer, upgraded" in „International Herald Tribune“, January 17, 2005, p. 12)

In England, a non-denominational Church catering to the gay and lesbian community has used text messaging to extend care and support for its clientele. The project involves two-way communication where texters actually interact with a pastor of the Metropolitan Community Church in Manchester. (ibid.)

Islamic groups also use wireless technology to maintain contacts with their followers. In Britain, the Islamic Prayer Alert Service sends out more than 70000 messages a month to remind Muslim subscribers of the times for daily prayers and quotations from the Qu'ran. (ibid.) (For more information about SMS and Religion around the world, visit <http://www.textually.org/textually/archives/cat_sms_and_religion.htm>).

In the Philippines, cellphones are used for a wide range of purposes from high-profile politics, propelling a change in government in 2001 and a failed coup attempt in 2002, to the rather low-key Catholic education and evangelization. Religious texts sometimes take a high-profile status when universal concerns are pushed forward. Whenever John Paul II's health was endangered, forwarded messages circulated requesting prayers for his recovery. Text messages also flooded during the Pope's final hours calling for prayers and invoking Divine intervention. Requests to light candles in churches and in homes were also announced via radio, TV and text messaging.

Text greetings have become a custom among Filipinos. They get messages across easily, and texting is considerably cheaper than voice calls. Here are few sample text messages circulated last Christmas and Easter:

<p><Example 4> This CHRISTMAS, I wish u not Just smiles but Laughter,not Just happiness but Pure Joy; Not just wealth but Heaven's Treasures;& not just silence But God's Peace!</p>	<p><Example 5> D Risen Lord is NOT a relic of a past 2 b cherishd. He is a living presence 2 xperience & share. Let's live &proclaim His msge of Peace 2 all always &evrywher!</p>	<p><Example 6> J-E-S-U-S- Can't b spelled w/out -U- Bcause -U- are the reason y He gave up Hs Life on d CRoss. AS He Loves me, He Loves -U- too!! HAPPY EASTER!!</p>
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One wonders where such forwarded messages come from, and who instigates them. To this day, no one knows exactly. Some informants allege that mobile phone companies themselves send these out to few subscribers for re-circulation. Such messages include „chain texts,“ prayer re-

quests in exchange for miracles or to avert some dooms-day prediction, to keep people hooked on their keypads and spend money credits.

<p><Example 7> Sr Reodica predicts Intensity 9 ertquake On apr14 @ 5pm. Pls pray 2 save us from dis trial. Pass on!!!</p>	<p><Example 8> 2day is Mama Mary's feast day. Pray 1 our father 3 hail marys 1 glory be. Pass on to 5 frens & xpect a miracle 2nyt. Don't ignore!!</p>
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Text manuals, however, can be easily found in bookstores and anyone with a hint of piety and time to spare could devise a relevant greeting and send to friends. A good return rate is always assured, sometimes with impressive and touching thoughts ready for re-circulation. On Palm Sunday 2005 with no manual at hand the greeting below (Example 9) was sent to ten of the author's friends. On the very same day, seven replies were received. Three were messages of a similar nature; four were notes of thanks.

<p><Example 9> JESUS enters r Own temples 2day. Lets pray: 'Lord, come w/ d whip 2 cleans me of everythn dat displeases u AMEN'</p>

In 2001, a multinational firm specializing in wireless technology pioneered a catechism project through SMS, which has gained support from Church authorities in the Philippines. The project evolved in three stages. At first, it was a „religious chatroom“ accessible through a four-digit access code. The service was soon discontinued because some texters joined seeking sexual gratification rather than moral or religious education. It was likened to Internet chatrooms where visitors play on chance to meet romantic or sexual partners online.

By mid-2002, the same project took on counseling as its service. Again, it was short-lived because texters with questionable motives and pathological cases came in. By the end of that year to this day, the service simply sends Biblical quotations to subscribers. In addition to a main „Quote“ service, two key figures in the Philippine-church were employed

each having their own key-word access with the same four-digit code and short reflections for their own subscribers. The four-digit code became a one-time subscription pass to receive quotes on a daily basis, for which standard texting rates apply. Interactivity was changed into what is referred as „push technology“ where messages are sent from a single source to subscribers with little mechanism for feedback. An insider says that feedback is possible, but whatever is received goes directly to the server and not to the priest-writers of the reflections. Often, feedback is used for marketing purposes alone and not to establish further contact with subscribers.

Mobile phone service providers and some religious congregations later followed suit and competed head-on offering different kinds of service. A few replicate the sending of Biblical quotes while others attempted more elaborate practices like mobile versions of two of the most cherished Catholic prayers - the Rosary, and Way of the Cross. Only one service provides counseling service „SEEK 2346“ by the Jesuits in the Philippines.

The university survey aimed to find out if the students are aware of these religious SMS services, and whether they subscribe to them. The results show that about four out of ten (43 percent) are aware of at least one existing service, the most popular being „Quote 2978.“ Interestingly, however, half of that or two out of ten (20 percent) of the students actually subscribe to it. And in total, a little over third of the entire sample (38 percent) subscribes to faith-based texting services.

Table 1: Religious SMS Service - Awareness and Subscription

<i>Service</i>	<i>Aware of</i>	<i>Subscribe to</i>
Quote 2978	43 percent	20 percent
Mobile Rosary	18 percent	6 percent
Reflect Txt	20 percent	6 percent
AMEN 2971	12 percent	4 percent
Mobile Way of the Cross	12 percent	3 percent
Reflect MMS	7 percent	3 percent
SEEK 2346	11 percent	2 percent
SEEK 29766	4 percent	2 percent
Reuter 2978	4 percent	1 percent
Soc 2978	2 percent	1 percent

Those who knew of „Quote 2978“ and other religious SMS, but are not active subscribers, must have learned about the service through word-

of-mouth or through advertising. One of the priests writing reflections maintains a column in a major daily newspaper. The students may have aborted their subscription for one of the reasons given below. (Table 2) These are the top-six reasons for disliking religious SMS services. Among other reasons, the students are not so appreciative of „one-way“ communication where quotes are simply sent to them (12 percent). A small number (5 percent) also said „cellphone is *not* for religion.“ Although the total percentage is given here, male and female responses were separately tabulated and found to actually have no difference. Male and female students share the same views about religious SMS services.

Table 2: „What I don't like about religious SMS services?“

Expensive	18 percent
Passive	13 percent
Too „catholic“	13 percent
Logos (downloadable graphics as accessory)	12 percent
Boring	12 percent
One-way form of communication	12 percent

Subscribers of religious SMS, meanwhile, gave their reasons for liking the service. In addition to the list in Table 3, the students also said they like religious wallpapers (16 percent), similar to logos, which they can save and display on their cellphone monitors. Ringtones with religious flavor are another favorite (16 percent), which again can be saved and used as melody for incoming calls or texts. A few of the students (13 percent) cited the fact that religious messages are not only inspiring, they give some form of „entertainment“ as well (13 percent).

Table 3: „What I like about religious SMS services?“

Inspiring	36 percent
Prayer guides	28 percent
Relaxing	25 percent
Deepens faith	21 percent
Logos	18 percent

The point in all this discussion is that while mobile phones lend themselves to better and increased *connectivity*, certainly for one-way communication from distant and at times anonymous senders, receivers in the

other end are seeking a *connection*. Connectivity and connection have been distinguished in „Wired for Ministry“ quite clearly by theology professor John P. Jewell as one that involves technical means (connectivity); in this case, the cellphone. The other (connection) has something to do with relation and relationship, the building blocks of community (2004, pp. 15-25).

Jewell, a pastoral worker and an information technology expert, made such distinction to shed light to the use of new media, particularly the Internet, in Church ministry. Articles have been written about the technology as if it is the final solution to all that hinders the task of proclamation. Its utility is found in its ability to deliver messages far beyond the reaches of the pulpit or the limited broadcasts of electronic media. Jewell proposes that pastors regard the Internet, and other new media like the cellphone, as bringing to fore new ways of communication and not exclusively as *the* only means to communicate lest he warns of the danger of *imposing* the technology instead of *integrating* it in ministry. Rather than exhausting ways of doing pastoral and ministerial work online, it could be beneficial to think of new ways of being religious and expressing faith. (ibid.)

The cellular phone proves to be an effective conduit of Biblical and inspirational texts. In the Philippines, catechism has found a special niche in the texting market. But fostering relational exchanges rather than one-way transmission of religious texts may have a better impact and could elevate the whole enterprise of religion propagation to another more significant level.

Lay leaders have expressed concern over the youth's increasing patronage to Internet chatrooms like <www.friendster.com>, <www.adult-finder.com>, <Yahoo! Messenger>, and other match-finding websites. Indeed, a growing number of Filipino youngsters are getting hooked to these services opening doors to sexual adventures or mis-adventures. Mobile phone giant Globe Telecom has recently introduced a mobile version of <www.friendster.com> and <Yahoo! Messenger> with exactly the same dynamics as its root online versions. As a consequence, the Church is called upon to devise new and creative ways of communicating with its most valued sector, the young.

Conclusion

The late Pope John Paul II said the „new culture of communication“ is marked by new languages, new techniques and new psychology. „Therefore“, he said, „it is not enough to use modern means of communication to communicate the Gospel message“ but pastors and Church leaders

should also find ways to „integrate that message into the new culture created by modern means of communication.“ (cf. *Redemptoris Missio*, no. 37c)

The cellular phone goes side by side with the Internet as the new icons of modernity. It is used to forge and maintain relationships, and not simply to send and receive messages. It might serve the purpose to re-think existing religious SMS services to cater to specific user needs especially that of young people.

But while Church experts are grinding their creative mills on the next religious SMS service it might be good to look for ways to improve Church services *offline* as well. People might get so enticed to go to Church after an inspiring text message, only to be disappointed with a different scenario inside the hallowed grounds.

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