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And Then There Was Zoom: A Catholic Theological Examination on the Development of Digital Youth Ministry

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Abstract: Although some youth programs have found significant success in expanding their ministerial outreach through the use of digital technology, a significant question remains: can spiritual communion among youth remain flourishing in isolation or outside the ‘brick and mortar’ walls of the church? The following paper is a practical theological analysis focused upon defining digital youth ministry and the theological underpinnings that provide a framework for its development. Sketched out through the lens of American Catholicism, this paper will especially make use of the sacramental and Trinitarian language of ‘communion’ and accompaniment in framing its exploration digital youth ministry and how it can keep young people engaged through periods of isolation caused by crises like that of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: Catholic church; communion; digital theology; youth ministry

1. Introduction

In early March 2020, as youth programs across the U.S. were preparing youth for their annual Lenten journeys, Catholic parishes and schools abruptly ‘shut down’ because of the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic. Subsequently, youth and other faith formation programs, to maintain the communal and educational aspects of their programs, quickly had to find effective digital platforms that would help fill the void left behind by unfinished 2020 youth program agendas and sacramental preparations. Several months later after the onslaught of the pandemic, youth ministry has yet to recover or regain the ground it lost in its efforts of connecting with youth in community and faith. Indeed, youth ministry still continues to struggle in finding and navigating meaningful ways to engage young believers who have been digitally siloed.¹

Prior to the pandemic, although Catholic youth ministry struggled to combat disaffiliation among baptized youth, most youth programs were thriving in parishes across the U.S. Catholic youth conferences, like that of the Steubenville or Lifeteen conferences², consistently filled large convention halls and sport stadiums across the U.S. with youth participants eager to hear the Good News and connect with other believers like them. At most of U.S. parishes, however, youth ministry limited its engagement to in-person meetings, mission trips, or other social activities. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, boxed-program producers and other creative local youth ministers developed U.S. Catholic

¹ In addition to the sources referenced, this article also leans on new research out of the field of digital theology and virtual communion. For those interested in the additional resources used to frame this article’s engagement with this field, see (Campbell et al. 2016; Esler 2005; Gardner and Davis 2013; Kendall 2007; Osborne 1988; Ostrowski 2006; Phillips et al. 2019; Schmidt 2020).

² For more detailed information about these conferences, visit lifeteen.com (Lifeteen) or <https://steubenvilleconferences.com/youth/> (Steubenville Youth Conferences).

youth programs according to the ministerial standards set by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) in their 1997 document for ministry with adolescents: *Renewing the Vision*. Formed out of the post-Vatican II document, *A Vision of Youth Ministry* (1976), *Renewing the Vision* still continues to serve as the foundation for most of the U.S. Catholic youth ministry programs today. Specifically, the three goals, “1. To empower young people to live as disciples of Jesus Christ in our world today; 2. To draw young people to responsible participation in the life, mission, and work of the Catholic faith community; and 3. To foster the total personal and spiritual growth of each young person,” continue to offer a visionary map of what youth ministry might look like in dioceses and parishes across the U.S. *Renewing the Vision* also outlined a variety of ministries (i.e., Ministry of Justice and Service, Ministry of Evangelization, Ministry of Community Life, etc.) that have and continue to inspire youth programs across the nation (USCCB 1997). Even though *Renewing the Vision* does not explore the specific details of ‘how’ to do the work of youth ministry, if one looks closely at any diocesan or parish youth program one will find that it is a mirror image of what *Renewing the Vision* aspired to: creating sound youth programs for the development of faithful adolescent believers who long to connect to and rest in Christ.

Although some youth programs have found significant success in expanding their ministerial outreach through the use of digital technology, in forming solid digital youth ministry approaches, there is much more work still left to be done. Before the field of youth ministry and its practitioners can pursue this work, however, we need a map of strong theological foundations in as far as it will offer sacred connections between youth, Church teaching, and the digital spaces that they inhabit. Therefore, the rest of this paper, through a qualitative analysis, will explore how the use of sacramental language, especially that of ‘communion,’ assist youth ministry in finding meaningful ways of connecting to youth to each other and Church teaching outside sacramental worship and youth gathering spaces. In this exploration, this paper will especially make use of the sacramental and Trinitarian language of ‘communion’ in framing its exploration of the development of digital youth ministry.

1.1. Research Methods

In relation to the research methods, the discourse of this paper arose out of placing digital youth ministry into conversation with the process of a “practical theological method of analysis”. Richard Osmer asserts that the primary four questions (in relation to an everyday experience one might encounter) that practical theology addresses are: (1) what is happening? (2) Why is it happening?; (3) What should happen?; and (4) How should we (scholars, practitioners, believers) respond? (Osmer 2008, p. 4). In simpler terms, the “practical theological method of analysis” is a process of: (1) outlining what is happening (see); (2) pondering what has caused the event or experience to happen (judge); and (3) exploring what one might do in reaction to the event or experience (act).³ With this in mind, this paper will use this method to:

1. Explore digital youth ministry, in relation to the Trinitarian language of ‘communion’ and accompaniment, in conversation with that of digital spheres and the field of youth ministry (see).
2. Propose why digital youth ministry is an independent ministerial approach (judge).
3. Offer a set of frameworks that may help ministers and youth programs put digital youth ministry into practice (act).

1.2. Limitations

To state that this paper is not limited in scope would be to do so in error. Thus, the primary limitation of this paper is that, as also mentioned in Section 3 (Digital Youth Ministry in Practice) the practical applications of digital youth ministry are so vast that it is not possible to explore and outline

³ To explore the complete history and development of Cardinal Joseph Cardijn’s ‘See-Judge-Act’ method of analysis, see (Stinson 2009).

them all in a single article. Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, youth leaders and practitioners have and continue to share new digital approaches across a plethora of external and internal digital platforms on an almost daily basis. Because of the constantly expanding and ever-changing landscape of digital youth ministry, a limitation of this paper is that it cannot address all ideas, conversations, and challenges that continue to arise out of the U.S. Catholic's church's quick adaptation of digital ministerial practice.

The second limitation of this paper arises out of the fact that it will not involve interviews with young people or youth ministers who are actively navigating digital youth ministry pre/post the COVID-19 pandemic. This paper will not explore the existential reality of how the faith of young people and ministerial approaches of youth ministry have changed over the pandemic and its creation of a migration from physical to digital spaces through the lens of youth and ministerial voices. Although this paper will not include the voices of youth and youth ministers, the next phase of my research will be to offer these voices a platform to speak about the digital experience of youth ministry in the pre/post pandemic age. Indeed, the full portrait of the impact that digital youth ministry has upon youth and youth ministers will remain incomplete without it.

2. Digital Youth Ministry

Outside of using social media or text messaging to stay connected to program participants and their families, or as an effort to keep them informed on when the next food drive might be, digital youth ministry largely remained a large ocean of uncharted waters. This is not to say that maps for those uncharted waters have not been discussed or created. In the final document, *Christus vivit*, of the 'Synod on Young People,' promulgated in 2018, Pope Francis addressed the digital environment in relation to building human relationships and its impact upon "the way people learn and the development of their critical sense." Francis noted the "extraordinary opportunities for dialogue, encounter, and exchange between persons" that social media offered to young people but he also cautioned how digital environments can also be ones of "loneliness, manipulation, exploitation, and violence." Digital spaces, in the words of Francis, "must find ways to pass from virtual contact to good and healthy communication" (Pope Francis 2019). Although Francis undoubtedly sketched out a good map to explore digital spaces in relation to youth ministry, *Christus vivit* does not offer the routes that youth ministry might take as it accompanies youth on their faith journey. Digital youth ministry remains a 'sketch of an idea.' A problem illuminated by the COVID-19 pandemic, a problem that the Church can no longer ignore.

In a 2018 Pew Research study on "Teens, Social Media & Technology," 40% of U.S. teens that responded to the survey shared that one of the most positive effects of social media was that it allows them to stay connected to friends and family. In the same survey, 16% of U.S. teens also shared that social media was a good place to gather information or find out the latest news. When broken down according to whether or not social media has had an overall positive or negative impact upon helping young people to connect to each other, 31% responded that it has had mostly a positive impact, 24% responded that it has had mostly a negative impact, and 45% of young people responded that social media has had neither a positive nor negative impact upon their connecting to others. The survey also found that 95% of the teens who were surveyed had access to digital spaces either via a home computer, laptop, or smartphone (Pew Research Center 2018).

Although the above findings are not surprising given how digital devices have, to a great degree, become an extension of teenage life, it is surprising to see that digital youth ministry has not developed as one might expect it to, given the usefulness young people have found digital spaces to be in building community and finding new information. Indeed, the U.S. Catholic church has been slow to adapt to

conversing with modern youth media culture.⁴ Which brings us to the question of why; how is it that in the technologically driven youth culture of today, digital youth ministry has remained undeveloped? The answer, as this paper will subsequently explore, lies within a search for defining digital youth ministry, the use of digital tools, and connecting them to communal expressions of faith.

2.1. What Is Digital Youth Ministry?

Although the literature in youth ministry has kept up well with the ever-changing digital trends and the best tools to use for digitally connecting with youth, the field of youth ministry has not conscientiously defined a cohesive definition of ‘digital youth ministry.’ The primary reason why this may be lies within how youth ministry has traditionally approached digital spaces. Youth ministry has traditionally reserved digital worlds, as alluded to before, to act as tools for the sharing of information about the next social gathering or prayer meeting. To a great degree, digital youth ministry has largely ignored that one of the most “significant aspects of the formation of young people is their understanding and practice of social relationships” (Zirschky 2015). We can find evidence of this in how youth ministry continually uses digital platforms as mere tools to share information rather than as opportunities to form young people in the faith.

An adequate definition of ‘digital youth ministry,’ therefore, should focus upon defining digital youth ministry as a ministerial act of using digital spaces to form youth in their Christian faith. According to Andrew Zirschky, a proper digital youth ministry grounds itself in seeking ways to “encourage youth” to find how to “use their devices in ways consistent with a Christian ethic of koinonia in which they ‘discern the body of Christ’” (Zirschky 2015). In addition, digital youth ministry, which is often separated from that of traditional youth ministerial practices, should not be pursued as a separate ministerial model. Digital youth ministry, in contrast, should mirror youth ministerial approaches active in the ‘brick and mortar’ spaces of the lived church. “[Virtual spaces],” in the words of Anthony Le Duc, SVD, “are no longer a place out there but integrally connected to our life so that it is becoming more artificial to make distinctions between our online and offline life” (Le Duc 2015). Virtual spaces are no longer “simple instruments of communication,” as they have developed to be “cultural environments,” which “contributes to new ways to stimulate intelligence and to tighten relationships” (Spadaro 2014). They have become such an integral part of our lives that many no longer see virtual spaces as places that separate us from reality. It is for this reason that for us to define ‘digital youth ministry’ properly we must remember to consider and reflect upon the reality that it does not occur in a vacuum or spaces void of connections to lived religious experiences, like that of koinonia.

As stated above, the overarching field of youth ministry has yet to develop a coherent definition or understanding of what digital youth ministry is. There is no denying that youth ministry programs, especially those practiced in U.S. Catholic churches, have been successful in using digital tools well. Digital youth ministry, however, is much more than using digital tools or inhabiting digital spaces as a means to minister to young people. The Church and her youth leaders should instead approach digital youth ministry as a continuation of youth ministry into and out of digital spaces. Digital youth ministry and tradition youth ministry are the same. The only difference between digital youth ministry and youth ministry as practiced in physical spaces is the context in which they are encountered and even then, their interaction with one another should be so that the environment, digital or physical, fades into the background of the ministerial work that is present. 21st century youth ministry is a hybrid model for the spiritual and religious formation of youth: physical and digital.⁵

⁴ To this point, the teachings, traditions, and doctrines of the Catholic Church are not what need to adapt or change in an effort to be more relatable to modern youth culture. Instead, this explicit point is to bring awareness to how the Church has been slow to adapt to using effective digital platforms and approaches in sharing Catholic teachings, traditions, and doctrines in the digital spaces that youth inhabit (i.e., social media, text messaging, gaming).

⁵ For a more detailed discourse on youth hybrid-identity in relation to digital and physical spaces, see (Faix 2016, pp. 65–87).

Coupled with the discourse on what digital youth ministry is not, one can conclude that a proper definition of digital youth ministry is: Digital youth ministry is the digital ministerial acts of accompanying youth in the formation of their faith and their relationships to their faith communities (koinonia) and Christ as drawn out of and into their real-life experiences of religious and spiritual practices.

As a last point and a brief answer to the question: if digital youth ministry and youth ministry are one of the same, then why is a definite definition of digital youth ministry even needed? Digital youth ministry, undoubtedly, is synonymous with youth ministry as practiced in physical spaces. However, to not separate this avenue of youth ministry out on its own would be to ignore the deep digital theological underpinnings of ministry in digital spaces. To not root digital youth ministry in digital theology or to leave it as the act of merely offering digital tools to do 'real' youth ministry is to neglect the seizing of opportunities to engage young people in the totality of the communion of persons. So, although in practice we should not separate digital youth ministry and traditional forms of youth ministry, we should explore them through the theological discourses out of their own contexts as doing so will enhance ministerial knowledge of each and offer practical answers to the question of, how might youth ministers connect to the hybrid youth of today?

2.2. Digital Communion

One of the primary reasons that the field of digital youth ministry has not gained traction as worthy of serious consideration is because of the lack of connections made between sound theological discourse and digital youth ministry. Although the field of digital theology is still under development, the scholarship it has offered over the last ten years in relation to deepening the connection between lived theological experience within digital spaces is a point that can theologically animate digital youth ministry. One specific digital theological discourse that can assist in our understanding of the deep theological underpinnings of digital youth ministry is the sacramental and Trinitarian language of communion.

At the "heart of" the Catholic Church's "self-understanding lies communion as it is the Mystery of the personal union of each human being with the divine Trinity and with the rest of mankind." The communion of persons, the 'Body of Christ,' means "that the Eucharist is where the Church expresses herself permanently in the most essential form. While present everywhere, she is yet only one, just as Christ is one". With this in mind, it is through the 'Body of Christ' that the wellspring of a communion of persons springs out through not just physical spheres, but digital ones. The sacramental language of communion is an essential underpinning for defining, understanding, and practicing digital youth ministry. Much in the same way that this "communion exists not only among the members of the pilgrim Church on earth but also between these and all who belong to the heavenly Church" ([Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 1992](#)), this communion also radically unites all of God's people in the visible and invisible spaces in which they inhabit.

In relation to the Trinity, "we see that communion in its fullness is a matter of constant, free, and unrestricted sharing of the self in love." Communion is a unique interaction between people as it is an "unrestricted exchange" of emotion, energy, sacrifice, and love ([Zirschky 2015](#)). Le Duc also offers:

Despite the perceived limitations of the Web's mediated relationships, the reality and the prevalence of such relationships require that we not dismiss them categorically but attempt to recognize their existence as well as to see how they may help expand present parameters for what it means to be in relationship. Online relationships do not always necessarily represent a desire to escape real-life relationships but in a way symbolic of the deep human desire to communicate with others. The various Internet applications that help people engage in building relationships, sharing information, exchanging ideas, creating new forms of entertainment can persuasively be said to reflect the desire for interconnectedness that are rooted deep within the human spirit. ([Le Duc 2016](#))

The deep desire to connect with one another, digitally and physically, reflects the Trinitarian nature of man/woman. “Being in the image of God,” as stated in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC), “the human individual possesses the dignity of a person who is not just something but someone.” A “someone” who has the potential to give himself freely and “enter into communion with other persons (CCC 355–384).” Out of man/woman’s covenant with God is a response to connect to other members, who like them are created in the image of God. An act that is fully realized and united in the Eucharist. Digital people are part of the ‘Body of Christ’ and desire to connect in the same way that they do so with others in physical spaces. This is the root of what digital youth ministry is: a theological pursuit to accompany young people in fully living out their inner desire for intimate communion with Christ and his body of believers.

The practical question that remains, however, is: can digital spaces maintain ‘communion’ outside of the space of sacramental worship? In the age of COVID-19, a global pandemic that has separated the ‘Body of Christ’ into digital silos, is it possible to sustain a communion of persons in the same intimate way that reception of the Eucharist sustains believers? The brief answer is, yes, it absolutely can. The deepest of human desires, to remain connected to God and each other, does not disappear when the context changes. In fact, after the early onset of the COVID-19 global pandemic prohibited many people from practicing their faith, many shared, via social media, that their desire to receive the Eucharist and worship with other believers was stronger than ever, even young people shared how much they missed being in community with believers like them and in the Eucharistic presences of Christ. Although the ‘Body of Christ’ transcends space and time, a strong digital ministerial presence was still needed for keeping youth connected to the faith. To effectively accompany young people, digital youth ministry must assert itself into the digital lives of young people and the digital spaces that they inhabit. With this in mind, the next section will look at the digital tools needed for effective digital accompaniment.

3. Digital Youth Ministry in Practice

In the creation stories, God said, “let there be light,” and light appeared. In the digital realm, so it seems, God also said, “let there be Zoom,” and a world of digital platforms appeared faster than what anyone could have imagined. When man discovered digital spaces, youth ministry leaders and practitioners discovered a whole new, unknown world of ministerial possibilities. Moreover, although youth ministry, as mentioned above, has used these digital spaces to create effective outreach plans for the sharing of what is going on in youth ministry, there is so much more that digital spaces can offer in relation to connecting youth to each other and to Christ and his church.

Effective tools for the use in digital youth ministry expand across social media, hosting, and other digital platforms. In choosing a mirror for the reflecting of the image of youth ministry in physical spaces out into digital spheres, the options are almost limitless. For this reason, it is almost impossible to outline every opportunity or digital platform that one might explore for their specific program. With this in mind, instead of trying to tackle the momentous task of exploring all digital possibilities that await youth ministry, this paper will instead propose, outline, and explore key frameworks for the creation and support of digital youth ministry. Before forging ahead to explore these frameworks and what digital youth ministry might look like, however, this paper will first explore ‘digital accompaniment’ in relation to its being the primary pillar needed to frame effective digital youth ministry programs.

3.1. Digital Accompaniment

A good, effective youth program, digital or not, is one that is grounded in modeling “frequent intentional choice to follow Christ for young people, taking into account the realities of their lives today so they might not become discouraged in their pursuit of their holiness” (Campbell and Carani 2019, p. 82). In the words of Pope Francis:

In the modern world, marked by an increasingly evident pluralism and by an ever-wider range of possible options, the theme of choices arises with particular force at a variety of levels, especially in the face of life journeys that are less and less linear and marked by great precariousness . . .

Accompaniment for the sake of valid, stable and well-founded choices, is therefore a service that is widely needed. Being present, supporting and accompanying the journey towards authentic choices is one way for the Church to exercise her maternal function, giving birth to the freedom of the children of God. Service of this kind is simply the continuation of the way in which the God of Jesus Christ acts towards his people: through constant and heartfelt presence, dedicated and loving closeness and tenderness without limits.

Translating this into the realm of digital youth ministry, to accompany youth on their faith journeys is not just reserved for lived experiences outside of digital spaces. Accompaniment should extend to the same digital spaces that youth inhabit. In the same ways that Christ is constantly present in our lives, youth ministers should be the same in physical and digital spaces. Accompanying young people on the 'digital way' is an essential foundation of digital youth ministry.

As the primary formators of youth, parishes (and other faith-based youth programs) should look for ways to accompany youth beyond "sacramental formation and form youth in the intellectual and spiritual truths of faith and in the practice of accompaniment." Youth ministry programs should also seek ways to "empower youth" in accompanying each other as they navigate the challenges and opportunities that arise as they journey onward in their exploration and discernment of their faith ([Vatican Synod on the Youth 2018](#)). In forming digital youth programs that root themselves in accompanying young people as they navigate their faith living as digital people, digital youth ministry can grasp opportunities for forming not only faithful and active Christian believers, but good digital disciples who are entrenched in digital communion as well.

3.2. *Practical Frameworks for Creating Effective Digital Youth Programs*

As highlighted earlier in this section, it would be a momentous task to outline and explore every practical tool that could assist with the creation and implementation of an effective digital youth ministry program. For the sake of brevity, this paper will therefore outline and explore three frameworks that may be used for the creation and support of digital youth ministry: (1) understanding the youth audience; (2) being Christ-like communicators; and (3) reaching out to youth on the digital margins.

3.2.1. *Understanding the Digital Youth Audience*

When framing the digital side of youth ministry, it is important to keep in mind: without knowing your audience or dedication to consistency, effective digital youth ministerial work is impossible. To be effective youth ministers in digital spaces, youth ministers and the Church must know something about who they are ministering to. Where do youth go when they visit digital spaces? What do they do or are they searching for when there? Who do they interact with? What social media platform do they prefer? These questions are just some of the ones that youth ministers and the Church should explore, for not knowing these things strips any youth focused ministerial efforts of any claimed relevancy that they may have. It is ineffective to navigate all the digital spaces, hoping to encounter youth in digital spaces. To meet the challenges posed by youth, ministers must instead go into the digital trenches to uncover who the youth are, what their spiritual and religious needs are, and to learn about how youth are engaging their religious practices in digital spheres.

Understanding of the digital youth can be gained in a variety of ways; just remaining present in digital spaces, for example, affords a plethora of opportunities for youth ministers to get to know whom they are ministering to. Another way for youth ministers to grasp a better understanding of digital youth can also be obtained by examining how they are interacting with the social media sites, text messages, or other digital resources as shared by youth programs. On the 'backend' of all social

media group pages, for example, one can obtain how many ‘likes’, ‘shares’, and ‘reaches’ each post gathers. Comments made to the page and other interactions between posters also offer opportunities to get to know how young people are responding to what is being shared. If a youth minister really wants to understand the digital youth they are ministering to, they just need to stop posting and scrolling and just look at what is happening among the youth that they serve.

Besides answering the questions above, digital youth ministry, in relation to building and sustaining the Eucharistic communion of persons, should also grasp a better understanding of how young people view online and offline relationships. Generation Zers, for example, can connect with other Gen Zers in ways that older generations could have hardly imagined at that age. Because of the vastness that the internet offers, Gen Zers can build meaningful friendships with others across the globe. Friendships for Gen Z are more likely to be built out of shared values than shared hobbies or other interests. Gen Zers are also “not just looking for friends with similar values, but they hope to associate with people who will enhance their values as well” (Seemiller and Grace 2019, p. 166). This desire to connect to others who share their values reflects the same communion of persons that is spiritually integrated throughout young people’s digital and physical lives. In knowing these things, digital youth ministry can be better equipped to think through how to continue the work of the ‘brick and mortar’ youth ministry in the digital spheres; preparing to enter digital youth ministry is preparation for meeting the known spiritual needs of those who are waiting to be connected.

3.2.2. Being Christ-Like Communicators

Another essential element of placing digital youth ministry in practice is the formation of communication out of the practices of the perfecter of communication, Jesus Christ. In 2014, at his address on World Communications Day, Pope Francis stated:

It is not enough to be passersby on the digital highways, simply “connected”; connections need to grow into true encounters. We cannot live apart, closed in on ourselves. We need to love and to be loved. We need tenderness. Media strategies do not ensure beauty, goodness and truth in communication. The world of media also has to be concerned with humanity; it too is called to show tenderness. The digital world can be an environment rich in humanity; a network not of wires but of people Personal engagement is the basis of the trustworthiness of a communicator. Christian witness, thanks to the internet, can thereby reach the peripheries of human existence. (Pope Francis 2014)

Francis’s words remind us that digital youth ministry in practices must be a ministerial approach mindful of the strategies it chooses in fostering relationships among members of the ‘Body of Christ.’ Any digital plan for youth ministry (and religious practice) must remain mindful of how it is communicating truth and beauty and connecting the people who are present but not visible. Digital youth ministry is a practice of finding the best forms of communication, whether it be emails, social media, text messaging, etc., for the reaching out to the depths of digital spaces in the hopeful perusal of engaging youth into the deep friendships that they desire, ones with Christ and each other.

What does this form of communication really look like? The answer to that question depends on the youth program, minister, parish, diocese, and the resources that are or are not available. For example, digital youth ministry in a country or region that does not have access to reliable internet is going to focus upon using digital technology to connect young people through phone calls or using digital design to engage their imaginations. In countries or religions like the U.S., digital youth ministry is largely going to be presented through interactive social platforms, like that of Tik Tok or Instagram, places in which conversations can happen in ‘real time’ and youth can connect to the faith as presented in their native digital languages. The most important element of placing digital youth ministry into practice, however, is to have a plan. Take the time needed to look at what is happening in the physical youth spaces that you are ministering in, then look at the digital spaces and then ask yourself: Are they reflective of each other? Do these approaches sustain youth as members of the ‘Body of Christ’? Sadly,

I expect that many youth programs would answer at least one question with a quick ‘no.’ Indeed, as stated before, there is much more work left to do.

Lastly, as Christ-like communicators it is also important for digital youth ministers (and young leaders) to keep in mind that just as Christ instructed his Apostles on how ‘to do’ his ministry, the same approach is needed in the ‘doing’ of digital ministry. For communication to be fruitful in the realm of digital youth ministry, policies, practices, and procedures for its implementation must also be formed. This would mean that as digital ministry programs are formed and communication plans pursued, digital youth programs should carefully outline who can post on behalf of the program, how to respond to cyberbullying or other issues if they arise, and what platforms are acceptable to use. Other areas in relation to policies and practices that digital youth ministry might also consider setting standards for include:

- A developed theological and professional language
- Transparency (keeping communication in public spaces)
- Policies on what should/should not be posted or commented on
- A list of approved digital devices and platforms
- Procedures for addressing inappropriate behaviors⁶

Digital youth ministry has a unique opportunity to communicate the faith, the life, and teachings of Christ, in places that the early Apostles and Church Fathers could have hardly imagined. Moreover, with the right theological approach, coupled with thoughtful policies outlining the ‘who, what, when, where, and whys’ of digital communications, digital youth ministry programs will not only find success in connecting digital youth to the faith and each other, but they will also become a powerful evangelization tool in building communion among God’s people and those who are desperately longing to connect to God and his people.

3.2.3. Reaching Out to Youth on the Digital Margins

In 2012, a writer for *The Atlantic*, Stephen Marche, posed the question: “Is Facebook Making us Lonely?” in which he asserted:

We are living in an isolation that would have been unimaginable to our ancestors, and yet we have never been more accessible. Over the past three decades, technology has delivered to us a world in which we need not be out of contact for a fraction of a moment . . . Yet within this world of instant and absolute communication, unbounded by limits of time or space, we suffer from unprecedented alienation. We have never been more detached from one another, or lonelier. In a world consumed by ever more novel modes of socializing, we have less and less actual society. We live in an accelerating contradiction: the more connected we become, the lonelier we are. (Marche 2012)

A 2019 study by San Diego State University psychology professor, Jean Twenge, not only confirmed what Marche assumed, but added that young people today report being far lonelier than the elderly who are alone and isolated. The number of U.S. high school seniors who reported a sense of loneliness increased from the 2012 finding of 30 percent to that of 38 percent (O’Donnell 2019). Somewhere along the way of finding points for digital connectedness, young people have found themselves lost among disconnected wires and missed opportunities, like that of meeting in physical time and space, to connect with those like them. Although we can explore many things in relation to how youth ministry can address the feeling of isolation and loneliness, in an effort to stay focused on digital spaces, this

⁶ For an overview of practical ideas on how to create a social media handbook that not only explores building an organization’s social media presence but also the potential risks involved, see (Flynn 2012).

paper will briefly explore how digital youth ministry can reach out to the youth who have found themselves on the digital margins.

To pursue the reconnection with youth who find themselves in the digital margins, a task of digital youth ministry should be to use effective means of making ministers available to the digital youth across all digital platforms and spaces. Ministers, whether young youth leaders or veteran program directors, must seek the best ways to make themselves digitally available to digitally siloed youth. Imagine, for example, that as a minister you have a member of youth group that only comes to youth night about 30% of the time. After speaking a bit with him, to get to know him, you discover that he is an avid gamer and from what he shared, if he is not at school or church, he is online gaming. What can you do to help this young person connect to the faith? Be digitally present and learn about his favorite game and, if appropriate⁷ and with his parent's permission, play with him sometime along with other members of the youth group. By being present in conversation over a game, sharing ideas and accompanying the young person as they journey through a digital space, youth ministers can lie the groundwork for meaningful evangelization and formation.

Another area of concern in relation to youth on the digital margins lies within the question of: how might digital youth ministry connect young believers with those who have disaffiliated, especially the 'dones,' or those who "once participated in church but have since made an intentional decision to leave?" (Seemiller and Grace 2019, p. 166). For those who are 'done' with the Church, the path to what led them there is often charted by negative religious experiences. For Catholic youth, this especially is true in relation to the negative feelings that they have felt in relation to how they think the Church has treated LBGQTI+ communities (Seemiller and Grace 2019, p. 171). Because youth can access a plethora of misinformation about religious beliefs, spirituality, and what Christianity is and is not, it is no surprise that these kinds of misguided explorations are also theorized why youth becoming more and more digitally marginalized from the rest of the flock. With this in mind, for digital youth ministry to be effective in inviting the religious disaffiliated back into conversations out of faith and in communion with the 'Body of Christ' in which they are members, digital youth ministry must be open to dialogue regarding deeply listening to the spiritual needs of the disaffiliated. Digital youth ministry also should heighten its awareness and sensitivity to ensuring that marginalized voices, like that of those who struggle with understanding and accepting the Catholic Church's teaching on LBGQTI+ lifestyles. Digital youth ministry's presentation of the faith needs not to be forceful; being present and open for discussion in relation to answering questions about the faith is enough to engage the disaffiliated and make them sense their connection to the faith and other believers once again.

Lastly, when reaching out to youth who are siloed either by choice or through questioning their faith, digital youth ministry should also be mindful of youth who are digitally marginalized to the point of no longer being present. It is for this reason that digital youth ministry must not limit itself to expressions of evangelization and catechesis only in digital spaces. Youth ministry, as defined above, is digital and physical, and when it comes to reaching out and connecting to the digitally marginalized, sometimes the digital side of youth ministry must abandon the digital space for the sake of communion. It is for this reason that digital youth ministry must remain flexible in finding the best ways to connect to youth on the margins, there is not a single 'one size fits all' approach and to form a digital youth program that claims there to be one is to only invite further frustration and additional digital silos for youth to inhabit. For in order to connect youth to each other and to Christ, if the digital space is not working or if along the way it no longer is effective in reaching out to youth across the digital margins, then digital youth ministry must look towards traditional forms of youth ministry as it searches for ideas for meeting in person.

⁷ Any form of ministerial activity, online or offline, should be performed in accordance with diocesan or parish standards in relation to keeping young people safe from predatory practices. When it comes to ministering to young people, digital youth ministry is not excluded from properly established protocols for the protection of children.

4. Conclusions

This paper offered a practical theological analysis focused upon defining digital youth ministry and the theological underpinnings of its development, and the practical frameworks that can assist practitioners in placing digital youth ministry in motion. Specifically, this paper has sketched out, through the lens of American Catholicism, how the sacramental and Trinitarian languages of ‘communion’ and the process of accompaniment can frame a robust understanding and practice of digital youth ministry. It is from this approach that digital youth ministry can offer the broader youth ministerial fields a means to keep young people connected to the faith and the ‘Body of Christ’ even as they journey through digital spheres.

In his message for [World Communications Day \(2013\)](#), Pope Benedict XVI noted that “the digital environment is not a parallel or purely virtual world but is part of the daily experience of many people, especially the young.” In the months following the onslaught of the COVID-19 global pandemic, as youth across the world adjusted to relying on digital platforms to stay connected, the digital environment and youth daily experiences are definitely one and the same. Although the un-paramount reliance on the digital world to keep us connected has led many youths to rethink what their digital lives should really look like, the digital world has offered youth new opportunities to search for God and connect to other members of the ‘Body of Christ’ in new ways that they could have hardly imagined a few months ago. Moreover, that is a fantastic thing; and now it is up to digital youth ministry to sustain the new points of communion found within the invisible digital world. It is my hope that this paper begins new conversations not only in relation to digital youth ministry, but its place and purpose within 21st century youth ministerial practice.

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