

INTERNATIONAL UNION OF SUPERIORS GENERAL

Digital Communication and Pandemic



What we have learned?

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Communication and Pandemic: what we have learned

"We have experienced the essential need to live in this new time with its limitations and opportunities" Sr. Rosalba

The UISG Communication Office, in collaboration with other communicators of religious life, has taken up the request of several congregations to open a reflection on the effects that the pandemic has and is still causing, for better or for worse, to the mission of digital and social communication of religious life.

The aim is to understand and live together a new sense of communication in this strange and extraordinary time that is the Pandemic.

This text is intended only as a basis for the various Congregations to reflect on how not to waste this wisdom that we have accumulated this year and to invest in strengthening and, where possible, professionalising institutional digital communication.

The pandemic has 'exposed' us

"Outside there was a painful desolation, inside, on the other hand, we had too much noise".

This sentence says a little of what each of us has experienced between the inside and outside of this time that has really taken us out of ourselves, putting us in a different position perhaps never known before, a position of complete vulnerability!

Putting away one style of communication and imposing another on us...think of the necessary protections that 'hinder' us in our contacts, think of the quantity not to mention the quality of the information that each of us has sought, begged and requested to find a certain tranquillity in facing 'something' that we did not know but that was rapidly attacking us in what is most important and essential: our life, our breath!

I think that this exposure, forced in a certain sense, has changed ways of our



The digital revolution is the latest historic change we are witnessing: after Copernicus (heliocentric approach), Darwin (evolutionism), Freud (unconscious).

The question we should ask ourselves is: how do we wish to be within this digital context as consecrated women?

communication, also because of great 'acceleration' in the number of information and multimedia exposure. Just think how many Congregations have lost control of information in a certain sense, both outgoing and incoming! As we would say, guidance is necessary.... From within and without.

➔ What has happened in this year from a communication point of view?

The day after the first lockdown (March 2020), many congregations found themselves without the daily routine, often still made up of physicality and movement, in which they were embedded.

Scheduled trips, scheduled chapters, meetings and assemblies.

Life changed in an instant.

Some institutions reacted immediately by strengthening their existing meeting and virtual communication platforms.

Others found themselves for the first time navigating in a completely new situation with uncertain and unknown scenarios: for the first time they had to deal with a virtual and intangible world.

Those who already had a communications office responded more promptly and competently. Others needed more time and discernment to understand what they needed and who they could ask for help and support.

The International Union of Superiors General (UISG) was quick to respond, not only in promoting a series of online initiatives that could accompany the isolation and pain of so many communities, but also by providing technical and professional advice for online meeting platforms.

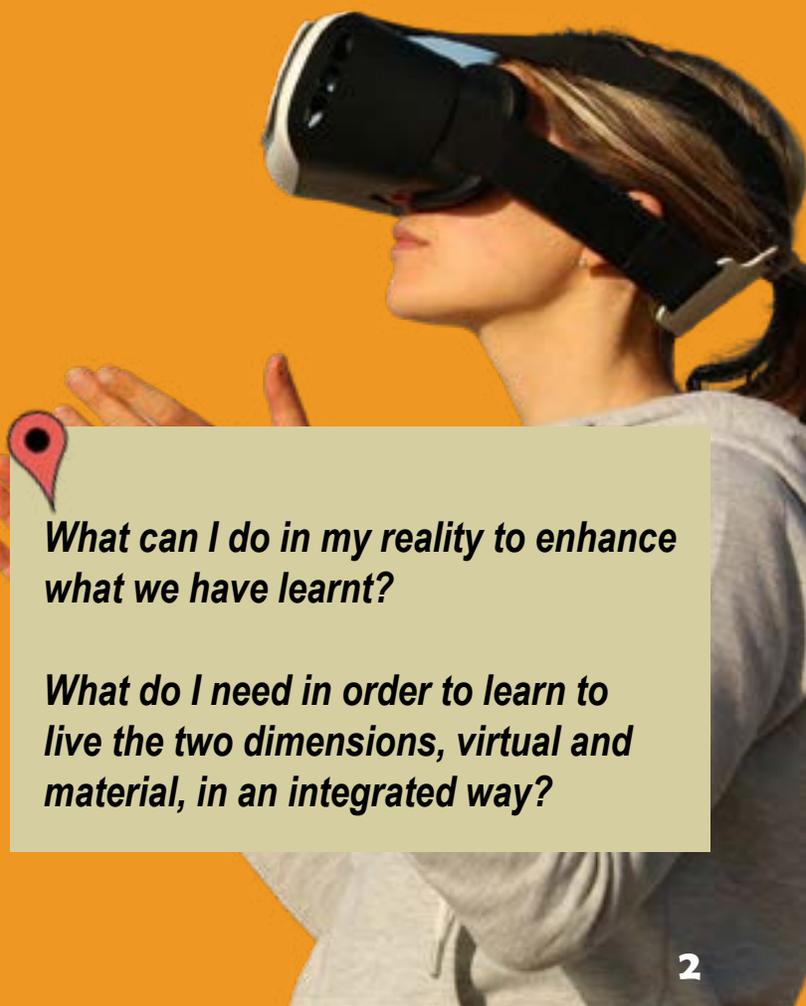
The congregations, which already had a number of updated virtual spaces, were able to experience isolation in a more relational way and also respond, from a missionary and pastoral point of view, more readily and creatively to the needs of their peoples.

This newly acquired awareness should not be lost: it is necessary to capitalize on this cultural leap made in digital.

The challenge will be to manage the physical reality of travel, of meetings together with a virtual and digital reality that has been building up in recent months. We will not have to choose to go back 'to when we could meet', abandoning the virtual.

We are asked to experience reality in its different dimensions, virtual and material, tangible and intangible.

We will have to learn new skills in order to live both online and offline relationships, accepting to live the complexity in which we are now experiencing.



What can I do in my reality to enhance what we have learnt?

What do I need in order to learn to live the two dimensions, virtual and material, in an integrated way?



Pandemic information management

In the first months of the pandemic we experienced a real **infodemic phenomenon**: a kind of information and data epidemic. We were overwhelmed by information and thirsty for news.

This phenomenon still continues, with less intrusiveness, but it can certainly be a source of anxiety and misinformation.

We soon realised that **this bombardment of news and data required a critical capacity**, discernment and knowledge that were not available to many religious communities, as well as to citizens.

This raises a major challenge encountered in religious communities, especially where the average age is high and the information habit rooted in traditional models of mass information: the same newspaper, the same news programme.

The challenge is to train our sisters to discern information, to recognise hoaxes and fake news, to know how to form their own narrative of reality by diversifying the sources

of information and getting out of our social bubbles (filter bubble) that 'close' us in real bubbles of information and do not leave us mental space to get out and read something else.

It is good to remember the ethical aspect of our communication, which must be integrated with social justice, respect for the person and which does not bend to the commercial logic of information.



What questions do I ask myself to interpret an article in the light of the Word?

Am I aware of the influence of conscious and unconscious criteria on my reading of global reality?



Special attention should be given to these areas....

- *Critical sense with information and the Web, so that there is real USE and NOT ABUSE*
- *Ordering information, as EDUCATORS favouring paths and processes*
- *Beware of entering dark areas that are easily manipulated*





On the same BOAT but with very different MEANS and OPPORTUNITIES...

It is certainly one of the images that we carry within us and will carry within us for a long time... the boat of humanity in which symbolically we were all in that evening of 27 March 2020 in St Peter's Square, with Pope Francis.

But we realised very quickly that although we were in the same boat, the means and opportunities were very different.

In the management of information we tried as Consecrated Life to 'circulate' information: some UISG-proposed webinars were most important, thanks to their function to helping raise awareness of what was happening and also to offer the necessary tools for 'its' management.

Despite the information massively flowing on the Web, some countries seemed to be completely cut off – without basic supplies, testing access or vaccines available for everyone. The only choice left for them was to fight for survival with the means they had. We may be in the middle of the same storm perhaps, but definitely on different boats!

This is important to note and to try to really grow through this Pandemic not only in the information on the net, but in the solidarity that is fostered, so that everyone has life and life in abundance!



We asked some young people to tell us about the criteria for being in the digital world as consecrated persons.

- Knowing the Web in general and social networks in particular
- 'Using' virtual spaces as an apostolate
- Being able to evangelise
- Finally, social media are not considered the devil
- Too many adults do not know how to use them and migrate to communication platforms at random, intoxicating them.
- Too much information about the pandemic (infodemic) has created anxiety and especially all virologists...
- Bonus (4): be present with content not only with phrases!

“*Despite the information massively flowing in the Web, some countries seemed to be completely cut off*”

➔ Overwhelmed communication offices

Institutions that already had communication offices or a person (religious or lay) in charge of communication, experienced an overload of work for the office and a push to look for technical and digital solutions in order to respond to a series of needs that were previously met in the traditional way: with the physical proximity and presence, travel, gatherings.

These institutes have also been able to respond with more immediacy to communication crises: requests from the press or other church bodies; visibility of congregations whose charism revolves around health; dealing with so many bereavements and deaths in communities.

Some congregations have already drawn up guidelines for crisis management from a communication point of view in the past years.

Those who were not prepared for this, certainly encountered more difficulties but also they learned by doing.

Certainly today we are more aware of the importance that virtual, social and digital communication plays in our society: with or without a pandemic.



In my congregation, do we usually deal with the press?

If we had to do it during this period: what did we learn?

Do we think it is important to have guidelines for external communication and in crisis situations?



➔ Preparing for an era of COMPLEXITY

Complexity is the hallmark of our society: several variables interact to create a phenomenon of reality (virtual and material) and act simultaneously.

The challenge is to be able to name and interpret these factors.

This is an opportunity to change our lives, but it really depends on us. We might want, and I think this is a great temptation, to go back to the normality that we were comfortable with before, to our comfort zones.

Immersed in this time, we really discover the need to be able to understand in order to manage complexity.

The complexity generated by the digital world has changed, above all, the categories of time and space: this calls for a new reformulation of how we live these two elements in communication but also in the life of the congregation.

This last year we have experienced a digital proximity that has allowed us to nourish communion.



In order to work in communication, is it really necessary to be physically together all the time?

In order to share projects and missions, is it essential to be physically close?





For the first time, we fed on data

In just a few hours, we all understood how digital reality works: it transforms and narrates reality into data. The challenge then is to know how to interpret them in the appropriate way with the attitude of relativity and knowledge of prerequisites that not all of us have.

The data, as they were told to us, fed the narrative that we were making, personally and communally, of this anomalous situation in which we were immersed.

Am I aware that data today is part of our digital identity?

What would help me to learn how to read and interpret the data?

CONCRETE CASE OF COMMUNICATION MANAGEMENT DURING A PANDEMIC: THE DAUGHTERS OF ST. CAMILLUS

On 20 March 2020, one of the religious communities in Grottaferrata (Rome) was struck by Covid-19. Within a few days, the virus infected 57 sisters. The reference health unit quickly intervened and quarantined the sisters.

Within a very short time, the news reached the media, and journalists swarmed the House switchboard with phone calls. Others decided to station themselves outside the building to obtain information and to make direct contact with the site.

We have lived through a season of pain and suffering, a pandemic that has knocked on the doors of many convents. The virus caught us unprepared and forced us to change our behaviour. It also highlighted our limitations.

So many people still suffer because of the variants. Are we prepared to handle such crises? What action should be taken to avoid being overwhelmed again (including by the media)?



The time we have lived through has invited us to reflect and today we are called upon, as health professionals, to deal with new post-pandemic scenarios. Among these is the stress of isolation.

During the height of Covid we learned to use social media more familiarly. It was an important tool that allowed us to stay in touch and share experiences. It has made us feel like a community on the move, even if in the midst of suffering. Above all, it has guaranteed the constant proclamation of the Gospel, as a comfort to a community that is afraid and no longer certain.

CASE STUDY OF COMMUNICATION MANAGEMENT DURING THE PANDEMIC: SISTERS OF SANTA DOROTEA DI CEMMO

I find myself dealing with the subject of communication... even without prior experience... the pandemic situation has overwhelmed us... it has also made us summon up the courage to offer a space to reach out to our communities.

If in the past it was unthinkable to work all online, today it has become almost indispensable... even in our communities who knew nothing... in some cases, you needed someone to turn on the computer, to connect... and little by little they learned.

In some cases, the pandemic has generated a sense of depression, of fatigue... of anguish of not seeing or finding anyone... of feeling the need for so many brothers and sisters who suffer and yet cannot be close by.

We, the animators of our Institute, needed to create something that would give hope, that would be of consolation... to be able to look with eyes of faith and seek answers from within...

The meetings, the celebrations, the feasts... it has allowed us to meet with communities outside Italy... very strong and very quick encounters...

We still have to learn a lot, to manage, but also to balance... in some generational groups, sometimes I think there is a risk of preferring only online...

In other groups, for example, I feel that even the institutional website space becomes useless, old... because it doesn't update immediately.

Valuing and learning a new way of communicating, because everything online is no longer ours alone... the care and attention to use and the veracity of what is shared is a new challenge.



QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Hoping that the Congregations will understand the importance of being (consciously and competently) in the virtual, a place of evangelisation as much as the “non-virtual”.

- 1. What and how has my institute's digital communication changed in this time of pandemic?*
- 2. What changes do we intend to make in the future to strengthen the institute's communication?*
- 3. What training needs in digital and social communication have emerged among the sisters in your institute?*



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