Opinion



Kimberly Letran and Allison Amaya, seniors at Don Bosco Cristo Rey High School in Takoma Park, Maryland, participate in the in the National School Walkout March 14. (CNS/Catholic Standard/Jaclyn Lippelmann)

by James Hug

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The Holy Spirit has a new organizing tool. The hashtag.

#MeToo #TimesUp #EnoughIsEnough #NeverAgain #MarchForOurLives.

The list can go on. There is no better recent example than the way #MeToo created a sense of solidarity and protection that gave victims around the world, people who had been threatened into silence about the sexual harassment and assault they had suffered at the hands of people more powerful than they, the courage to step forward and speak up. The result is widely recognized as an unprecedented historic shift underway in acceptable social behavior and in the newly established credibility of victims. Its value as a way for the weak and victimized to stand together in safe solidarity is surely a part of its power.

The hashtags emerging in relation to the mass shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School are another powerful example. They are facilitating the organizing of students across the nation and enabling them to stand together and amplify their voices. Their courage and common voice appear to be making a significant difference in shifting the national debate on guns and gun violence. The political positions on the issue have been frozen into immovable blocs for decades and through the slaughter of thousands of innocent children, women, and men. May the voices of these children arouse us and lead us toward solutions to this constantly recurring tragedy!

The power of hashtags to convene, coordinate and encourage responses to evil and injustice in our society makes them a promising new instrument in the work of faith-inspired justice. But developing and choosing appropriate hashtags is an art, a skill that requires serious discernment.

#BlackLivesMatter, for example, has been an important rallying cry, but its power has been undercut by the launch of misleading and divisive counterpoints like #BlueLivesMatter and #AllLivesMatter, the latter being especially dangerous because of its appeal to religious people who are not always attentive to or conscious of the deep-seated racism and racial violence in our society. The crafting of insightful hashtags that can rally millions of people without being easily susceptible to sabotage is a social justice talent worth careful consideration and development.

It is, I insist again, a new organizing tool for the Holy Spirit.

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I have been conscious for many years that we do not hear much talk of the activity of the Holy Spirit in social movements. Spirit-life or spirituality is too often treated as a matter of individual interior movements and responses, and a great deal of attention appropriately goes into discerning their significance and guidance. But the Jewish and Christian Scriptures are filled with accounts of God active in the social-political world — liberating a motley group of slaves from Egypt, speaking constantly through prophets with guidance for the social life of the nation, arranging the defeat and exile of a disloyal nation and then arranging its return and reestablishment, moving a Jewish reform movement of Jesus followers into a new community with gentiles that would become a major world religion, and on and on.

Maybe with our cultural focus on individual interiority as the realm of spirituality, it would help to imagine it this way: when the Holy Spirit moves in the interior of many, many people, moving them in the same direction in the service of social love and justice, it is just as real and more significant for the human family. And when a good hashtag facilitates that, I am positive the Spirit is at work.

[Jesuit Fr. James E. Hug serves as sacramental minister for the Adrian Dominican Sisters and writes on spirituality for social transformation. His blog, "Truth that does Justice," can be found on the website for the Dominican Center: Spirituality for Mission.]