

Pope's interviewer tells Vatican congress to reevaluate spiritual quest

Joshua J. McElwee | Feb. 27, 2014

ROME -- Changes in technology have fundamentally altered the human quest for spirituality and require Catholics to reevaluate how they approach society, a Jesuit known for interviewing Pope Francis told an international communications conference Tuesday.

Saying the Internet has brought on a "radical change in perception of the religious question itself," Jesuit Fr. Antonio Spadaro said the traditional Catholic vision of spirituality "does not stand up today."

Where humans would once ask, "God, where are you?", we now think of the spiritual almost in terms of a cellular network ? waiting for answers to arrive on our multitudes of devices, said Spadaro. In such a system, it is no longer important for the spiritual teacher to give answers because "answers are everywhere."

"It is not the answers, but the questions which are important" today, he said. "We must learn to distinguish the true questions from the replies that are continually given."

Spadaro, the editor-in-chief of the Italian Jesuit magazine *La Civiltà Cattolica*, was speaking Wednesday at a global conference hosted by SIGNIS, an international association of Catholic media professionals.

Spadaro wrote a book on cyber technology, released in 2012 titled *Cyberteologia* in Italian. He is best known for a wide-ranging interview with the pope that was [released last September](#) [1] in multiple languages in 16 publications run by the Jesuit order around the world.

Because of his apparent access to the pontiff Spadaro has also been mentioned by some as a possible next director of the Vatican press office, should current director Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi retire.

Spadaro compared his vision of the new spiritual quest on Tuesday to thoughts Francis shared last November with a gathering of the leaders of male religious orders around the world.

Spadaro, who was present for that [closed-door meeting](#) [2], said Francis was asked why most vocations to religious life come from areas of the world that are not traditionally considered Catholic, or even Christian.

The pope responded: "I don't know," Spadaro said,

"A pope who answers 'I don't know' is something," said the priest. "It's more than an answer. Maybe this is a great answer because this answer makes you think about the answer."

Turning back to the issue of changes of technology, Spadaro continued: "This may be the most important answer of our time."

SIGNIS, known formally as the World Catholic Association for Communication, is hosting its conference in Rome Tuesday through Saturday on the theme: "Creating images with the new generation: Media for a culture of peace."

More than 300 communication professionals are attending the event, according to organizers. Attendees are coming from some 80 different nations, representing a wide range of the world's peoples, including: Australia, India, Taiwan, and more than a dozen African countries.

Sending a message to the group Monday, Francis said Catholic communicators today are "challenged to present the wisdom, truth and beauty of the Gospel in a language capable of touching the minds and hearts of countless people who thirst for meaning and direction in their lives as individuals and as members of society."

Spadaro spoke to the group Tuesday during a keynote session on "The Emerging Digital Culture: Ethical and Spiritual Perspectives." Among those responding to the Jesuit was Msgr. Paul Tighe, secretary of the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Social Communications.

Tighe, an Irishman who has served at the Vatican since 2007 and is partly responsible for the pope's wildly popular Twitter accounts, told participants that their "first service" is to listen to what people are saying on the Internet.

"I think a first service we need to do is to allow the deeper questions to emerge in the digital arena," he said, telling the communicators to take the questions seriously but "don't rush to answer."

"If we want to be there where people are looking for something let's not rush in with a ready-made answers," he said.

"God will find people," said Tighe. "It's not up to us. People in their nature are searching for something. Our job is not to get in the way, not to block the passage."

Spadaro compared his new vision of the spiritual quest to the dozens (or hundreds) of emails and messages most people receive on their phones each day, saying the human being is now primarily a "decoder."

"We decode questions from the multiplicity of answers and responses that meet us without any effort of our own," he said.

Quoting from short remarks given by Pope Paul VI in 1964 when he was visiting a technological center, Spadaro said the deceased pontiff had remarked: "Science and technology are becoming brothers once more."

"The mechanical brain is coming to aid of the spiritual brain," Spadaro quoted Paul.

Calling that description one of "staggering beauty," Spadaro said "what follows is an implicit theological definition of technology."

"Paul VI heard a cry ... for a higher level of spirituality," he said. "New technologies can help satisfy the desire for meaning, truth, unity."

Spadaro ended his talk by comparing the Internet to the spiritual exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola, one of the founders of the Jesuit order. Traditionally given as a 30-day spiritual retreat, the exercises focus on having the retreat maker imagine themselves inside a Gospel story "hearing, feeling, and touching all that is present in the story."

The exercises, Spadaro said, have a "sense of virtual reality."

"It is the same dynamic of a video game," he said. "See yourself inside the scene contemplating Jesus, Mary, Joseph and yourself acting. This is very interesting."

SIGNIS, known formally as the World Catholic Association for Communication, is an international association that traces its roots to groups founded in 1928 for Catholic media professionals to "help transform our cultures in the light of the Gospel."

Comprised of members from some 140 countries, it has consultative status with UNESCO, the United Nations in Geneva and New York, and the Council of Europe.

Its gathering this week will also see 11 different workshops for the global communicators on topics ranging from best practices in digital communication, to creating television catered to the Middle East, to fostering dialog between older and younger journalists.

A second keynote session is also to be held Thursday on "A Vision of the Future: Challenges of the New Generation."

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