

6 JUNE: Professor Eamon Duffy on Devotions to Our Lady in East Anglia diocese's Learning Together programme, 'Preparing for the New Evangelisation.'

11 a.m. - 3 p.m., Pastoral Centre, 14 Exeter Road, Newmarket CB8 8LT. Pre-booking not essential but email learning_together_2015@yahoo.com

Evangelisation 2.0

The obligation to evangelise falls on all Christians but the methods have changed over the centuries according to the means available. The smartphone app is one tool with enormous potential

BRENDEN THOMPSON

LOVE, HOPE, joy, vision, promise, life, peace, truth, goodness and beauty: these are words we use to describe the Church. Each of these words speaks volumes of the Good News and the person of Christ, who gave humanity the best story ever told – and who gave his Church the job of sharing that story. It is a story that touches the deepest needs of the human person and yet, we struggle to share the story.

We are living in an increasingly technological world but I'm not sure that parishes are keeping up. I am a part-time pastoral assistant at St Mary's parish in Hampstead and I am currently studying for a master's in applied theology. My studies require the use of computers for doing research, writing essays and submitting them online. It's not a problem for me because I have always been something of an enthusiast when it comes to new technology. It's not a problem for most of our parishioners either as the technology they use in their everyday lives is at a very different stage from the technology being used by their parishes.

Unfortunately, while many parishes would love to avail themselves of more and better technology, they think it is probably far too complicated and far too expensive. In a way, their resistance (or fear) surprises me because so many people have Apple and Android phones and tablets of all shapes and sizes and they use them efficiently.

My parish priest is 65 and he has an iPhone and an iPad. Even my grandmother knows all about these "toys" (although she doesn't have them). An informal survey would show just how many of us actually carry around these powerful devices. Moreover, it is estimated that 90 per cent of the time spent on the average smartphone is spent on apps that have nothing to do with the traditional functions of a phone.

For the past few years, all major companies and organisations have invested large sums of money in this powerful technology; but for the most part, the Church has not availed herself of these new opportunities. This is a waste. I have long sought to put new technology to good use in the parish – not only because it has the potential to radicalise our approach to ministry but also because, in many cases, it would make life a lot simpler for priests and laypeople working in the parish.

To do

ASK people around you how many use apps on their smartphone or tablet and if they are aware of specific Catholic ones
CONSIDER the parish app as a way to keep in touch with parishioners all week, offering a faith resource at the same time
VISIT the myParish website, www.myparishapp.com and see the variety of facilities available

Next week is Pentecost, when we celebrate the beginning of the spreading of the Gospel-message after Jesus' Ascension. Acts 2:41 records that after Peter spoke to the crowd, some 3,000 people who welcomed his message were baptised. We have found an app called "myParish" that allows Church and parishioners to stay connected. We are calling Pentecost "Download Sunday" at St Mary's. A team of volunteers will be on hand to help parishioners set up the app on their phone or tablet and explain its features. Perhaps this will be a watershed moment; or perhaps it will fail miserably. One thinks of St Paul roving around the known world and the monumental risk involved in proclaiming the Good News. St Paul did not have a smartphone but I suspect he would have used one if he were around today. I see this app as a modern-day, large-scale opportunity to spread the Gospel.

THE POSSIBILITIES are many. You can send messages straight to the phones of parishioners; you can upload homilies, newsletters, the liturgical calendar and Catholic news. It can be an aid to personal faith formation as the app allows you to set reminders to pray or go to confession and provides you with the words to popular prayers and the daily readings. Then, as if having the average parishioner in mind, it has a feature called "mass mode", which (when activated) sets your phone to silent when you get in close proximity to the parish. Many of the parishioners and friends I have spoken to (even those who are not religious) love the idea.

See all these facilities for yourself on the website: www.myparishapp.com. The app guides a parish every step of the way to make the set-up process a trouble-free experience and there is a team of experts available to

support you. The launch kit they send has personalised graphics for your parish, a six-foot banner, T-shirts, postcards, stickers and a marketing plan to help your launch to be as successful as possible. We are the first parish outside of the United States to use myParish. In fact, we think we are the first parish to launch any sort of app in the UK but we will certainly not be the last. This app has been made without complex coding and costs about the same as an average mobile-phone monthly contract (roughly £35).

As the people with the best story, we should have the best means of communicating it – and this is our goal. We aren't just launching a new app, we are launching a new experience by which parishioners connect to parishes and vice versa. We hope that it will be a new and better experience and that it will break the mould and rethink evangelisation in an easy-to-use, accessible way that allows technology to complement the user's faith life. Pope Benedict XVI called for the re-proposing of the Gospel to those regions awaiting the first evangelisation but also to those regions such as ours where the roots of Christianity are deep but which have experienced a serious crisis of faith due to secularisation.

The focus of this New Evangelisation calls all Catholics to be evangelised and then go forth to evangelise. In a special way, the New Evangelisation is focused on "re-proposing" the Gospel to those who have experienced a crisis of faith. The New Evangelisation calls for each of us to deepen our faith, believe in the Gospel message and go forth to proclaim the Good News. It invites each Catholic to renew their relationship with Jesus Christ and his Church. The New Evangelisation has become a buzz-phrase without many truly understanding the term and what it really means.

For me, the New Evangelisation is really the old evangelisation but with new methods, expression and approaches. In other words, it is the same Good News of Jesus Christ – but with attempts to find new means to communicate it and new mediums through which to express the same Gospel Jesus shared with the disciples.

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