

Faith in the Church of Facebook

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THIS ARTICLE WILL INVESTIGATE THE IMPACT of Facebook's timeline format and the implications of having the church traverse through this format, given Facebook's current status as an indispensable point of dissemination of all manner of information. More specifically, this article will focus on the time that this timeline format embodies. The significance of time can be gleaned from Scott Bader-Saye's essay entitled, "Figuring Time: Providence and Politics."¹ In it, Bader-Saye writes that "time, community and politics interweave in significant ways," so much so that "the ways we experience, name, and interpret time contribute to the kinds of communities we imagine and inhabit."² Conversely, it is also true that the practices and communities that we adopt and move within also constitute an acceptance of modes of time as one's own.

What this article also seeks to demonstrate is that this link between time, community and practice is of great theological significance for the Christian. Dispensing with this burden will require demonstrating how the church works under the lordship of a time very different from that in social media. It will also require this article to show how, as a result of this difference in times, the traversing of the church within a space under the lordship of a different time will have an impact on the way that faith is received and operationalized. In elaborating on these points, what will become apparent is the need to highlight the relationship between memory and God's providence, and show how this relationship looks in the church, and how that relationship differs in the church as it traverses through Facebook's timeline. In outlining this article's case, a key theological touchstone will be *Lumen fidei*, the encyclical by Pope Francis on "the light of Faith."³

FAITH AND TRAVERSE

Before analyzing the nexus between the church, Facebook and faith outlined above, it is necessary to first establish the case for the

¹ Scott Bader-Saye, "Figuring Time: Providence and Politics," in *Liturgy, Time and the Politics of Redemption*, ed. Randi Rashkover and C.C. Pecknold (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 96.

² Bader-Saye, "Figuring Time: Providence and Politics," 95, 98.

³ Francis, *Lumen fidei* (June 29, 2013), w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_2013-0629_enciclica-lumen-fidei.html.

relationship between faith and the spaces we occupy. To this end, attention must be drawn to three things one might not necessarily associate with Facebook. The first is paragraph 31 of the Dogmatic Constitution of the Church, *Lumen gentium*.⁴ Speaking of the laity, the document brings out the spatial dimension of evangelization, and the church's positioning of itself in order to fulfil that task. In speaking specifically to the laity, paragraph 31 is indicative of an evangelical methodology for huge swathes of the church when it calls on the church to engage in a "sanctification of the world from within as a leaven," and "in this way they may make Christ known to others."⁵ From this, one can observe one aspect of the relationship between faith and space and the church's placing within that relationship, that the spread of the faith is dependent not on a church's situating itself over and above the secular sphere. Indeed, *Lumen gentium* no. 31 makes clear that the spread of the faith actually is tied intimately with an embedding of the church within the secular sphere, and especially so through the laity.

A second noteworthy point is that Pope Francis also hints at this methodology in his Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii gaudium*, in which he equates obedience to God's call to spread the gospel with going "out of our own comfort zone in order to reach all the 'peripheries'."⁶ In terms reminiscent of the Dogmatic Constitution, the Apostolic Exhortation emphasizes the spread of the gospel as thus one which must "evangelize cultures in order to inculturate the Gospel,"⁷ thereby making the Word of God "incarnate *in* the peoples of earth."⁸ Although there is no explicit mention of the internet as an avenue of evangelization, *Evangelii gaudium* does make a more general reference to "the media" which nonetheless highlights the link between media and space, a link that has an impact on the embedding of the gospel within a culture, as highlighted in *Lumen gentium*. In a section pertaining to "urban cultures," *Evangelii gaudium* speaks of "vast new expanses" which act as "interpreters and generators of meaning." These consist of "languages, symbols, messages and paradigms which propose new approaches to life," which are sustained via the "influence of the media."⁹ This influence of the media is relevant due to the

⁴ *Lumen gentium: Dogmatic Constitution on the Church* (1964), www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vatii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html.

⁵ *Lumen gentium*, no. 31.

⁶ Francis, *Evangelii gaudium: Apostolic Exhortation on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today's World* (2013), no. 20, w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/a-post-exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html.

⁷ *Evangelii gaudium*, no. 69.

⁸ *Evangelii gaudium*, no. 115. Emphasis added.

⁹ *Evangelii gaudium*, no. 73.

fact that it is precisely these “places where new narratives and paradigms are being formed,”¹⁰ places which constitute the “privileged locus of the new evangelization.”¹¹ To tie this more immediately to the topic at hand, we can glean from *Lumen gentium* (and by extension, *Evangelii gaudium*) an ecclesial imperative, as the body of Christ, to facilitate the encounter with Christ by immersing oneself within the space of social media, particularly Facebook.

Thirdly, this link between the embedding of the church and the spread of the faith is coupled by another spatial observation which is made in *Lumen fidei*. The spatial dimension of *Lumen fidei* is different from that raised by *Lumen gentium* because while the first speaks to the *spreading* of the faith, the second speaks to the *operationalization and maintenance* of faith at the same time that the faith is embedded within secular space. Because of *Lumen fidei*'s focus on the operationalization of faith, it is this encyclical that will form the primary touchstone for this article. Paragraph 9 is particularly important here, for it explicitly identifies a spatial dimension to faith, challenging overly spiritualized or purely cognitive approaches to contemporary Christianity. Paragraph 9 does so with the notion that “faith *sees* to the extent that it journeys.”¹² With this, paragraph 9 does not equate faith to a mere assent to ideas. Instead, faith is a result of a twofold process. First, faith is something that is received, and received insofar as it acts as a way of seeing. Secondly, faith as a form of seeing emerges from a journeying through space.

Put another way, faith is not merely a series of propositions, but a collage of events and conditions that mark one's life in this world. Such conditions are not just objects that we see, they are also lenses *through which* we see. In *The Social Construction of Reality*, Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann speak of every action and decision being refracted through a rubric of what they call “plausibility structures,” socially distributed practices and institutions which act as subtle guides by which one comes to regard certain things or ways of seeing things as persuasive or plausible.¹³ In similar terms, Pierre Bourdieu speaks of how the concrete forms of space and the positioning of an agent within such spaces create fore-structures called a “field.” This field, for Bourdieu, then creates a *habitus*, a set of dispositions to accept particular presumptions about the cosmos (which he calls *doxa*) as real.¹⁴ Such dispositions are not the result of any prior process of

¹⁰ *Evangelii gaudium*, no. 74.

¹¹ *Evangelii gaudium*, no. 73.

¹² *Lumen fidei*, no. 9. Emphasis added

¹³ Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (London: Penguin, 1967), 154-5.

¹⁴ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production* (Cambridge: Polity, 1993), 162; Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 35.

discernment, but are in a sense pre-cognitively accepted as one moves through the warp and weft of everyday life. What is theologically significant is that these dispositions are unseen and yet accepted at a pre-theoretical level.¹⁵ Thus, at a very fundamental level, the acceptance of these fore-structures as a precursor to any action, however unconscious, can be considered an act of faith, insofar as faith is defined as the belief in “the evidence of things unseen” (Heb 11:1).

TIMELINE AND TIME

Even after identifying the spatial dimension of faith, the question must be asked concerning what this has to do with the specific phenomenon of the church’s moving through Facebook’s timeline format. At one level, the timeline format is just another of many format changes brought about by the corporation on Facebook accounts around the world. Be that as it may, a more profound change is taking place. From the set of pictographic and textual data on a front page, Facebook has mimicked Twitter’s mode of rationalizing everything in a user-profile—from statuses, posts, citations and photo uploads—into a single thread of events, and weaving them together with similarly rationalized threads of other user-profiles. This interwoven series of feeds are then fed through a single endlessly-cascading feed on one’s screen, with no distinction made between one type of post and another apart from its timing. Only the latest posts stay within eyeshot, and earlier ones disappear from sight and are retrievable only with considerable effort. A further tweak on this update has even removed the requirement for strict chronological sequencing between posts, though the rule still remains in force that posts beyond a certain time frame are removed from view.

Anything the church seeks to make manifest through its traversing of cyberspace, in particular the social medium of Facebook, would have to be reformatted to adapt to the timeline platform. What needs to be focused upon here is the kind of time that the Facebook timeline presumes and externalizes, and investigate how Facebook is an artifact of a particular kind of time. In doing so, the article wishes to show the difference between Facebook’s version of time and that of the church. Having noted this difference, the article will go on to demonstrate how the church’s traversing through Facebook operationalizes a lordship of a particular time, one that may be antithetical to a distinctly Christian conception of time. It will then demonstrate how, if this preceding argument is correct, the practice of Christian faith would become undermined.

¹⁵ Berger and Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*, 65.

CHRONOS AND KAIROS: TIME AND FAITH*Chronos*

Attention must now turn to the type of time that one must submit to while traversing in Facebook. Insofar as the internet is inextricably hooked to the infrastructure of the computer, which runs on the time set by a clock, one can argue that the internet also operates on “clock time,” which is a very Modern conception of time. This is significant, because “clock time” is premised upon the ability to conceive of one moment being followed by another. It is a scientifically quantifiable time, with discernible units of measure. Yet, in order for time to become a unit of scientific measure, it must be turned into what Walter Benjamin calls “homogeneous, empty time.”¹⁶ Time must be homogeneous because scientific measurements of any kind require all units of measure to be absolutely identical to one another. And time must be empty because the most consistent way of ensuring such homogeneity is to strip these units of time of any substantive content.¹⁷ The kind of time you can set your watch to, according to Robert Gibbs, has to be such that each moment has to be made to pass by and pass away, which can only be so if the moment had no significance in and of itself.¹⁸ Thus, while contemporary clock time is characterized by a march of moments, it is a march of the same type of moment—the “uniform mathematic moment,”¹⁹ with that same type of empty moment brought before you over and over again. It is the march of one godforsaken moment after another.

Under conditions where time is emptied and laid out on a string, what time becomes is a disposable commodity in which culturally, what matters is the intensity of the present moment. Indeed, Graham Ward argues that contemporary culture is one that “idolizes the present, the seizure of the present,” because in idolizing the “present as such,” one is experiencing a secular version of “eternity as the fullness of time.”²⁰ In order to create the “present as such,” however, it becomes necessary to change the relationship between past, present and future in such a way that no one moment has a real and organic relationship with another. To authentically experience the present, the past has to be excised from the present, reduced to a moment that is to be

¹⁶ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 263–4.

¹⁷ With reference to novels, Benedict Anderson argues that “nothing better shows the immersion of the novel in homogeneous, empty time than the absence of those prefatory genealogies.” This can easily transfer to contexts outside that of the novel. See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 2006), 26.

¹⁸ Robert Gibbs, “Eternity in History: Rolling the Scroll,” in *Liturgy, Time and the Politics of Redemption*, ed. Randi Rashkover and C.C. Pecknold (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 128.

¹⁹ Gibbs, “Eternity in History,” 128.

²⁰ Graham Ward, *Cities of God* (London: Routledge, 2000), 154.

seized, lived, and then tossed aside. This conception of time in theory is what underpins the experience of Facebook posts in practice. For whether it is in status updates, photo uploads or articles, Facebook harnesses the fullness of the present in order for the posts themselves to be fully experienced within the timeline. However, the fact that these posts are framed within the timeline infrastructure also means that there is no discernible link between one post and those that are lined up before or after it, and no narrative framework to connect the posts as a whole. This is the case even when posts are lined up within the same user-profile.

The idolization of the present which excises the present from other moments and forbids any narrative to cohere these moments, will also have an impact on the way the future is apprehended. As each moment becomes isolated from another, the future becomes a moment whose contours remain completely unknown, because there is no real basis from which one can apprehend the future, except insofar as it is a repetition of the present. This repetition—the “recurrence of the same”—is identified in our day by Friedrich Nietzsche in works like his *Notes on the Eternal Recurrence*. It is a state where “everything has returned,” and where “all that has existed countless times will return again countless times.”²¹ If that were true, however, then any attempt to imagine the future as anything different from the present would appear to be a pretentious illusion.

Moreover, any attempt to transform the present to project it into the future is but a novelty, which is ephemeral and thrown into the ash heap of history as soon as it arrives. The Protestant poet, Kathleen Norris, has taken notice of the effects of living under a cultural condition marked by a unilinear structure of time.²² In her *Cloister Walk*, Norris speaks of living in such a time as a “death-in-life... when my capacity for joy shrivels up.”²³ But the effects do not stop at the level of culture, for if the church were to uncritically immerse itself in such a culture, the practice of faith as a belief in things unseen would be effected as well. This ties back to paragraph 13 in *Lumen fidei*, a line of which reads: “in refusing to await the time of promise, his life-story disintegrates into a myriad of unconnected instants.”²⁴

It is worth considering how *Lumen fidei*'s notion of life as a series of “unconnected instants” links up with the notion of faith under the lordship of time conceived as a string of disconnected, un-narrated

²¹ Karl Jaspers, *Nietzsche: An Introduction to the Understanding of His Philosophical Activity* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 352.

²² For a detailed display of this point, see Matthew John Paul Tan, “St. Evagrius of Pontus and Redeeming Time in Postmodernity,” *The Church and Postmodern Culture* (September 23, 2013), <http://theotherjournal.com/churchandpomo/2013/-09/23/stev-agrius-of-pontus-and-redeeming-time-in-postmodernity/>.

²³ Kathleen Norris, *The Cloister Walk* (New York: Riverhead, 1996), 130-1.

²⁴ *Lumen fidei*, no. 13.

moments. To do this, one must turn to the issue of how memories of past events are apprehended, particularly when done so within a unilinear structure of time. This is important for two reasons. More generally, it is important because *Lumen fidei* makes an explicit tie between faith and the memory of the past. In paragraph 4, *Lumen fidei* calls faith “a light coming from the past, the light of the foundational memory of the life of Jesus.”²⁵ Elsewhere, Francis makes an important tie that faith has to truth. And thus faith, like “the question of truth is really a question of memory,” dealing “with something prior to ourselves and can succeed in uniting us in a way that transcends our petty and limited individual consciousness.”²⁶

The interactions between faith and memory—and the changes to that relationship when the unilinear structure of time in a digital environment becomes normalized—now assume greater importance. This is because understanding the changes in time structure also leads us to a greater understanding of the changes in our apprehension of faith in God’s goodness. In a structure of time where only the present is both the only real moment and also a disposable moment, the past can never be a reality as such. It is instead a specter, a ghost of an experience that comes to the forefront of one’s mind, but can never be *really* experienced. It remains but a mirage which disappears upon arrival. Memory becomes mere nostalgia, an irretrievable mental museum piece. Under such conditions, what faith becomes is but a belief in museum pieces. When faith becomes a belief in things lost in the past, then faith in God’s goodness in the now is reduced to mere optimism, because it has no real basis apart from a distant, unconnected specter of God’s goodness in an irretrievable past.

Under such conditions, one should not be surprised to find—to echo Norris—that joy shrivels up. This is because the joy of God’s intervention in history becomes sporadic, momentary, arbitrary and finally, isolated and disconnected from any other occasion of God’s providential action. Moreover, whenever joy does come, it is a joy that instantly becomes distant in a past that is never retrievable in the present in any real way. All one is left with is the norm, that is, the constant stream of one godforsaken moment after another, and the eternal recurrence. As Walter Benjamin noted, homogenous empty time defined as this unchanging stream of unchanging moments is also a time when radical transformation to that time, or what he calls the “Messianic cessation of happening”²⁷ is snuffed out. This has the effect of curbing faith in God’s goodness, defined in terms of the expectation of God radically transforming an otherwise repetitive sequence of

²⁵ *Lumen fidei*, no. 4.

²⁶ *Lumen fidei*, no. 25.

²⁷ Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 283.

events, or at best, expecting such a transformation to be sporadic and momentary interruptions to a normality where joy is absent.

Kairos

If this flattened streamlining of time as *chronos* can render the apprehension of providence into pleasant but episodic interruptions to a joyless normality, how is it any different to a Judeo-Christian conception of time, time as *kairos*? Normally, the notion of *kairos* has been explained in terms of every moment being an “eternal present.” This is true at one level, since every moment is *the* time, so *kairos* can interrupt *chronos*’ cataloging of moments as merely *a* time. Be that as it may, such an interruption does not get to the more fundamental challenge of transforming the present’s relationship to the past and future in a unilinear structure of time. Indeed, insofar as the relationship between the past and future is left unconsidered, and a real connection between past, present and future is never made, the notion of “eternal present” may even serve to reinforce the fetishization of the present under the lordship of “clock time.”

One way of understanding the apprehension of time and faith in divine providence in a *kairotic* register would involve apprehending time in a Hebraic register. To this, Rabbi Edward Feld’s commentary on the Psalms entitled *Joy, Despair and Hope*²⁸ provides a wonderful insight on the psalmic confusion of time. In a commentary on the confusion of tenses in Psalm 92, Feld makes reference to the prophetic experience of an ahistorical God’s concern for his very historical creatures. For Feld, the prophetic imagination becomes paradigmatic of the psalmic apprehension of God’s operations in the world, and by extension, becomes paradigmatic of the way God’s time and operations enter ours.

For the prophets, Feld says, the experience of God’s involvement in the world is not one that is sporadic, occurring in a single, arbitrarily chosen moment and then lost irretrievably to the past. Rather, in the prophetic imagination, God’s work so penetrates the fabric of time that, when it makes contact with and is experienced in the present, it goes beyond the present and weaves its way into the past such that, for the prophet, the present becomes linked to the past through the golden thread of God’s providential operations.²⁹ Moreover, this golden thread becomes so woven into both past and present that one becomes another. In the psalms and prophetic writings, this interweaving comes out in utterances where tenses become confused in the same stanzas.³⁰ Feld notes that the prophets experience the works of God so viscerally

²⁸ Edward Feld, *Joy, Despair, and Hope: Reading Psalms* (Eugene: Cascade, 2013).

²⁹ Feld, *Joy, Despair, and Hope*, 139.

³⁰ Feld, *Joy, Despair, and Hope*, 141.

that they speak of it as already having happened in the past.³¹ Moreover, in the prophetic imagination, the future is framed in the past tense, so long as they remained anchored in the providential action of God, which again are felt so intensely that even before they are experienced in the present, they have already broken into the past. In Feld's words: "Prophetic poetry sees God's expected, yet unaccomplished acts so vividly that the past tense is used to describe an activity of God that is yet to be performed.... Future possibility has become fact – the future is not opened but already determined."³²

Indeed, in the prophetic imagination, God's operations in the past constitute the very superstructure by which the present is experienced and the future is understood, with references to the past and passages in the psalms that are read in the past tense actually refer to a future promise of providence. This then feeds back onto our experience of the present. Seen in the light of the prophetic imagination, the present is not the joyless norm that is interrupted by the joy of God's providence. Rather, under the lordship of the *kairos*, it is the joy of the Messianic in the now that is the norm and joylessness that is the aberration. Seen in this register, the anxiety we have regarding the future shows the extent to which we are yet to be under the lordship of God's time. God's time is the aegis under which Benjamin's "Messianic cessation of happening" takes hold in history.

CONCLUSION: FACEBOOK AND RECITATION

To reiterate what we have covered above, Facebook is not just a newsfeed. It is a space. Even more than that, it is an infrastructure that manifests certain commitments about the world, and by extension, certain predispositions pertaining to time. The acceptance of certain lordships of time are not just abstract, they lay the foundation of forming certain predispositions pertaining to faith in God's providence. Traversing through such a space, therefore, cannot help but become formative of a person's faith. Thus, if traversing through the space of Facebook can become erosive of faith in terms of the expectation of God's providence in everyday life, then the church's exclusive traversing through Facebook is arguably harmful to the church's mission in becoming a contact point for God's providence in an enduring fashion.

It would seem that, if faith is to be nurtured, it has to be done so as the church traverses through a space that militates against faith, just as it has in every age, and just as it must now in the space of social media. If that were so, then there must exist a mode of travelling by which the adulteration of faith under the lordship of clock-time, as is institutionalized in Facebook, can be countered. This mode consists in having

³¹ Feld, *Joy, Despair, and Hope*, 139.

³² Feld, *Joy, Despair, and Hope*, 139.

the church's traversing of clock time parallel a traversing within a prophetic imagination described above, an imagination that operates under the aegis of God's time. This imaginary is operationalized through the practice of liturgy, and this concluding section would focus on the practice of recitation as a fundamental element of liturgy.

William Cavanaugh's *Theopolitical Imagination* is a primer on how liturgy, in particular the Eucharistic liturgy, provides a concrete site that transgresses "spatial and temporal barriers" to unite "all times and places in eternity."³³ In such liturgical transgressions of time, one becomes immersed in a space whereby the past and future are all collapsed into the present. A supplement to the Eucharistic mode of transgressing time can be found in contemporary rabbinical literature, in particular that of Feld. Feld speaks of the seemingly mundane practice of recitation and proclamation of Scripture as the concrete means of actualizing the prophetic imagination. For Feld, recitation with one's lips is not just a neutral instrument by which words on a page are made audible to an audience. Rather, recitation is a practice of emplacement, that is, the creation of a space and the placing of a body within that space. As the body—namely the lips—recites the word of the psalms, one is moving one's body through that space.

The act of corporeally moving through space thereby plants the seeds of faith as a present apprehension of past memory and future expectation via the act of traverse, as highlighted in *Lumen fidei*, no. 9. This corporeal element is indispensable for the nurturing of faith so defined because, as Conor Sweeney has argued, the body stands as a point of convergence between the past, present and future.³⁴ In a similar vein, Feld argues that the act of recitation is an act of faith because it is corporeally enacting, in the present, the future as depicted in the psalms. Recitation plants the seeds of faith because the act of recitation constitutes a foretaste of future reality. In Feld's words, the bodily "intonation of the psalm is both an announcement about future hope and also the creation of that future moment in the present."³⁵

In short, it is in the practice of recitation that one grounds the prophetic imagination, which in turn acts as the locus of resistance to the lordship of clock time in Facebook. In the first instance, recitation places the one at prayer in the locus of that imagination, "the house of

³³ William T. Cavanaugh, *Theopolitical Imagination: Discovering the Liturgy as a Political Act in an Age of Global Consumerism* (New York: T&T Clark, 2004), 118.

³⁴ Conor Sweeney, "A Baptismal Theology of Relation: Overcoming the Intra-cosmic Temptation," Presentation at the Transcending Dualisms Conference, John Paul II Institute for Marriage and Family in Melbourne (May 2014). Although Sweeney uses the language of signification in his coverage on the body, the signification here does not imply an absence of a real presence in that signification. Rather, Sweeney implies a sacramental imagination in which the sign is organically making present what is signified.

³⁵ Feld, *Joy, Despair, and Hope: Reading Psalms*, 145.

God.” The act of recitation is the embodied experience of the providence of God in the here and now, and it stretches that space to other bodies via the communication of experience to those that have ears to hear.³⁶ In the second instance, through the practice of recitation, one is doing more than merely indulging in cognitive fantasy. Indeed, one is actively resisting the inevitability of lordship of “clock-time” by creating a real space, with a real field of dispositions whereby another time, God’s time, is made perceivable here and now. In so doing, the practice of recitation is one, but not the only, practice whereby the adulterating effects of traversing through the church of Facebook can be resisted, and the “doing of that new thing” (Isa 43:19), where God’s providence is made present, and where faith in that future providence is vindicated in the now. **M**

³⁶Feld, *Joy, Despair, and Hope: Reading Psalms*, 145.