

# The Role of Participatory Culture in Faith Formation

by Eileen D. Crowley

At an eightieth birthday party for a religious sister, I watched a sixty-year-old friend use my iPad to help the “birthday girl” get her Facebook settings sorted out. Sister Stella wanted to be able to keep up with her far-flung nieces and nephews and grand-nieces and grand-nephews. What had she seen so far on Facebook that had motivated her eagerness to master this social media platform? Family photos and videos of everyday moments and special occasions. Facebook helped Sister Stella stay in the family loop.

Before her retirement, Sister Stella had served as a high school teacher for many, many decades and had used a variety of media throughout the course of her teaching career. She was not afraid of learning new technology; she just needed a little help. Most of her Baby Boomer, Generation X, and Millennial graduates likewise use Facebook to keep up with family near and far. Whether or not they like this particular social media platform (and many people do not!) is not the point. Facebook is where their family members choose to communicate. Consequently, other family members of whatever age climb the steep learning curve of navigating Facebook.

Much of what Sister Stella’s family members post on Facebook comes under a term now familiar to most communications scholars: “participatory culture.” Henry Jenkins, who coined the term, described it in this way:

A culture with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby experienced participants pass along knowledge to novices. In a participatory culture, members also believe their contributions matter and feel some degree of social connection with one another (at the least, members care about others’ opinion of what they have created.)<sup>1</sup>

## Media Art Making and Sharing in Popular Culture

News organizations and corporations have mastered ways to motivate ordinary people to share the fruits of their creativity via social media. Weather forecasters regularly post images sent in by viewers of handfuls of hail, swirl-

<sup>1</sup> Henry Jenkins with Ravi Rurushotma, Margaret Weigel, Katie Clinton, and Alice J. Robison, *Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2009), xi.

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ing waters in flooded neighborhoods, advancing tornados, and towering snow piles, as well as beautiful sunrises, sunsets, flowers, rainbows, and other images of local beauty. Corporations hold contests to encourage people to create videos for possible inclusion on their websites, or even to be broadcast on the Super Bowl. Reality television producers welcome viewers to create videos of their singing, dancing, and other talents for the chance of their becoming contestants. Nonprofit organizations invite members to share photos and videos of local events and action. A bucket-of-ice-over-the-head challenge for one foundation went viral on Facebook and beyond in Summer 2014:

With everyone from former President George W. Bush to Justin Bieber and Shakira posting online videos of themselves dumping buckets of ice over their heads in the name of charity, the viral “Ice Bucket Challenge” continues to dominate social media and has now raised more than \$40 million for amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, commonly known as Lou Gehrig’s disease.<sup>2</sup>

Through videos of themselves completing this challenge that are posted on Facebook, young and old alike challenged family and friends to undergo this icy drenching and to give money to ALS research. Via this form of civic participatory culture, “More than 739,000 new donors have given money to the association. That’s more than double the \$19.4 million in total contributions the association received during the year that ended Jan. 31, 2013, according to a filing with the Internal Revenue Service.”<sup>3</sup>

The evidence of this extraordinary social media phenomenon is something for parish leaders to ponder. The basic statistics regarding Facebook are startling. Each day more than 968 million people post on Facebook.<sup>4</sup> Millions of ordinary people around the world post photos and videos not only to Facebook but also to Twitter and other social media websites.<sup>5</sup> People using the media-making technology available on their smartphones expect people may be interested in what they produce, and so they post these photos on social media. Sister Stella is interested in those photos and videos, at least to the extent that those media productions relate to those she loves.

### Media Art Making and Sharing in Roman Catholic Church Contexts

What is strange and disappointing to me—as one who knows and teaches the Roman Catholic pastoral instructions on social communications and the annual World Communications Day papal messages on the importance of communication—is how slowly the practices of participatory culture have entered Roman Catholic culture. A look at a parish website can be a discouraging experience for a communications professional who cares about the church reaching out and engaging our people who live in today’s participatory culture.

At the parish level, too many churches continue to depend on bland diocesan webpages that list their address and Mass schedule. Too many parishes have yet to appreciate that today’s newcomer to a town or any other person motivated to seek out a faith community typically first hunts on the Internet to find that community. Parishes that have managed to enlist someone to create a basic website have yet to realize that something more is required than the PDF of their parish bulletin (itself usually a boring publication rarely read even by those who pick them up),

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2 Emily Steel, “Ice Bucket Challenge’ Donations for A.L.S. Research tops \$41 Million,” *New York Times* (August 21, 2014), [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/22/business/media/ice-bucket-challenge-donations-for-als-top-41-million.html?emc=edit\\_th\\_20140822&nl=todaysheadlines&nlid=58900381&r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/22/business/media/ice-bucket-challenge-donations-for-als-top-41-million.html?emc=edit_th_20140822&nl=todaysheadlines&nlid=58900381&r=0).

3 Steel, “Ice Bucket Challenge.” To see how the movement started, see the ESPN video and story, Darren Rovell, “Sports World Helps Drive Challenge,” *ESPN* (August 21, 2014), [http://espn.go.com/espn/story/\\_/id/11385374/sports-world-helps-drive-als-ice-bucket-challenge](http://espn.go.com/espn/story/_/id/11385374/sports-world-helps-drive-als-ice-bucket-challenge).

4 Craig Smith, “By the Numbers: 200+ Amazing Facebook User Statistics (August 2015),” *DMR: Digital Marketing Stats/Strategy/Gadgets* (August 7, 2015), [http://expandedramblings.com/index.php/by-the-numbers-17-amazing-facebook-stats/#.U\\_qVsktE\\_nQ](http://expandedramblings.com/index.php/by-the-numbers-17-amazing-facebook-stats/#.U_qVsktE_nQ).

5 Craig Smith, “How Many People Use 800+ of the Top Social Networks, Apps and Digital Services?” *DMR: Digital Marketing Stats/Strategy/Gadgets* (August 12, 2015), [http://expandedramblings.com/index.php/resource-how-many-people-use-the-top-social-media/#.U\\_qW8UtE\\_nQ](http://expandedramblings.com/index.php/resource-how-many-people-use-the-top-social-media/#.U_qW8UtE_nQ).

the names and contact information for staff members, and rules about who can and cannot request preparation for celebrating a sacrament. Parishes that have embraced the importance of websites may create a photo album, but unless someone is responsible for frequent updating of that site, the website becomes stale. It is not a reflection of whatever *current* parish life exists that might attract others to inquire or to dare attend a Sunday liturgy.

### Why Is This Happening?

Why is there such an ecclesial disconnect with what is happening in other aspects of our participatory culture and popular engagement with social media? Here is my hunch. Most pastoral leaders, other than youth and campus ministers, typically are (at least to some degree) functionally illiterate in the languages of today's media art-making and media art-sharing.

Today's coworkers in the vineyard of the Lord need to tend to the creation of an environment where the fruits of today's participatory culture have a chance to flourish. However, pastoral leaders will themselves need to be as willing as Sister Stella to brave the learning curve involved in today's social media and the media arts that are found on these platforms. They need to welcome collaboration with lay faithful who already possess skills and have evaluative criteria for what makes for a good image or a worthy video. Collaboration is essential to fostering the media arts. Pastors and pastoral leaders need not themselves be experts in the arts of photography and video. But they surely need to be willing to collaborate with others who have this expertise. In a parish setting the person with that expertise might be a member of their youth ministry, a parishioner who is an avid amateur photographer, or a schoolteacher who has already mastered basic photo and video skills as part of her encouraging student media art-making. Potential collaborators abound in our participatory culture. Permit me to focus now on opportunities in faith formation at the parish level.

### But Why Bother?

Encouraging the creativity of parishioners means inviting people into the ongoing creative action of God's creating Spirit. What's more, it has the potential to engage them in what Pope Francis has called the nurturing of "an authentic culture of encounter."<sup>6</sup> In a multiweek group process I call Photography as a Spiritual Practice,<sup>7</sup> I have witnessed the spiritual growth of church members who engage in the simplest exercises of photo-making. I have made an open website so that church leaders can use it and adapt it for their local projects of encouraging their people to share their gifts. Some common photography assignments can be as simple as sending people out to answer the following questions: "Where do you see grace in your neighborhood?" "Where do you see beauty in your neighborhood?" "What do you see in your neighborhood that you think needs attention or change?" "What is one of your callings in the world and how might you illustrate that literally or metaphorically in photography?" "How do you think God sees the world?" "What does God look like?" "Where might our community need to take action?" "Where do you find hope?"

The *artistic* fruits of the small group process of Photography as a Spiritual Practice will necessarily vary in aesthetic quality, given the wide range of skills in any group, although a significant aspect of participatory culture is that the more-experienced are happy to share their skills with novices. The potential *spiritual* fruits are great. The *process* of people attending to the world around them potentially can lead them to develop what theologian Karl

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6 Francis, "Message of Pope Francis for the 48<sup>th</sup> World Communications Day: Communication at the Service of an Authentic Culture of Encounter" (June 1, 2014), [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/communications/documents/papa-francesco\\_20140124\\_messaggio-comunicazioni-sociali.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/communications/documents/papa-francesco_20140124_messaggio-comunicazioni-sociali.html).

7 Eileen D. Crowley, *Photography as a Spiritual Practice* website, <http://www.photogsp.weebly.com>. I have provided guidelines, suggestions, and resources for parish leaders to use in developing their own small groups who engage in this process.

Rahner called “the poetic capacity.” People who look at the world through a camera—whether for still or moving images—become more attuned to the world around them. They get into the habit of paying attention to the details of their daily world, even when they are not using their camera. They learn to truly stop long enough to *see*.

The potential to invite people to share their media art-making and media art-sharing is real and present. Potential topics for this creativity abound. The encouragement of and sharing of media arts as the focus for deep reflection on grace in the world—in parish youth groups and campus ministry, worship, and faith formation—potentially can bear great spiritual fruit. The potential for the empowerment of parishioners of every age to be more creative and for them to share that creativity on social media, as well as in other face-to-face settings, awaits every pastoral leader and parishioner.

Are we willing to invite this creativity in our parishes? Will our photography and video of moments of God’s grace join the family photos on Sister Stella’s Facebook and other social media?

The participatory culture “ship” has already sailed. Dare we find a way to jump on board? If not, what are we waiting for?