The Good News in a Digital Age:
A Call to the Contemplative
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Good morning and greetings from Santa Barbara, California. I would like to thank Dr. Ruffini and Dr. Govekar for their invitation to participate in the Plenary Assembly. Members, Superiors, and Consultors of the Dicastery, it is an honor to have this opportunity to address you all on this topic of digital technologies which I believe is central to understanding Christian discipleship and spiritual formation today.

i.

As an Anglican with a Southern Baptist upbringing, I would like to begin with a Testimony and a Confession—two defining practices from these faith traditions.

My Testimony: Twelve years ago, in 2010, I converted and invited the iPhone 4 (affectionately known as the Jesus-Phone by Apple fans) into my life. My husband and I took the leap of faith, accepting the Jesus-Phone into our lives because we believed in its promise to make our work and family lives better and easier to manage.

And after a long stint of conscientious objection to giving over my life data to Mark Zuckerberg, I finally joined Facebook in 2013 (and then dumped FB 6 years later in 2019). I have texted, I have blogged, I have played Candy Crush. I have streamed countless podcasts, videos and music through my phone; and I rely on my digital calendar every morning to what lies ahead each day.

Through these years of digital living, I have been grateful for how my devices help me to fashion a life that is more convenient and more efficient, and even pleasurable. But, just as the Christian faith asserts that Jesus transforms anyone who opens themselves to His Presence, I can personally testify to the curious way in which the Jesus-Phone has transformed my relationships, my work patterns, my routines of how I spend my time and how I engage my spaces, even the patterns of thinking and my hearts' preoccupations. The more I consider how deeply the logic and presence of my digital technologies have penetrated my subconscious, the more troubled I have become.

And so, my confession: For the last five years—despite being a scholar of digital technologies-- I have grown discontent about all things digital—especially my email inbox, which fills constantly like a form of reverse quick sand. The sense of satisfaction I used to derive from engaging technologically, from swiping through my feeds, have been replaced with cognitive dissonance, utter exhaustion, and annoyance.

During my years on Facebook, even when I was enjoyed the pleasures of receiving daily doses of digital affirmation, I sometimes felt like I needed to engage, post, and publish in order to exist. I had come to feel at times that my relationships were primarily cultivated in terms of transactions and reciprocity as I liked or commented my way into people's circle of trust.

Despite these misgivings, when I was deeply plunged in the thick rapids of social media, blogging, email and messaging—it all felt so remarkably normal. It had the look and feel of what it means to be connected and to belong; to be responsible and to be successful, And frankly, to be modern, cool. To be relevant.

Here, is where I find philosopher Charles Taylor helpful when he explains that: Every age is defined by a social imaginary. Taylor writes that a social imaginary "incorporates a sense of the normal expectations we have of each other, the kind of common understanding that enables us to carry out the collective practices that make up our social life." In this sense, a social imaginary is a kind of story that a culture tells itself about what we believe to be our human condition and how we ought to live life together.

So to the extent that a digital life can feel remarkably normal, we can understand it to be training us into a distinctive story, the social imaginary that feels desirable, feels compelling –that is, until we encounter a startlingly different social imaginary.

Consider the one that is embedded in Anglican priest and author Tish Harrison Warren's description of corporate confession found in Christian practice:

> *"In church each week, we repent together....Confession reminds us….Our failures or successes in the Christian life are not what define us or determine our worth before God or God's people. Instead, we are defined by Christ's life and work on our behalf. We kneel…..We confess and repent…. And then—what a wonder!—the word of absolution: "Almighty God have mercy on you, forgive you all*

your sins through our Lord Jesus Christ, strengthen you in all goodness, and by the power of the Holy Spirit keep you in eternal life."

And then she goes on:

When we confess and receive absolution together, we are reminded that none of our pathologies, neuroses, or sins, no matter how small or secret, affect only us. We are a church, a community, a family. We are not simply individuals with our pet sins and private brokenness…. If we are saved, we are saved together—as the body of Christ, as a church. Because of this, I need to hear my forgiveness proclaimed not only by God but by a representative of the body of Christ in which I receive grace, to remind me that though my sin is worse that I care to admit, I'm still welcome here. I'm still called into this community and loved.

When we have been drinking deeply of our digital world and its social imaginary, running across such an account of Christian confession and the Church is to come against up something that feels positively alien. Warren's description brings into sharp relief the vast distance between the posture we practice when we are steeped in the social imaginary of our digital ecology and the posture that Christian spirituality encourages. Our normalized digital practices of keeping up, grasping for attention, and seeking the reward of affirmation begin to feel paltry and thin against the sheer magnificence of what is promised in the ritual of confession & absolution: to be invited to freely admit our failures and discover that we are still loved and welcomed.

What interests me most is the pathos of our cultural moment: despite what we followers of Christ may profess in our faith, most of us are so desperately trying to keep up with the demands of our digitally-saturated lives that we simply lose track of who or where we even are.

We lose track of the fact that the Christian tradition produces a social imaginary that understands our embodiment, our worth, our relationship with time and the Other in terms that are completely opposite from the story we are trained in when enmeshed within the contemporary digital ecology. And we end up living lives that express a story that does not quite match up with the theological and faith commitments that we profess to be true.

So, this morning, I would like to first (1) describe the story—or social imaginary—that the digital world is training us in; and then (2) explore how viewing digital practice as a form of liturgy can help us begin to reimagine what it means to be the Church in these digital times.

ii.

What is the story we are being trained into?

One key feature of the social imaginary that comes with our digital ecology is the normalized expectation that we live in permanent connectivity. When you look at the history of mass communications and telecommunications, the promise of connection has been there from the start—from the telegraph, to radio, to TV. At the core of the Internet—in all of its amazing networking capacity—was a desire to connect, to share. But, "being connected" in 2022 means something dramatically different from what it meant back in the 1990s when the Internet of yesteryear was accessed through a boxy desktop computer dialed into the walls of our homes or workplaces.

In fact, I would contend that "being connected" today is closer to a state of consciousness—a human condition—than a discrete behavior. The character of today's digital technologies and social media push us towards living in, what media scholars call, a state of permanent connectivity.

A key feature of this permanent connectivity is the fact that

1) our Tech is MOBILE and therefore inescapably ubiquitous: today, it is carried in our pockets, in our bags, strapped on our wrists–so that they seem to be living and breathing along side us as we move throughout the day. A study last year showed that 30% of Americans (18-54) say they are almost constantly online now.

2) And what makes permanent connectivity compelling is that our Tech is SOCIAL –meaning it is embedded in our responsibilities and in our community.

   It is a wonderful thing to be able to stay connected with our family/friends, our schools and our work, but it also means that our family lives, our friendships, our loved one's schooling, our work lives become increasingly reliant and even dependent on our devices. For we are often dealing with social expectations/obligations of always be available and immediately responsive to any text or email. We have come to feel that being online is necessary to being a good parent, good friend, good colleague, good employee, good leader.

3) Finally, layer on the fact that our current digital media and services deliver content that is infinitely novel—there is always new email, posts, messages to check —and what we get when we mix infinitely novelty with the mobile and the social, is a psychological cocktail of pleasures, anxieties and felt expectations.

Even when our devices are not in view or on our bodies, our consciousness has become sufficiently trained and thoroughly immersed in the habits of being formed by an unceasing awareness of how, as Dalton Conley has described, life is constantly "being lived elsewhere." Our bodies are in one place, but our minds and consciousness dwell on the stuff of our screens. This is what it means to live in permanent connectivity. When we are at work, having lunch, or sitting through a meeting, we feel this sense that something else is always happening, something potentially more important, and we feel the itch to peek at our devices and know.

It might be apt to borrow the Biblical notion of "abiding" to describe our relationship with our technologies today. In the same way that Jesus called his disciples to abide in Him as He would abide in them, we too have become a people who abide in the digital, and the digital abides in us.

Evidence of such abiding can be found in how much time we spend looking at our screens: In 2019: the average American child age 8-12, was engaged in non-school related screen time almost 5 hours a day. This screen time increases for teenagers 13-18 to 7.5 hours a day – which is almost half of their waking hours. Lest we think that digital issues is a "young people's problem" – PARENTs and older generations are spending just as much time, if not more. Before the pandemic (2020): 56% parents themselves admitted to being on social media too much; 68% reported being at least sometimes distracted by phone when spending time with kids.

What is interesting to note about our screen time is that we actually have little or no awareness of what we are doing during a significant portion of that time. One study showed that our time spent online goes by largely with little reflection because they are an accumulation of micro-moments—in between commitments, waiting in line, waiting for the hot water to come on….The digital practices that characterize our lives are largely habitual, automatic…even compulsive.

iii.

In her book, The Human Condition, Hannah Arendt noted that a reporter characterized the first successful satellite launch as a first "step towards escape from men's imprisonment to the earth." Arendt saw this milestone as one in a long line of technologies driven by a "wish to escape the human condition."

Arendt's observation from 1958 continues to ring true today when we look at our digital landscape. Perhaps we are compulsively driven to be permanently connected because it is a part of our "wish to escape the human condition"? Consider our fascination with the plethora of digital options that promise to liberate us from the uncertainties, inconveniences, and constraints that come with the limitations of our physical bodies, being as they are: embedded in a given place and given time. Consider how we wrap ourselves in digital blankets of unending news updates to keep ourselves warm with the comfort of knowledge, ever seeking to calm our fears and increase the reach of our control. Consider how the carnival of social media, streaming entertainment and online retail promises to reduce the distance we feel from each other and offer new solutions to the loneliness and alienation that philosophers, artists, and theologians have long pondered through the ages.

Indeed, often it seems we run into the beckoning arms of our digital technologies because we feel that the permanent connectivity will dull the pain. As Pascal once remarked: 'Being unable to cure death, wretchedness and ignorance, we have decided in order to be happy, not to think about such things.' To know that even Pascal, living in the seventeenth century, had observed our instinct to run away from the helplessness of being human is strangely comforting. We aren't the only ones who have had to struggle against the problems of misery and brutality.

What is different today, however, is that our digital ecology is disturbingly Effective at helping us "not to think about such things." The digital realm often offers us what Jean Baudrillard termed the hyperreal, an enhanced version of reality, tricked out with glamorous, alluring filters that make it impossible to ignore. Employing lead-edge insights of behavioral psychology and brain science, and finely calibrated algorithms that calculate the optimal way to keep us tethered to their sites, digital media industries have sought to colonize our attention, and unabashedly search for new and efficient ways to monetize our most basic needs for relationship and belonging. The same experts that design casinos and other addictive industries are brought in to consult about what types of notifications, what color buttons and badges, what types of emotional content are optimal for training our brains to become activated and hooked on dopamine. These platforms understand that we like things that are sexy, funny, and violent—and they know that when we are tired, we have little willpower to resist the auto-play of the next video that will

start in less than 4 seconds. With such vast system of persuasion in place, it is no wonder that we feel compelled to turn to our screens whenever being human is just too much to bear.

And so, by and by, the digital encourages us to become a people who are living on the run. Trained into Silicon Valley's vision of the good life: a life of maximum optimization where we are promised the capacity to expand our influence, increase our efficiency and master the art of getting things done—we tell ourselves that we are running in order to keep up. But, I believe very often, too often, we are running from the pain of being human.

The Good News is that, unlike what many presume, Christianity is not a religion that offers a formula of escape in exchange for good works or sacrifice. At the heart of following Jesus is the steadfast promise that God's very presence is what gives us hope and empowers us to go through all that being human can mean. In the incarnation of Jesus, we see how the God of the Universe consenting to experience the indignities of the human condition--all the frustrations of poverty, ethnic marginalization, and political oppression. In his crucifixion, Jesus chose to not withdraw His Hand but endured humiliation and death, undoing their powers through His resurrection life.

The Good News is that it is this God who dwells in solidarity with us when we are in the ashes; the Good News is that, as Jurgen Moltmann once wrote that: it is this God who wants, and wishes, and waits for us. "God is our last hope because we are God's first love."

iv.

When we ponder how the social imaginary implicit to our permanent connectivity has drawn us far away from the Divine One who wants, wishes, and waits for us, we are left with a practical question: what can we do to re-align our lives to reflect the truth of our professed faith?

One paradigm I have found particularly helpful is viewing digital practice as a form of liturgy.

In philosopher James KA Smith's books, Desiring the Kingdom and You are What You Love, he draws from an Augustinian understanding of Christian formation and bodily practices, and suggests that, rather than viewing human beings as being formed primarily by knowledge or beliefs, we should better appreciate how we are shaped by our loves—the desires that churn in our guts. He write that what we do with our Bodies actually signal and train our loves towards a particular version of the good life.

To understand ourselves as desiring creatures actually illuminates how it is that, despite what knowledge we may have about how corporations are manipulating us through the addictive designs of our apps and devices—despite our intuitive sense that aspects of our digital habits are impoverishing our lives, despite how we may know a lot about how we should live, that knowledge often doesn't translate into the transformed life.

But, if we can recognize ourselves to be desiring creatures, formed by the visceral and the bodily, then we might re-see how our seemingly mundane routines function to train us towards some goal, some end, some telos. In all of our digital practices of checking our emails, reading our social media feeds, responding on Twitter, when we first wake up, right before we go to bed, in between meetings, waiting in lines, our desires and our souls are being formed—we are becoming trained towards becoming some sort of person.

And so, when we are unreflectively adopting the taken-for-granted norms in our society, we will find ourselves engaging in what Smith calls "secular liturgies," personal and cultural habits that we routinely practice with our bodies, which have the effect of mis-forming our desires. According to Smith: "Secular liturgies capture our hearts by capturing our imaginations and draw us into ritual practices that "teach" us to love something very different from the Kingdom of God."

So, to awaken ourselves to how our bodily routines both signal and shape our loves, and who we are becoming, we can ask something like: where in my daily life are there secular liturgies that erect blinders and obstacles to my recognizing when God is present or speaking? If the first-century disciples were so preoccupied and caught up in their everyday dramas that they felt compelled to ask, "But when did we see you, Jesus?" how much worse it is for us living in a 21st century modern society where our digital capacity to fill ourselves with hurry, noise, and crowds is infinite and unbounded? How do our digital secular liturgies train us to devalue that which is proximate to us, happening all around us in the grocery store, waiting on line, in the taxi cab, or even in our own living rooms? Have we missed opportunities to encounter the Christ in the quiet of our spirits or in the holy presence of the unexpected guest within our physical proximity?

After identifying our secular liturgies, Smith recommends that we develop counter-liturgies that push back against the mis-formations of the heart. Instead of simply removing the bad, we ought to fill

ourselves with something good. Why? Because our hearts are restless, and will remain so until we find our rest in God. So, in response to our digital secular liturgies—turning to our devices whenever we're waiting or bored, our soothing daily wind-down of thirty minutes with Instagram or Netflix— we should ask: how can I disrupt these digital habits and open myself up to the opportunity to taste a different kind of living? Can I seek out generative approaches to developing practices and routines that can re-direct my loves back to experiencing communion with God and others in my life?

An obvious place to start exploring ideas for counter-liturgies is within our Christian heritage of spiritual disciplines. Cultivating such disciplines of solitude, silence, lectio divina, prayer, fasting as alternative approaches to meeting the stresses and anxieties of our lives, re-centering ourselves in the presence of God—they can be practiced in their traditional forms, or adapted to the digital context (such as fasting from particular apps or devices) and seen anew as "counter-liturgies" that push back against the subtle but real mis-formations of the heart when our lives are framed by the dictates of the digital.

Given how deeply our digital defaults have left us untrained in being fully present to anyone these days, never mind being fully present to ourselves or our God, I believe that we are particularly hungry for the spiritual practices from the contemplative tradition which can train our hearts towards greater expectation for God's presence and communion.

Another approach to counter-liturgies is to try out experiments that can encourage us to develop a taste for something new that, perhaps uncomfortable at first, might become a precious source of life and vitality. Here is one example: Over and against our secular liturgies of digital multi-tasking: what if we engaged in counter-liturgies of mono -tasking (when we drive, only driving, when we are waiting on line, just waiting): what happens to my brain if I stop filling it with content, noise, an agenda? Do I become more aware of the place where I am? Do I become aware of the people around me? What do I hear in my soul, or from God when there is quiet and stillness in me?

And another example: Over and against our secular liturgies of digital ubiquity—allowing the digital to permeate all times and spaces in our lives--we might consider counter-liturgies that protect sacred spaces and sacred times for rest and communion. We might ask ourselves: what new freedom or quiet can we enjoy when we charge our phones outside our bedrooms or living spaces? What do we discover when we guard the first and last 30 minutes of our days as tech-free times? Might we hear our thought again—

whether chaotic or calm? Might we notice the morning light, the smell of rain, or the birdsong being sung outside our window?

vi.

To close, I think it's worth dwelling on the fact that the word "liturgy" in Greek means: "the work of the people." This meaning brings out the way that certain practices are not truly "individual" in nature, but are actually the product of "the people" – that is, many people, a community, a culture. And when we think about social media and so many of our digital practices, they certainly exercise their power, and remain sustainable precisely because they are practiced AS a people, a group, a culture. (Many of us might not remain on Facebook or Twitter unless everyone else we know was there….)

So, if secular liturgies are practices that possess power because we engage in them together, then Christians need to find a way to engage in bodily counter-liturgies together. While personal acts of technological self-discipline and restraint are still essential, I believe it will ultimately be the communal effort in counter-liturgies—the work of the people—that proves effective and sustainable.

It is only when we are together that we can consider how to create conditions of social life that re-train our contemporary sensibilities to quiet our interior life enough to abide in our Lord, in order to see and hear, to discover the God who often chooses to hide Himself in unlikely places & people, and to reveal Himself in due time.

This is where I believe the Church has the unique potential to develop life-giving counter-liturgies that give shape to contemporary Christian discipleship and can genuinely be Good News to our web weary world.

Thank you.