



The Mobile Church App:

Smartphone Evangelization in a Digital World

Do You Remember Purple Ink?

I joined the staff of Saint Pius X in Greensboro, NC, in 1992, and I was a young guy right out of divinity school. My job was to catechize and evangelize the community. I was armed with many books, the Bible, my faith, a Smith Corona word processor, and a *mimeograph*. (If you are reading this and have never heard of those last two things, you are really young. But I am still not fifty, so it really wasn't that long ago.) My Smith Corona was basically a typewriter with a two-inch tall screen. I would save my document to a disk, print it out, and then make copies with purple ink on the mimeograph machine. And yes, I would smell the ink every time. Imagine my joy when I convinced my pastor I could get a computer after only one year on the job. It had Windows 3.1 and I was in the fast lane. It only took two more years for me to get something called a Web browser and actually read content on something they called the World Wide Web. Awesome!



Harness the latest technology to connect people to the body of Christ

It sounds funny to us now, doesn't it? When I think back on how technology improved and changed the way I did things in just the twenty-two years I was in a parish, I cannot help but be amazed. Today, I receive email on my watch, read books and magazines on a tablet, and watch TV shows provided by a little Internet stick placed into a slot on my HDTV. Technology has completely changed the way I live my life and how I communicate with the world around me. Some will say much of the communication is impersonal, but I have found that used correctly, it actually enhances the relationships I have and helps to keep some relationships alive where otherwise they would disappear due to lack of time or face-to-face engagement. And at the center of my communication system is my smartphone. Yes, I do use it to call people, but it also serves as my GPS, my reservation service, my news outlet, my email provider, my music player, and a way to keep my shopping addiction alive. My faith is also supported with this device, as it serves as my prayer book, my Bible, and my source for Catholic news. One thing it doesn't do is connect me with my parish community, because in the midst of all the other apps I use on a daily or weekly basis, *my church community does not have a mobile app*. The place where I experience "the source and summit" of my faith is not represented on my smartphone, the center of my communication universe.

When Is That Event Again?

If you have been around long enough in some form of parish leadership, I am sure you have been amazed at how hard it is to have an informed and engaged parish community.

Have you ever announced an event for weeks, detailed that event in the bulletin, talked about it on your website, and sent out emails, only to have someone ask you the week after the event, "When is that event again?" You are not alone. Where there is a community of human beings, there is a struggle to communicate and make that communication meaningful. And the good news of Jesus Christ is the most meaningful message ever to be communicated. Beyond the desire of any parish community to communicate the details about events exists the primary reason for those events, Jesus.

At LPi, we know that to get a parish to sign a contract with us as its new bulletin provider it will take, on average, seventeen points of contact over time. Those contact points will be email, mailings, face-to-face meetings, visits to our website, etc. Also, a good marketing firm will tell you that it will not only take a quantity of contacts to get the message across, but success will depend on the quality of that communication. A parish has a goal of much greater importance than convincing someone to sign a bulletin: evangelization and catechesis. Can you afford not to try seventeen times to bring Jesus into someone's heart? Should you not try to harness the latest technology to connect people to the body of Christ? Along with all the other ways you seek to build parish engagement and share the message of Jesus, you need to have a voice in the primary arena of communication used today: the mobile app

Why the Church Mobile App?

Mobile apps, whether used on a smartphone or a tablet, have changed how we think about



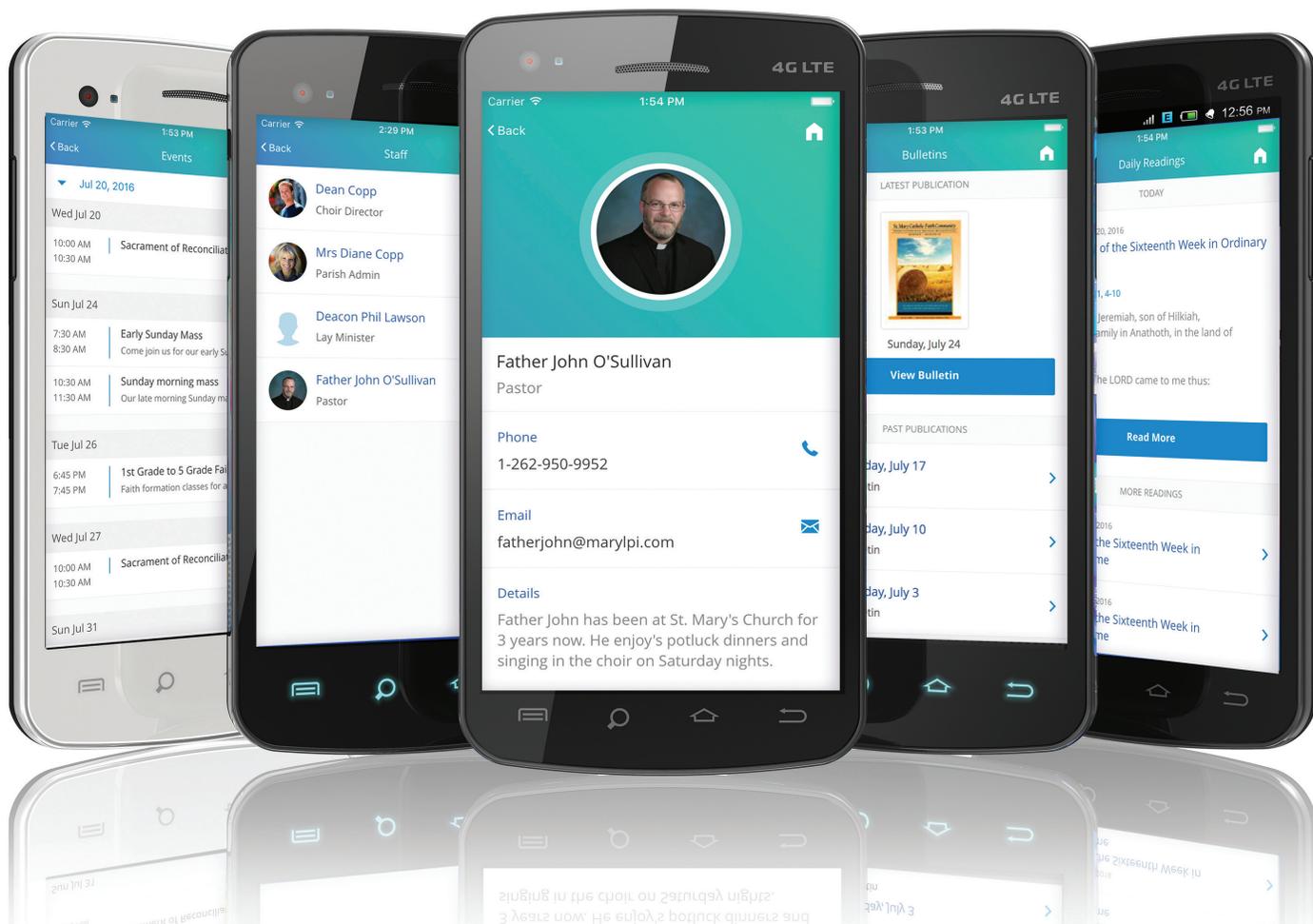
and use mobile technology. Studies show that when people use their smartphones, eighty percent of the time they are using apps. It is how we connect ourselves to all those things that mean something to us. Look on someone's smartphone and you will catch a glimpse into what that person finds important. You will find the games they like to play, the organizations they belong to, the services they use, and the music they like. Should there be anything more important to those in your parish community than their faith? The initial value in a church app is that downloading it is an exercise in belonging. If you belong to something that has value in your life, downloading the app from that entity reinforces your connection.

After reinforcing belonging, the ability to communicate and engage parishioners is a value unsurpassed by other forms of technology. I have apps on my smartphone from other parishes throughout the country. When I give talks about church engagement, I use them to show people I meet how this technology works. I like to tell a story about how effective a church app can be when used to increase engagement.

One day, I was driving between churches, and my phone buzzed. It was a notification about an event coming up that weekend. I looked at my phone and it mentioned a big Italian festival coming up that Saturday. When I pulled over for gas, and saw the event was at Saint Pius X. I thought, "That's my parish!" Then I thought, "I am home this weekend!" Then I started to dream, "A night of Italian food, music, and wine tasting? I am there!" Then I finally realized that the notification came from a church app and my parish does not have a church app. The event was for another St. Pius X somewhere in the US. I was happy to be going home that weekend, but I wasn't going to be at any Italian festival. What a bummer!

If that notification had come from my parish, they would have gotten me. I guarantee I would have been there. I realized then how effective a phone app could be for engaging a community. I imagined all the other opportunities for engagement besides the big events.

If I had still been on staff at the parish, I would have loved to use it for cancellations due to weather, calls



to prayer in the face of tragedies, and schedule changes due to unforeseen circumstances.

Imagine the positive effect it would have had on a day like 9/11. I remember trying to think of all the ways to communicate that we were having a prayer vigil that night and time for people to simply be together. To send out a notification through a mobile app would have by far had the greatest impact.

Of course, communication can be abused. I know of some schools that need to communicate with parents by phone tree seemingly every other day. It gets to the point that many just ignore the call. That is often because every school group has access to the phone tree. You are unable to select when and from whom you want to receive a call. A good mobile app gives the user the option to opt in and out of certain types of notifications. That also means that a good app offers a parish options for its many different ministries and groups.

In your parish, imagine the Knights of Columbus, parish council, youth ministry, and the parish school all wanting their own app. If your app allows the user to opt in and out of notifications for all the different groups in your parish, then all groups can use the app like it was their own. On top of that, the message put forth to the community is that all these groups make up one parish; no group is an entity unto itself. This is such an important message in creating a fully engaged parish walking a stewardship way of life.

You are also making parishioners aware of all the ways they can give of themselves in the parish. They can look at your app and see the long list of opportunities for their time, talent,

and treasure. The vitality of your parish is on display through your app.

Finally, a good church app should serve as a means of good catechesis and evangelization. Links to sacred Scripture, prayers, and the liturgical calendar help users fill their day with faith. Blogs written by parish staff or outside reliable content creators can provide good formation for users, wherever they find themselves. People are able to take their parish with them 24/7, and if they take full advantage of this reality, they can grow in their faith as well.

The New Evangelization

The New Evangelization is a call for the Church to re-propose the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the world and those in the Church who need to strengthen their faith. I would say that includes all of us. We are called to engage people with catechesis and reengage those who have lost a sense of the importance of faith in daily life. Daily life in the modern world, for most, is filled with technology. Young adults, those we seem to be losing at a rapid rate, are the most engaged with technology. By using a church mobile app, a parish has the chance to engage and catechize the future generation of the Catholic Church.

My hope is that my parish community, as well as yours, will seize the opportunity to create an app to reach more people for Christ. I would love to put my parish icon on my phone next to my sports, media, and travel icons. It's time for all parishes to embrace mobile app technology as a ministry tool to meet people in the cyber-world where they already exist. It is a way to demonstrate that we are taking the call for a New Evangelization seriously.

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