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Tweeting and the New Evangelization: An Interview with Father Michel Remery

by [Catholic Pulse Staff](#)

Father Michel Remery, who worked as an architectural engineer for a time in his native Netherlands before responding to his call to the priesthood, has constructed an innovative catechetical project for the New Evangelization that uses social media to great advantage. His new book, *Tweeting with God* (Ignatius Press, 2015), and its affiliated website and phone apps provide clear answers on real questions pertaining to Catholic doctrine, practice, and spirituality. Designed with young people in mind, the project is beginning to find an appreciative audience among older adults, parents, and persons of all stripes.

The book isn't all in tweets — those short messages transmitted through the popular Twitter application — but many of the questions that gave rise to the book were collected through tweeting, and tweets provide a clever device for capsulizing key points drawn from each two-page answer.

We recently caught up with Father Remery to discuss his project and his thoughts on the Church's outreach to a new generation of believers.

CATHOLIC PULSE: *Tweeting with God provides a handy and concise survey of the Catholic faith in an engaging format. How did you arrive at the concept and how did you go about assembling it?*

FATHER MICHEL REMERY: For many years I served in three parishes in Leiden, The Netherlands. After Mass young people would be waiting for me at the church door to ask me questions about the faith. They had so many questions that it was not possible to answer all of these there at the church door. My suggestion that they should write down their questions was taken seriously: In total I received over 1,000 questions via Twitter, emails, Facebook, scratches of notebooks, etc.

After ordering the questions into four large groups (see the four parts in the book), and singling out the questions that were too private or too delicate to discuss in a group, young people and I gathered every fortnight to speak together. We would take one question and search together for an answer.

No questions were taboo, and all opinions were allowed. The main rule was that you would listen to the opinion of the other person without judgement, and that you would try to see why he or she believed she was right. If necessary, in the end of the discussion, I would present the Church's position on the topic, with the same question to listen carefully and try to see why the Church would teach thus.

It's interesting that as we were becoming more experienced in talking about different subjects, looking for the internal logic of the faith, it became less and less necessary to explain extensively the position of the Church, for if you take the right point of departure, all answers fit into the teaching of the Church. We also discovered that there are many good reasons for this teaching. In a few words, we discovered how logical it is to believe!

CATHOLIC PULSE: Young people especially use social media extensively for their everyday communication. What challenges and opportunities does that present to the Church and her mission of evangelization?

FATHER REMERY: Today, people, and especially young people, spend a lot of time online, and in particular on social media. So, if we intend to bring Jesus' message to the people of today, we'll have to be active also online.

Jesus starts where people are to be found. He visits them, talks to them about their concerns. His main "tool" to convince people is his love for them. That is what drives him and that is what people find so attractive in him. He is present in their lives. And then, when a relationship has been established, Jesus goes further and explains all that is demanded to live life to the fullest. The pedagogy of *Tweeting with GOD* is based on this. We, too, intend to start where people are, with their questions, with their ailments, whether spiritual or physical. By witnessing of our own faith in Jesus, without imposing it to others, we demonstrate how it is to walk with Jesus. We invite to get to know Jesus better, by recognizing the logic of his teaching in the light of the entire creation by God. With every specific answer we intend to demonstrate how this fits into the great plan of salvation, which God has prepared for one reason only: His desire to share his love with us.

CATHOLIC PULSE: Tweets are limited to 140 characters. Much of modern communication — texting, for example — involves very brief messages. Some would say that's a symptom of an attention-deficit generation that has been raised on sensory overload. As far as preaching the Gospel or explaining the Catholic faith is concerned, you can't go very deep with 140 words. But what can you accomplish with a tweet?

FATHER REMERY: The challenge of Twitter is to say a lot in just a few words. With *Tweeting with GOD* (#TwGOD), we intend to explain elements of our faith. This is done on the basis of questions of people today. #TwGOD starts there where people are, with their questions about the faith and their lives. Subsequently, it helps them to see what the Church is teaching on this particular point, also referring to those reference texts, especially the Bible. Thus, from the particular questions we intend to demonstrate how this fits in the entirety of our faith in a loving God who created us and is with us.

You're right: This cannot be done uniquely in Tweets. Therefore, we have developed a number of different tools that all serve the same goal. If people are present on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, that's a good place to start. We try to build a relationship with our followers on social media. But the project *Tweeting with GOD* is more than just tweets of 140 characters. Our website (www.tweetingwithgod.com) and the app for Android and Apple expand on the tweeted answer, and so does social media.

The most comprehensive answer can be found in the book, *Tweeting with GOD*, which answers every question on a double page. There is no need to read the book from the beginning to the end: You can go immediately to the question of your interest. On the double page that answers the question presented, you will find a tweet as an appetizer, whilst the body text intends to explain the deeper logic of the faith, investigating the different argumentations that can be heard on the topic.

CATHOLIC PULSE: *Your experience has led you to some strong opinions about the catechetical methods we should be using with young people today. What would you say our approach ought to be? How can we get them to "cast into the deep"?*

FATHER REMERY: In my experience, the most important element when working with young people is to take them, their questions, their difficulties and their joys seriously. In other words: Start where they are. This is about them, isn't it? This is not about what we want to tell them, but about the great support and joy they can find in a life of faith.

When speaking to people, I am always open about my faith in God, and about the fact that I believe it can bring great good to the person with whom I'm speaking. But I cannot force other people to believe: That is a choice everyone has to make for himself. Every person is different, and every situation calls for another approach. So, start where people are, with their

questions and concern.

And do believe in the power of the Holy Spirit: We cannot convert the hearts of people, only the Holy Spirit can do this. We can only use all means we have to tell people about the great love of God and to show them how logical it is to believe. We do this in the first place by our own testimony of faith, and by trying to live constantly as good Christians.

CATHOLIC PULSE: When the secular media reports on the Church, sometimes they take the words of Church officials out of context and report a different message than was intended, which in turns leads to widespread confusion among the people. To what extent can thinking and communicating in tweet-sized "sound bites" help prevent such misinterpretation?

FATHER REMERY: Whenever we communicate, there is always the danger of being misunderstood. That goes for all human communication, in whichever environment. It's a fact that we live in a world which is basing its conclusions ever more on headings and tweet-sized messages. Therefore, we need to adapt to the way we communicate to this way of thinking. The message of the Gospel remains always the same, but the way we present it to people needs to be adapted in such a way that it can reach people's hearts.

In fact, Pope Francis is a wonderful example of someone speaking in tweets. He has the great capacity to say something essential in just a few words, or by using a catching example. That must be the reason that he has so many millions of followers on Twitter. I travel a lot for my work for the European Bishops' Conferences. Wherever I go, people see the Pope in a very favorable light. That is a great basis for the start of a conversation about the faith, both offline and online.

CATHOLIC PULSE: As a Church, both as the universal Church and at the local level, are we doing enough with social media to reach younger people? What are we doing well, and what can we do better?

FATHER REMERY: Many good things are being done. In fact, I believe every initiative that is based on an authentic faith and a true desire to share your faith in God with other people is of great importance. When doing so, it's essential to be yourself, and not to be afraid of witnessing of your own faith. At the same time, it's important to start where people are, in our case often online. From there we hope to help them to make a step forward in life, and

in particular in their faith.

However, it is not at all our intention [with #TwGOD] to replace face-to-face meetings. Rather, we often refer people to their local community and their priests, inviting them to join a faith reflection group or other groups in their community.

CATHOLIC PULSE: What plans do you have for further development of this project?

FATHER REMERY: At the moment we are working on more than 13 translations, always on the request of the local countries. It is our great hope that this project may contribute to the new evangelization, that it may help people to see their lives in the light of the love of God, who loves them whatever they do, and that they may try to give an answer to that love of God for them by working on their personal relationship with him.

(The views expressed in this column are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the positions of Catholic Pulse or the Knights of Columbus.)

Original article:

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