

THE FIELD OF COMMUNICATIVE DISCOURSE OF THE APOSTLES OF THE SLAVS AND THE APOSTLES OF THE DIGITAL CONTINENT: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF CYRIL AND METHODIUS' MODEL OF INCULTURATION AND THE CHURCH'S CONTEMPORARY ENGAGEMENT IN THE DIGITAL WORLD

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DOI: 10.17846/CL.2025.18.2.254-266

Abstract: SZEWCZYK, Marcin – GRALCZYK, Aleksandra. *The Field of Communicative Discourse of the Apostles of the Slavs and the Apostles of the Digital Continent: a Comparative Analysis of Cyril and Methodius' Model of Inculturation and the Church's Contemporary Engagement in the Digital World.* The article presents a comparative analysis of two processes of inculturation in the history of the Church: the mission of Saints Cyril and Methodius in the 9th century and the contemporary engagement of the Catholic Church with digital culture considered primarily at the level of communicative discourse. The study employs historical-comparative and theological-hermeneutical methods to analyse communicative discourses. Cyril and Methodius created a new alphabet (Glagolitic) and codified Old Church Slavonic, achieving full control over the communication medium. The contemporary Church adapts existing commercially-designed digital platforms, limiting its control over transmission. The analysis reveals shared missionary motivation – conveying the Gospel in culturally comprehensible forms, but differences in the nature of media engagement. The study confirms technological determinism thesis – media actively shape communication content. Modern digital inculturation requires new theological criteria considering technology's specificity as a communicative environments that shape media discourse.

Keywords: *inculturation, communicative discourse, language, Cyril and Methodius, digital culture, media, evangelisation*

1 Introduction: language, faith and the new areopagus

Language allows values to be contextually read and interpreted and determines a person's relationship to the world (Herman 2007, 41-42). It is continually reinvented in the constant social negotiation of meanings. At the same time, it shapes its creator-user, influencing the way people think about different aspects of reality (Dilkina – McClelland – Boroditsky 2007, 215, 219-220).

The key point is that language always functions through specific communicative media, from the verbal message to contemporary digital media, which are not neutral carriers but actively shape the content and reception of messages (McLuhan 1964, 7-21; Postman 1985, 18-29). This creates a concrete communicative space within which discourse can take place. Today, such revolutionary and fundamental changes include those resulting from the digitalisation of communication (Winkin 2007, 205-214).

Pope Benedict XVI has called for reflection on the challenges that "digital thought" poses to faith and theology (Adamski 2016, 143-155). In his view, the world of communication encompasses

“the entire cultural, social and spiritual universe of the human person” (Benedict XVI 2011). He saw the digital space not only as a collection of tools, but as a new “digital continent”, an environment to be inhabited and evangelised, but in doing so, the false distinction between the virtual and the real/material must be overcome (Flader 2019, 129-144; Liszka 2005, 341). Each form of evangelisation needs appropriate media capable of creating a discourse that allows the content to be communicated in a way that is relevant to the cultural context of the audience. This call to find meaningful expressions of faith in a new cultural context directly and explicitly relates to the theological concept of inculturation (Flader 2019, 129-144).

There have already been events in the history of the Church in which it has faced challenges arising from the need to inculturate the content it proclaims. One of those with far-reaching consequences in terms of creating new spaces of communicative discourse was the mission of Saints Cyril and Methodius. One of its elements was the creation of a new alphabet adapted to the phonetics of the Slavic languages and the translation of Scripture and liturgical texts into Old Church Slavonic (Friedelówna – Łapicz 1997, 19). Their work is seen as ‘the inculturation of the incarnation of the Gospel in native cultures and also the introduction of these cultures into the life of the Church’ (John Paul II 1985, 21).

The starting point of this article is the juxtaposition of two situations concerning new spaces of media discourse, challenging the adaptation of the mode of communication to the contexts of civilisation. The aim of the article is to find answers to questions concerning the analogies and specific differences between the two entries of the Church into foreign discourse, juxtaposing the challenges and seeking their theological and socio-communicative implications. The tool of analysis will be a historical comparative analysis of the model of inculturation used by Saints Cyril and Methodius with the contemporary Catholic Church's approach to communication embedded in digital discourse. A theological-hermeneutic method will also be useful, involving the analysis and interpretation of theological sources on inculturation, taking into account the teaching of the Church's magisterium on the digital world. The authors will also draw on the ‘sub ratione Dei’ method of interpretation proposed by Henryk Seweryniak (2010, 10-23). Due to the exploratory nature of the article, the authors do not formulate research hypotheses.

2 Overview of contexts and conditions

2.1 The mission of Saints Cyril and Methodius: the inculturation of the Gospel in the Slavic world

2.1.1 The historical-cultural context

The mission of Cyril and Methodius began in the ninth century, in a historical and cultural context due to the peculiarities of the period. In the ninth century, the Great Moravian state encompassed vast lands in Central Europe and was in the process of being Christianised by clerics from the Frankish state and Italy (Lehr-Splawiński 1967, 95-97, 248).

In 862, the ruler Rostislav, wishing to become independent of Frankish influence, asked Byzantium to send missionaries to preach the Gospel in a language the people could understand (unlike the Latin used by Frankish clergy). He looked upon the Byzantine mission as an opportunity to weaken his dependence on the German clergy and to build his own ecclesiastical structure.

For this mission, Emperor Michael III and Patriarch Photius appointed two brothers, Constantine (Cyril) and Methodius. They came from Thessalonica (Solun), a city in Greece with a large Slavic population, and had a suitable missionary background. Their knowledge of the

Slavic language, education and experience made them ideal candidates to undertake missions in Moravia (Kopeć 2023, 52-53).

From the very beginning, the mission was embroiled in a rivalry between the powers. Consequently, the later resistance of the Frankish clergy was not only due to liturgical differences, but also to the fear of losing control over Moravia. Therefore, it should be analysed in a context related to the geopolitical power play between the East Frankish state, Great Moravia, Byzantium and the papacy (Polek 1994, 81-100).

2.1.2 Creation of language and alphabet

Central to the mission of Cyril and Methodius was the creation of the tools necessary to transmit the faith in a Slavic context. The Latin and Greek alphabets were unable to convey the phonetic richness of the Slavic languages. And although the practice of using diacritical marks in the case of the Latin alphabet dates back almost to the sixth century BC, by the ninth century it was concerned with accentuation, not with the specific pronunciation and phonetic variants of letters in individual languages (Jodłowski 1979, 16-28; Oliver 1966).

Alphabet (script) as a medium proved to be a key determinant of the possibility of achieving missionary goals. Without a proper writing system, it would have been impossible to root Christianity in Slavic culture (Ong 1982, 78-116). Therefore, around 863, Cyril constructed a new alphabet, later called Glagolitic, adapted to the phonetics of the Slavic languages. The friars also standardised the Slavic dialect, creating a literary language for the translation of Scripture and liturgical books (Lehr-Splawiński 1959, 45-65).

The friars did not limit themselves to adapting existing communication tools, but created an entirely new medium, precisely tailored to the needs of the mission and the cultural context of the society to which the message was to be addressed. This act of creative media engineering provides the foundation for all subsequent evangelisation efforts (Bolter – Grusin 1999, 45-62).

2.1.3 Theological significance

The work of Cyril and Methodius is a classic example of the inculturation of the Gospel together with the creation of a communicative space of discourse enabling its realisation. The translation of the liturgy and Scripture into Slavonic confirmed the theological dignity of Slavic culture as capable of expressing God's revelation and created a space for the full realisation of the mission (Benedict XVI 2009c; Carey 1989, 13-36), which was made possible by the creation of a suitable communicative medium.

John Paul II (1985, 27) called the work of Cyril and Methodius inculturation. The universality of the Gospel, as their example proved, requires adequate means of expression rooted in the culture of the recipient, especially language. Christ's message is addressed to all peoples, and its authentic reception presupposes the possibility of expressing it in concrete cultural forms, especially in language (John Paul II 1985, 21). This implied that the Word of God can and should be "incarnated" in various cultural contexts (International Theological Commission 1988). The question now arises regarding the "digital continent": can digital culture become a similar environment for encountering the Gospel?

2.2 The Catholic Church in the face of digital culture: challenges and opportunities

2.2.1 Teaching of the Magisterium

The Church's reflection on the media moved from initial distrust to increasingly full acceptance and deeper theological reflection (Adamski – Przywara – Przybyło 2020, 111-123). A key turning point was the Second Vatican Council's decree *Inter Mirifica* (Adamski – Łęcicki 2019, 23-32), which foreshadowed a different style of ecclesiastical writings on the media than before (Bierzyński 2023, 36). It recognised the media as potential tools for spreading the Gospel, while warning against their misuse (Second Vatican Council 1963, 2). Post-conciliar documents addressed the media in its spirit by referring to newer communication technologies and challenges. Documents such as *Communio et Progressio* (Pontifical Council for Social Communications 1971), *Aetatis Novae* (Pontifical Council for Social Communications 1992), *Ethics in internet* (Pontifical Council for Social Communications 2002a), *The Church and internet* (Pontifical Council for Social Communications 2002b) addressed the role of the internet in the functioning of society and its impact on culture and communication. John Paul II (2002) saw the potential of the internet as “a new forum for proclaiming the Gospel”.

Benedict XVI (2013) continued this line, encouraging the Church's presence on social media. It was he who introduced the key concept of the “digital continent”, emphasising that the internet is not so much a tool as a living environment that requires evangelisation and the involvement of the faithful, especially the laity. He called for a search for symbols and metaphors in digital culture that could be useful for speaking about transcendence. At the same time, he warned against superficiality and “contamination of the spirit” (Benedict XVI 2008), and stressed that the effectiveness of digital evangelisation depends not only on being present in the new media but on understanding their specific communicative languages and forms of expression adapted to the logic of digital media functioning (Cheong – Fischer-Nielsen – Gelfgren 2012, 15-34).

Adopting a more critical stance, Pope Francis has emphasised the importance of face-to-face human communication, warning against the promotion of false images and ideas on social media, the use of user data by algorithms and the dangers of artificial intelligence (Francis 2023). This approach by the Pope reflects a growing awareness that digital media are not neutral communication channels, but complex environments that actively shape content, ways of thinking and human relationships (van Dijck 2013, 4-27).

The evolution of teaching from John Paul II's cautious optimism and focus on the evangelising potential of the tools (John Paul II 2002), to Benedict XVI's deeper grasp of seeing the digital world as a culture in need of inculturation (Benedict XVI 2009b), to Francis' criticism emphasising the negative social consequences (Francis 2023), shows a growing awareness of the non-neutrality of digital discourse, which shape culture and people in complex and problematic ways. This calls for a more critical approach to enculturation and a shift from the mere use of tools to an authentic presence in the digital environment.

2.2.2. Theological analyses

Theological reflection on digital culture is developing by analysing both the opportunities and threats it brings to faith and the church. Researchers are attempting to understand the impact of new media on theological practice, forms of community, religious identity, ritual and ways of learning about faith (Scharer et al. 2013).

Among the perceived opportunities is first and foremost the unprecedented reach of communication, enabling the gospel message to reach wide audiences (Dicastery For Communication

2023, 1) The internet creates new platforms for dialogue, witness and some forms of community building, potentially democratising the process of doing theology (Scharer et al. 2013). Digital media can contribute to humanisation if they are oriented towards the good of the person and the community (Dicastery For Communication 2023, 7; Benedict XVI 2009a, 73).

At the same time, theologians point to numerous challenges and risks: the risk of superficiality, distraction and difficulty in focusing, hindering deeper reflection and prayer. Social media algorithms, optimised for engagement, often foster polarisation, creating “information bubbles” that hinder dialogue and understanding, and disinformation and fake news pose a serious threat to truth (Francis 2018). Data collection raises ethical questions, and the digital divide exacerbates existing inequalities (Francis 2024). There are also concerns about the negative impact of technology on interpersonal relationships, identity and perceptions of the body (Dicastery For Communication 2023, 30-33). The ubiquity of technology raises questions about its impact on prayer, liturgy and the sense of the sacred, leading to concerns about desacralisation (Francis 2015, 101-114).

2.2.3 Inculturation in the digital age

The concept of inculturation has become a key term to describe the process of encountering the Gospel with a particular culture. It means the “implantation” of the Church in a given culture (Byrne 1990, 109-149). This concept, present in the Church’s teaching since Vatican II, was particularly developed by John Paul II in the context of the New Evangelisation (Doyle 2012).

Applying the concept of inculturation to digital culture requires, first and foremost, its recognition as a viable context for communicative discourse that shapes human relationships and value systems (International Theological Commission 1988, 11). A profound commitment is required that includes a critical analysis of the logic of digital platforms, a search for authentic languages and symbols capable of expressing faith in this environment (Dicastery for Communication 2023, 76). This process must, at the same time, face the specific challenges of the digital age that arise from the nature of this communication environment and new area of discourse. Therefore, the Church faces the task of using digital tools effectively without losing its identity and mission (Mazur 2021, 149-167).

3 Characteristics of the activities of Cyril and Methodius and the Church’s approach to the digital world

A historical and theological analysis focused on communicative discourse allows the identification of related key features of the mission of Cyril and Methodius and the Church’s contemporary engagement with digital culture. The linking element between the two situations is the recognition that in both cases the success of the objectives remains dependent on the degree of understanding and mastery of the properties of the communicative medium and the ability to creatively adapt it to specific cultural situations and new areas of discourse.

3.1 Nature and degree of involvement in the medium

Cyril and Methodius actively created the medium itself. They made use of the alphabets known to them and, on the basis of these, deliberately and consciously created an entirely new writing system. At the same time, they undertook the codification and deliberate refinement of the existing

Slavic dialect in order to transform it into a liturgical language. Thus, on the one hand, one can speak of reactivity, while on the other, of a high degree of creation. The current Church interacts with existing digital platforms that have been shaped by secular, commercial and technological forces. It therefore has much less control over the structure and logic of these media. It is therefore a reactive adaptation of the medium rather than a constructive activity. However, although the Slavic languages were already functioning as established communication systems in the ninth century, they lacked an adequate system of writing. Cyril and Methodius, entering a completely alien cultural environment, recognized that creating a proper graphic notation adapted to Slavonic phonetics was essential to gain control over the medium and shape the communicative discourse effectively. This act of creative media engineering – solving the problem of representation – became the foundation for their mission. Even in this respect, however, this difference does not affect the ability to shape an effective message and its reception, as the contemporary Church adapts existing forms of communication to its needs (theological and liturgical messages) based on the available communication tools, sets of symbols and signs. Paradoxically, the key point for understanding the similarity of the two processes is to focus on the different nature of the two media: on the one hand, the recording of Slavonic speech (and the deliberate codification of the language), and on the other, the use and adaptation of the message to ready-made tools. However, in both cases, the basis was to adapt to the existing language in terms of mediating the sacred, albeit on different levels.

3.2 Approaches to language and culture

In the case of Cyril and Methodius, linguistic inculturation ran very deep. They created fundamental symbolic linguistic tools for the Slavs, which enabled their culture to express the Christian faith based on their own linguistic structures. In the current situation, the Church is forced to seek inculturation in an already existing digital culture (Flader 2019, 129-144). Consequently, the Church's effort is to evangelise the digital discourse. It is the search for its own expressions of faith in a new cultural context and the realisation of inculturation in an existing communicative culture.

The nature of the two inculturations is different, just as the nature of the communication medium is different. In the case of Cyril and Methodius, the process involved the creation of a culturally specific sacred medium, whereas digital engagement involves the adaptation of the message of faith to the existing, secular and dynamically changing digital sphere. The digital discourse was not designed or evolved with religious purposes in mind, but with commercial or social purposes in mind (Gralczyk 2020, 237-248). Benedict XVI's call to find meaningful "symbols and metaphors" in digital culture demonstrates the need to search for meaning in the existing environment, which contrasts with Cyril and Methodius' creation of an entire symbolic system. Nevertheless, as a consequence, the Church's action is also to some extent an act of conscious symbolic construction, albeit on a different – dependent on digital contexts – level.

3.3 Purpose and motivation

Cyril and Methodius had a liturgical-evangelistic goal. The aim was to enable informed participation in worship, to deepen already existing faith and, in addition, to facilitate further and wider evangelisation. Key to this was the recognition that these goals could only be realised by mastering the appropriate communication tools (Hetényi – Ivanič 2021). In the case of the Church's current digital activity, the goal is much broader (due to the multiplicity of communication channels) and more diffuse. It shifts into the sphere of communication-evangelisation, although it

is not without reference to the liturgy either, as the time of the pandemic showed (Przywara et al. 2021). This difference is due to the very nature of the communicative situation. Digital tools are used for a variety of individual purposes: information dissemination, online community building, evangelisation, catechesis, dialogue, social engagement (Gralczyk 2022, 307-318).

The mission of Cyril and Methodius was focused on providing the tools for the transmission of Scripture and liturgy in the Slavic (indigenous) language to the inhabitants of the Duchy of Great Moravia. The missionaries were not aware of the geographical area occupied by the Slavs, nor did they know what the future impact of their introduction of the new language system would be. Contemporary digital engagement – although it also involves so-called digital natives – includes information, online community building, dialogue, witness, catechesis and is aimed at participants in a diverse, global digital “culture”. But the basis remains the same: it is the desire to reach people where they are and to communicate the Gospel through such channels and means, and within such a communicative discourse, as are accessible and understandable to them. It is therefore a clear analogy in terms of the goals of inculturation, albeit pursued under different communicative conditions.

3.4 Context and challenges

The mission of Cyril and Methodius was inextricably linked to the political and ecclesiastical situation of the time and they carried it out in this context. In the 21st century, the Church operates in a global technological and religious context. In doing so, it does so much more self-consciously, initiating of its own accord the digital scope of its mission. Cyril and Methodius had to contend primarily with political and intra-church opposition. Today, the problems are of a different nature, arising from cultural and technological trends and the logic of communication systems. A clear trend in the digital environment is the marginalisation of serious, religious content by light-hearted and pop-cultural messages (Adamski – Gawel – Przywara 2025, 12-13). What remains unchanged, however, is the concern about desecralisation (Dicastery for Communication 2023, 34).

With the benefit of hindsight – impossible to apply to digital transformations – it is apparent that, despite considerable problems, the mission of Cyril and Methodius had effects that were in no way foreseeable. It had an undeniable civilisational and cultural impact that changed the image of the modern world on many levels, going far beyond the sphere in which Cyril and Methodius carried out their work. Paradoxically, the expulsion of Methodius’ disciples from Great Moravia contributed to the spread of their legacy to other Slavic lands and the creation of the Cyrillic alphabet in Bulgaria, at the Preslav Writing School.

However, it would be a mistake to stretch the analogy between the empowering and causal effects of adversity and the sustainability of the Church’s contemporary solutions in the digital sphere too directly and simply. Undoubtedly, however, the rapid pace of technological and cultural change forces a constant adaptation and redefinition of communication activities. It is reflected in a constantly renewed and deepened theological reflection and the adaptation of pastoral action to new media possibilities and constraints.

4 Theological implications and discussion

The analysis conducted of the mission of Cyril and Methodius and the contemporary Catholic Church’s engagement with digital culture raises a number of theological implications. These go well beyond the historical comparison and compel a deeper reflection on the nature of inculturation,

religious communication in the field of the new digital discourse and the mission of the Church in the 21st century.

4.1 The theological dimension of communicative discourse in the context of inculturation

The work created by Cyril and Methodius demonstrated that language was integral to the process of inculturation – the creation of an appropriate communicative medium made it possible to fully express the Gospel in Slavic culture (International Theological Commission 1988, 6). Contemporary digital culture, on the other hand, uses languages shaped by commercial and technological logic. Rather than creating media from scratch, the contemporary Church adapts existing social media platforms (Benedict XVI 2013). This raises the question of the limits of this adaptation – to what extent can the Gospel message be adapted to the logic of contemporary media without losing its authenticity and depth?

4.2 Community in the digital age

The mission of Cyril and Methodius resulted in the creation of living liturgical communities that celebrated the faith in a language understood by the faithful. Today, the Church faces the challenge of creating authentic online communities that can realise the essential dimensions of Christian life using digital media with very different communicative properties to traditional forms of encounter. Theology therefore needs to develop criteria for distinguishing between authentic digital community and its appearance. Though the concept of 'information bubbles' emerges from media theory (Pariser 2011, 9-12), Pope Francis' 2018 message on fake news addresses related concerns about truth and dialogue (Francis 2018).

4.3 Liturgy and the sacred in digital space

Cyril and Methodius created an entire system of liturgical expression in the Slavonic language, which deepened the religious life of the faithful (John Paul II 1985, 13, 21). The contemporary use of digital technologies in the liturgy – from the broadcasting of Mass to digital prayer applications – requires theological discernment of the boundaries between the legitimate use of technology and the preservation of the sacred character of worship. However, a theology of liturgy must remain open to the pastoral use of new technologies, taking into account that digital media are not neutral transmitters of liturgical content, but active communicative environments that significantly influence the way the sacred is experienced.

4.4 Digital anthropology and spirituality

In contrast to the time of Cyril and Methodius, when enculturation was primarily concerned with language and cultural forms, today it touches upon profound changes in the way we think, perceive reality and build relationships. Therefore, the Church needs to reflect on the phenomenon of technology addiction, the influence of algorithms on decision-making and changes in the perception of privacy and intimacy (Mazur 2021, 149-167). It is particularly important to recognise the dangers of what Pope Francis has called "technological Gnosticism", that is, the temptation to seek salvation through technology while neglecting the material and communal dimensions of human existence (Francis 2015, 101-114).

4.5 Mission and evangelisation in a global context

The mission of Cyril and Methodius was local and aimed at a specific ethnolinguistic group. Contemporary digital evangelisation is global and multicultural, which creates new opportunities, but also runs the risk of uniformity of message and loss of sensitivity to local context, which can lead to a superficial evangelisation incapable of deep inculturation in specific cultural contexts. Theology needs to develop models of digital evangelisation that combine global reach with local cultural sensitivity, taking into account the limitations of the nature of digital discourse (International Theological Commission 1988, 11).

5 Conclusion

The comparative analysis of the mission of Saints Cyril and Methodius and the contemporary engagement of the Catholic Church in digital discourse provides insights for contemporary theology and pastoral care, but also for social communication and media sciences. The analysis confirmed the existence of a common missionary motivation in both cases of seeking to communicate the Gospel in a way that is understandable to audiences in their specific cultural and communicative context. Both Cyril and Methodius and the modern Church are guided by the fundamental principle that the message must be communicated within a communicative discourse accessible and comprehensible to specific audiences. At the same time, fundamental differences in the nature of engagement with the communicative medium are revealed. While Cyril and Methodius were developing new linguistic and writing tools adapted to the needs of mission, the contemporary Church is adapting existing digital platforms.

A comparison of these two forms of mission confirms that the medium is not a neutral channel of communication, but actively shapes the content of communication (McLuhan 1964, 7-21; Winner 1980, 121-136).

The analysis also provided valuable insights from remediation theory (Bolter – Grusin 1999, 45-62). The activities of Cyril and Methodius exemplify “radical remediation”, while the modern Church’s engagement with digital media represents “adaptive remediation”. Moreover, the media created by Cyril and Methodius served not only the transmission of information but also the ritualisation and communal experience of faith. In contrast, the digital media, oriented towards the rapid flow of information, challenges today’s Church to preserve the ritual and communal dimension.

Reference to the work of Cyril and Methodius possesses undeniable heuristic value. The vast differences in historical, social, technological and cultural context between the ninth century and the present day mean that the Cyrillomethodian model cannot be applied directly to the challenges of the digital age. The nature of the medium is different, the mechanisms of communicative discourse are different, the risks and opportunities are different. The parallel serves as a point of reference and inspiration for reflection rather than as a ready-made model to follow.

The analysis revealed a number of challenges facing contemporary theology and pastoral practice. There is a need to develop theological criteria for the evaluation and use of new communication technologies that take into account their specific characteristics as media and the anthropological and spiritual risks that arise from them.

It is crucial to strive for authentic presence, relationship-building and community, rather than just the superficial transmission of information. An in-depth understanding of the impact of technology on human beings and society as communicative environments is necessary to be able to consciously use its possibilities while avoiding pitfalls and risks. The central point remains the tension between openness to new tools and possibilities and the need to protect the essential

dimensions of faith, liturgy and community life from the trivialisation and desacralisation resulting from the commercial logic of digital platforms and, consequently, of digital discourse as a whole.

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