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# Marshall McLuhan's unmediated faith

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Marshall McLuhan, who coined “global village” and “the medium is the message,” and who predicted the internet and the rise of social media, was born a century ago this past July. He is considered one of the 20<sup>th</sup> century’s intellectual giants. Along with Marx, Freud, and Darwin, McLuhan is one of those rare thinkers with a persuasive “theory of everything.” He was also a devout Catholic, who taught almost exclusively at Catholic universities and attended mass nearly every day of his adult life.

McLuhan’s most important insight was that all technologies, especially media technologies, have hidden biases. His classic example, which has entered into conventional wisdom, is the 1960 Nixon/Kennedy presidential debate. People who heard the debate on the radio declared Nixon the winner, while those who watched on TV thought Kennedy had won. To say that TV emphasizes appearances and radio emphasizes ideas oversimplifies McLuhan’s thinking, but gets the basic concept across. Any new medium not only changes how we get information, but also what information we think is important.

Before he died in 1980, McLuhan applied this core insight to the world he saw taking shape around him. His conclusions then have the ring of prophecy today.

It is no exaggeration to say that McLuhan predicted the internet. While other futurists declared that computers could lead to either utopia or Big Brother, McLuhan quietly anticipated Facebook and Twitter. Writing in 1967, thirteen years before the first Web site even went live, McLuhan got the trivial, distracting qualities of our digital life just right. He told us there would someday be “one big gossip column,” powered by an “electronically computerized dossier bank,” that would keep an uneraseable record of our tiniest actions. This would be the background noise against which our lives would play out.

McLuhan also saw that our participation in this collective gossip column would be voluntary. He claimed we would all become not the unwilling but rather the “unwitting workforce for social change.” In McLuhan’s world, change does not announce itself or even arrive by ambush, but instead creeps up on us. After every advent in media technology, we wake up to an invisibly but fundamentally altered world.

The pervasive fear and uncertainty of modern life, argued McLuhan, could be traced back to a change in our dominant information technology. Books, which promote quiet, solitary and linear thinking, are giving way to electronic media, which promotes noisy, collective, and unpredictable experiences. The hangover from this change, argued McLuhan, is a profound uncertainty about the future.

Beginning with the publication of *Understanding Media* in 1964, the intelligentsia went crazy for McLuhan's ideas. He went from being a teacher at a small Catholic college in Canada to a world famous media sage. Writers like Tom Wolfe, and top executives in advertising, media, and technology companies sought him out. At the height of his fame, shortly before he died, McLuhan even appeared as himself in Woody Allen's film *Annie Hall*.

Despite global fame, McLuhan never abandoned his post as a teacher of literature at St. Michael's College at the University of Toronto, and he remained a private but devout Catholic.

McLuhan was not a Catholic by birth. Born into a Protestant household that was not especially devout, as a boy McLuhan recoiled from what he saw as the ugliness and inanity of modern life. He sought beauty and meaning in literature, and wavered between indifference and even hostility to religion until his late twenties.

It was not until he encountered the writings of G. K. Chesterton as a graduate student in the lively intellectual circles of 1930s Cambridge that McLuhan took his first steps towards becoming a Catholic.

Chesterton is one of the great English writers, creator of the fictional detective Father Brown, and a powerful Catholic apologist in books like *Orthodoxy* and *The Everlasting Man*. Like McLuhan, Chesterton had once been a literary young man in search of meaning, and had found happiness and an intellectual bedrock in the Catholic Church. Chesterton charms his readers away from conventional errors via paradox and humor, as McLuhan would one day do with his own readers. It is no wonder that McLuhan found Chesterton's ideas so compelling.

Though he was Canadian, McLuhan's conversion is best understood as belonging to the tradition of intellectual Anglo-Catholics like Evelyn Waugh, who were attracted to Catholicism in sharp contrast from the Church of England, and from the noisy, disenchanted world that had grown up around it, and, in many ways, because of it. Protestantism was fundamentally linked in McLuhan's mind with the excesses of capitalism, and the disorienting world of advertising and mass media that it had spawned. Catholicism, in contrast, was staunchly on the side of art and intellect. When he converted in 1937, McLuhan came into the Catholic Church as a grateful refugee from a fearful world.

But in the end it was not ideas that brought McLuhan into the Church, but first-hand experience. Open-minded in all things, the young McLuhan decided to approach the Church on its own ground. He saw that above all else, that ground was prayer. Though not yet a man of faith, McLuhan prayed fervently and persistently to be shown proof that Catholic doctrine is true. "The evidence," he says, "came unexpectedly and from many quarters and unmistakably." He never stopped praying during the five decades from his conversion to his death. Prayer for McLuhan was a "constant appeal for daily nourishment."

Though a man of profoundly complex ideas in his professional and public life, McLuhan felt no need to immerse himself in the subtleties of theology and dogma. For him, the Church was a living, sacred presence which entered his life on a level deeper than conscious thought. Faith, for McLuhan, was a matter of the human heart in resonance with the divine word.

The open-mindedness that served him so well in the world of scholarship was what brought him to the certainty of faith. And it was from the security of his faith that McLuhan could look out at a world in turmoil and, without sentimentality, bear honest witness to how it was changing.

Though it underlay his thinking, McLuhan never spoke from an explicitly Catholic perspective. He described his investigations into the effects of technology as "probes," and persistently claimed to have no fixed point of view. This can make reading and listening to McLuhan frustrating. Just when you think you have a handle on his thought, some new statement keeps you guessing. But behind all

his oracular vagueness is a sincere desire to come to the aid of people who feel displaced by modern life.

Privately, McLuhan was not happy about most of the changes he observed in the modern world, but he was never a pessimist. He believed there was hope as long as we used technology conscientiously rather than uncritically.

He also found hope in his faith, specifically in the guidance of the Virgin Mary, whom he petitioned in her role as a patroness of study. “At a time like this,” he said in a 1971 interview, “there is a very great role for her to play, because the things that we now have to study in the world are rather tremendous, and new.”

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