SUNDAY TV MASS AS A RITUAL COMMUNICATION AMONG THE YOUTH

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ABSTRACT

Sunday TV Mass (STVM) is one of the Catholic Church’s initiatives for evangelization via media. Primarily produced to spread the Good News, it is specifically for the sick and physically incapable since they cannot go to churches to attend Mass and fulfill their Sunday obligation.

However, since the broadcast Mass is communicated through a mass medium and is exposed to a wider audience than necessarily targeted, some people, the adolescents (youth) in particular, make STVM an excuse to forego Mass attendance in their respective churches.

This experimental study will focus on STVM on its role as evangelizer and catalyst to ritual formation. James Carey’s theory of Ritual Communication describes this practice as an enabler to the creation of a community of believers among the youth and George Gerbner’s Cultivation Theory depicts on how television ‘creates’ a worldview that unravels ritualistic experience by watching STVM.

The respondents of the study are 40 high school students of Angelicum College. Selected purposively, the students were instructed and monitored to watch STVM for four Sundays. These students are top achievers in their Religion subjects and are exposed to different religious activities in their school.

Keywords: Sunday TV Mass, Evangelization, Ritual Communication, Cultivation, Youth

1. Introduction

Everything is rooted on the dominance of the influential religion in a Filipino’s life. This premise may be attributed to the reliance of the Filipino on the Church’s teachings on the particular pattern by which he should live his life. Part of this is the picture of God, and following what has been required by religion (in this case, attending mass every Sunday) to attain the promise of that particular religion (in Catholicism, the promise of eternal life). It maintains that complying with certain norms to attain a particular goal would necessarily enhance the meaning of one’s existence - as if saying that one does not merely exist, lives and dies. In Catholicism, the Eucharist leads man to eternal life for it is a foretaste of it, and essentially a source of spiritual nourishment.

However, people nowadays find it difficult to keep the practice of going to church because of their busy lives, or because it does not serve them a purpose. This may be particularly true for the youth, as a substantial body of research has investigated the implications of the vast amount of attention that young people devote to media forms (Bryant & Rockwell, 1994). This distraction by, or engagement to, various media may be a major contributor to the youth’s declining mass attendance.

To restore the practice of keeping the Sabbath, the Church has devised ways for both for nominal and practicing Catholics, whatever their circumstances may entail. Malls, for example, are now
becoming places of worship for others, as regular mass celebrations are held on Sundays. The mission is to make mall-goers attend mass before their shopping - which seems very relevant for most Filipinos nowadays.

Another significant measure is apparent in the emergence of Sunday TV Masses, which the Church conducts to cater to the spiritual needs of those who cannot go to church because of sickness or other preoccupations. In Communication as Culture, James Carey (1989), observed the nature of and relationship between communication, culture and technology. Carey supposed that there are forms of communication whose primary purpose is to strengthen the community by egging them to participate and share in communication or communal experiences. These are called rituals, which, in this case, are being established through STVM.

STVM has been helpful for the Church to inculcate to its audience the importance of continuing Eucharistic celebrations every Sunday, as it fulfills its role as evangelizer and catalyst to ritual formation. It also fulfills Eucharisticum Mysterium, 77’s teaching that says Sundays should be presented to the people as the primordial feast day, that, when assembled together, they are to hear the Word of God and take part in the Paschal Mystery.

With all these premises taken into account, the promotion of a spiritual genre through a medium the youth identifies with is looked into. This study explores if STVM can be instrumental in unraveling a ritualistic experience and cultivating faith among the youth.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Forming Rituals

People rely on various media channels to meet their needs and wants nowadays (Littlejohn, 2010). In fact, it is said that the more readily available, the greater the perceived instrumentality, the more socially and culturally acceptable the use of a medium is. Andy Ruddock (2012), in his article Cultivation Analysis and Ritual Theory, said that Gerbner and Carey believed that media affected society by determining the ideas and the language that made ‘society’ possible. Society, being a conceived idea, is borne out of the constructions of experience from the various forms of communication technologies prevalent in the contemporary environment. This is how the power of message systems is secured: media users recreate habits, narratives and practices they have learned from mainstream media.

In the study Mediatized Rituals: beyond manufacturing consent, Simon Cottle (2006) said mediatized ritual have much to tell about how media, from time to time, intervene in the life of contemporary societies, their contending identities and contests of interest, and can contribute to the formation of plural solidarities or ‘publics’. Benjamin Burroughs’ (2014) Facebook and FarmVille: A Digital Ritual Analysis of Social Gaming furthers that through digital ritual participation, networked interests, communities and lives can increasingly manifest. Nick Couldry (2002), in his study Playing for Celebrity: Big Brother as Ritual Event, said that Emile Durkheim’s view on media rituals tends to celebrate all forms of ritual as fulfilling a natural need for an organic society. This shows how powerful media is – it transcends from a medium to social expectation.

Moreover, the term “ritual” embraces religious connotations. For Carey, this connection to religion emphasizes the concept of shared belief and ceremony that are fundamental to ritual view. The celebration of mass itself, for example, is a ritual - as people who share the same faith come together to commemorate their belief. Repeatedly observed and practiced, this ceremony draws people towards a sense of community.
Ritual communication examines how and why people interact with communication media. It suggests that attachments to media are not simply driven by efficiency and control over media, rather, it provides constancy that individuals may find hard to attain in face-to-face relationships and other areas of everyday life (Littlejohn and Foss, 2009).

2.2 Religion and Ritual

Ritual is always allied with religion. Couldry (2005), in his book *Media Rituals: Beyond Functionalism*, instills that in anthropology, there are three ways to understanding rituals: habitual action, formalized action and action involving transcendent values. Ritual, as a regular action or habit (and later on involving pattern or form), gives meaning to the action towards the particular values that it embodies. This explanation, when considered vis-à-vis religion, shows how closely connected the two concepts are: participants in both ritual and religion are urged to move according to the values their practices connote.

Mathieu Deflem (1991) in his article *Ritual, Anti-Structure, and Religion: A Discussion of Victor Turner’s Processual Symbolic Analysis*, finds Victor Turner’s view on religion as “religion in action” very apt: religion is what religion does. This observation finds a perfect manifestation in the way religion is fulfilled in the Philippines. In the Southeast Asian country where around 80% of the population is Catholic (National Statistics Office, 2008), many like to predominantly express their religiosity through rituals. These religious rituals include devotions to the Black Nazarene (Quiapo, Manila), the Sto. Niño (Cebu), to Our Lady (particularly Our Lady of Perpetual Help in Baclaran) and other saints (Bautista, 2010). This representation of shared beliefs is a ‘ritualization’ that was passed on from generation to the other.

The Filipino youth’s participation in religious rituals speaks of how they keep the tradition. Sandoval, et. al. notes how in a 1998 Social Weather Station (SWS) survey, 87% of the young Filipinos interviewed described themselves as religious, and 69% claimed to attend religious services at least once a week. Meanwhile, the Episcopal Commission on Youth 2003’s record shows that 40% of them are members of religious organizations while 15% are involved in campus-based ministries. Zimmerman (2008) notes that the 1995 World Youth Day held in Manila saw over four million Filipinos and delegates from other countries in attendance. The participants, especially the youth delegates, have remembered this historic event ever since.

The most recent manifestation of the youth’s participation in religious rituals was apparent in Pope Francis’ recent visit to the Philippines. In a Youth Encounter event held at the University of Santo Tomas, Manila, approximately 24,000 youth delegates were said to be in attendance (Rappler.com, 2014).

Ironically, however, NFO-Trends study among the Filipino youth in 2003 showed a considerable decline in the youth’s involvement in religious activities. From the 84% who were actively participating in religious activities in 1995, there were only 76% in 2003, and only 63% remained from the 69% who said they attended and took part in masses (Episcopal Commission on Youth 2003).

This may be attributed to certain rising beliefs, as Marty Macasaet (2009), in his study *The Spiritual Journey of Young Filipino in Grace Leung*, said that the true essence of religion seems to have been lost in a subjective, touchy-feely criterion of self-satisfaction, as young Filipinos are moving in the direction of an individual-expressive religious identity (Hornsby-Smith, 2004). In the article entitled *Young People and Golden Rule Catholicism in the Philippines: The case of religiously involved Filipino*.
students, Jayeel Cornelio (2013) echoes this and said that young Filipinos feel free to pick their beliefs and practices.

The term ‘ritualization’ thus implies a shift in thinking about ritual. Catherine Bell (1992, 1997), in her articles *Ritual Theory*, *Ritual Practice* and *Ritual: Perspective and Dimension*, said that ‘ritualization’ encourages people to look at the links between ritual actions, the wider social spaces that occur in, and the particular practices, beliefs and categories that make specific ritual actions possible.

### 2.3 Televised Mass

In the US, the television set is used for almost seven hours a day (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan & Signorielli, 1994). Locally, the National Statistics Office – *Exposure of Population to Mass Media, 2008* reports that the popularity of television continued to rise in both rural and areas in the Philippines. Even though Internet use is rapidly gaining popularity among young people, television remains the dominant media form they use today.

In the study, *Faith in Technology: Televangelism and the Mediation of Immediate experience*, Shane Denson (2011) said that ultimate function of televangelism is not to disseminate a pre-existing (and pre-modern) message but to actively produce new constellations of discursive content and experience that are intrinsically tied to modernity and its technologies.

Television is an unquestionably valid means for evangelization and pastoral service, which calls for professionalism and specialized training (*Conclusions of the World Congress of Catholic Television*). STVM is produced to help people who cannot go to Mass pray as much, since they are not really obliged to be physically present in the Church due to various reasons: sickness, inability to leave the house, the need to care for little children who cannot be left alone. Through television, they are thus united in the Eucharistic worship (Irvine, 1994).

The STVM also caters to people without priests and who view the mass as the best possible thing to hear the Word of God to pray, listen and be nourished. This also serves as a special opportunity for them to listen to the homily. Priests and bishops alike are given the chance to give their homilies a little more focus and effectively in the Word of God through televised masses. Even though people are at home, they can unite themselves and pray and be inspired by looking at the rituals, listening to the prayers and readings and being in communion in the holy Mass.

The broadcast of Mass continues to be one of the most widely followed programs of Catholic television channels (*Conclusions of the World Congress of Catholic Television*), thus complying to Communion et Progressio no. 4’s teaching of adding a new dimension to social intercourse as evangelization continues to make use of mass media. Vast numbers of people then get the chance to share in the life and progress of the community. Television itself may cater to needs that religion used to satisfy while presenting attractions and gratifications that counter some religious beliefs and absorb others in its broad and popular mainstream (Gerbner, et. al, 1984).

The Mass is televised or broadcast, but local ordinaries must see to it that prayer and participation of the faithful do not suffer (*Eucharisticum Mysterium*, 72).
3. Methods

The research is conducted within the realms of both qualitative and quantitative approaches. The study is quantitative since the researcher conducted surveys to determine the respondents’ perception and awareness on STVM, their perception and tradition on church-related activities like attending mass every Sunday and their preference between watching Mass on TV and attending mass in church.

It is also qualitative as interviews with key informants were conducted to get their opinions, insights or perceptions on STVM as instrumental to ritual formation.

Cultivation analysis, which involves the correlation of data from message system analysis (identifying prevailing images on television), and survey data, which will be gleaned from a research on the audience with regards their social realities (to assess any influence of such images on the attitudes of viewers) were used in the study.

In line with this, the researcher employed an experimental design, the strongest design for it is at the center of all causal or cause-effect inferences. This design is deemed appropriate as it addresses the need to investigate how STVM becomes an evangelizer that unravels ritualistic experience among the selected high school students.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Pre-test

4.1.1 Profile of the Participants

The participants of this study were high school students of Angelicum College, the pioneer of non-graded system. Forty respondents participated in the first phase of the study. However, only 37 students (92.5% of the original set) were part of the next phase, as the other three had to cease participation since they did not watch television.

The participants were aged 13 to 17 years old, and there were more females (55%) than males (45%). They all belonged to the teen fragmentation of media audiences: they are curious - seek answers from friends and the media and post the highest Internet usage among all demographics groups (Yahoo – Nielsen 2012 Net Index).

All of them are Roman Catholics and belonged to the advanced students of Christian Living and Values Education subject as determined by the subject’s Area Coordinator. Moreover, the participants are members of the student Catholic organization.

4.1.2 Media Exposure

Despite the proliferation of other media, television continues to be the most powerful medium. This is proven in the study as 37 out of the 40 student respondents, which is close to a 100%, admitted to be active television viewers. Of the 37 participants, 17 (almost half of the group) spend one to two hours of their time in front of the TV set. Other participants have more time to spare: 11 of them (29.7%) said they watched TV for three to four hours a day, while the remaining five (13.5%) allocated five to seven hours for TV daily. Significantly, 21 out of 37 participants (more than half of the group) watched TV during prime time, from 6:00 until sign-off.

The participants’ preferred TV time is indicative of the types of TV programs they prefer to watch: more than two-thirds (68%) claim they prefer to watch news programs, a little more than half (55%) chose drama shows and almost half (40%) liked to watch entertainment shows on weekdays.
Weekends’ viewership trends were distinct from weekday preferences as shown by the stark shift in program preference: 60% favored watched entertainment programs, 35% spent time with anime shows and only 28% went for news.

Regardless of TV viewership days, the participants’ primary reason for watching television is to be entertained. Some of them said that they use television as a form of an escape and sometimes, to unwind. Interestingly, there were three students who claimed they do not watch television. Though comprising a mere 8% of the participants, their reasons for not utilizing television are not negligible. For them, no TV program is interesting enough: with drama shows using same old storylines, casting the same actors and the like; and the news programs mostly reporting bad news they become tiring to watch. Moreover, they say they do not have time for television at all.

4.1.3 Religion and Filipino Tradition

Filipino tradition is undeniably still passed on from generation to generation. This is evident in the study as the youth still regard the use of po and opo as the top tradition (80%) that they still practice, with attendance to Sunday mass in church as their second priority (77.5%). Attending family gathering and reunions come in third for them (72.5%).

The youth still observes religious rituals, particularly attending Sunday masses. Almost all respondents (95%) go to Church on Sundays to attend mass (probably because all of them are Catholics). Of the 95%, however, only 57% regularly attend mass on Sundays – affirming the 2003 NFO-Trends study that there is a considerable decline in the youth’s participation in religious activities. However, despite the church leaders’ encouragement to participate in religious activities, this is still not a Christian requirement compared to attending mass on Sundays.

4.1.4 Intervention

After gathering the data on the participants’ media exposure (which includes their viewership pattern, their reasons for watching TV, and their program preference) and their awareness of Filipino religious tradition/s (specifically mass attendance on Sundays), the participants were asked to watch STVM for four Sundays. The researcher reminded the participants of this task every Friday, and followed through with an assessment the following Monday. The researcher also catechized the participants, and allowed them to share their knowledge about the previous Sunday’s Gospel.

After this intervention, the experiment resulted to 13.5% increase in Sunday mass church attendance among the participants. From 56.8% of the participants who preferred attending mass in churches on Sundays during the pretest, 70.3% of the participants admitted they already subscribed to this practice in the posttest. The decline in occasional attendance of Sunday masses in churches (from 29.7% in the pretest to 27% in the posttest) also affirms this claim.

The participants were also asked who they attended Sunday mass in churches with. The first phase of the study showed that almost everyone (36 out of 37) attended mass with his or her parents, and only one said he attended mass with friends. A shift in companions is evident in the second phase, however, as 29 of the participants said they are consistently with their parents during masses, two participants said they are with their friends, while six said they attended Sunday mass by themselves.

According to Rev. Fr. Alvin Pila, Parochial Vicar of the National Shrine of Divine Mercy, the youth’s present culture is “to come and go”. With people nowadays very busy doing their chores at home and with a lot of preoccupations, they sometimes they cannot afford to spend an hour attending mass. According to one respondent, even if he manages to be present in mass, he feels sleepy, tired and hungry.
The majority of the respondents’ positive perspective on mass attendance, however, counters this isolated opinion. The participants know that the essence of attending mass is to be with God. As they feel blessed, fulfilled and relieved after being in mass, this proved that their parents have properly inculcated these values in their children.

4.1.5 Sunday TV Mass

The Church has always recommended the use of mass for evangelization and promotion of worship since mass media has always had a great impact on every individual. The Church thus uses media to encourage, inspire and bring back every person to God, and STVM rightfully becomes one of the avenues for evangelization.

The participants are actually aware of Sunday masses broadcast on TV, with 22 out of 37 participants saying they are watching (or have watched) televised mass.

Televised mass has been instrumental in the Church’s desire to inculcate the continuation of the Filipino tradition of the Eucharistic celebration on Sundays and the spreading the Good News of God to its audiences. John Paul II, in his encyclical letter Dies Domini, said that Sunday should be presented to the people as the primordial feast day, where they excitedly come together to hear the Word of God and partake in the Paschal Mystery.

Msgr. Sabino Vengco, founder of Ecclesia in Asia, said the Sunday TV program’s main objective is evangelization and the proclamation of the Word of God in every Filipino home throughout the world. Since it is impossible to gather every Filipino in the church, mass media is the perfect avenue to penetrate every Filipino home anywhere in the world.

Msgr. Andres Valera, a licentiate in Sacred Liturgy, furthers that the objective of Sunday televised mass is to help people understand the importance of the sequence of the mass’ different parts. A televised mass would be instrumental in familiarizing the audience with the different segments of the celebration and people could easily recognize and associate what is taking place in each of these parts.

However, Rev. Fr. Dario Cabral, former director of the Commission on Social Communication, said there should be guidelines for televised masses. Despite being broadcast, these should still function as liturgical celebration that enhances worship — and not become a typical, commercialized television show bombarded by numerous sponsors.

Sunday televised mass is there to help the people who cannot go to Mass, pray as much as they are not really obliged to be present physically in the church because they are either sick and cannot go out of their homes because of their sickness, or the small children that need taking care of cannot be left alone. Televised mass aids the sick and the aged prevented from joining the community in the celebration of the Eucharist by allowing them to be spiritually united in the mass as best as they could.

Sunday televised Mass is the next best thing for people who need to stay at home. Listening to the prayers and readings in the mass and looking at the rituals of the celebration can at least inspire them to be united in the celebration of the Holy Mass happening in the Church.

4.2 Post Test

After the experiment, the participants were asked if they preferred to attend mass in church or watch its televised version. Almost all the respondents said they still preferred attending mass in
church – one of them even said that this is because “you can really witness and feel the presence of the Lord”.

Lansang (1986) thus notes that people should consider the complexity of the youth phenomenon, and avoid generalizations about their relationship to the liturgy. It is important to reach out to the youth through the media they make use of, thus making the Sunday televised mass relevant to the youth. Msgr. Valera notes that in order for the youth to grow as mature, adult attendees of the Holy Mass, exposure to televised mass will be of great help.

The aforementioned statements show how important it is for the Church to be mindful of the usefulness of mass media. The broadcast Sunday mass not only moves people outside of the church to share in the celebration, it also proclaims to the world the richness of this celebration. The youth’s affinity to mass media plus their exposure to televised mass, thus aids in their understanding in passing on the Filipino religious tradition of attending mass in churches on Sundays.

All of the participants believed Sunday TV Mass is necessary for evangelization. The sole participant who had a different opinion in the pretest eventually agreed with the rest of the group’s idea in the posttest.

4.2 1 Interpretation

The respondents’ views (as surmised in the surveys) and the key informants’ inputs show that STVM is relevant among the youth. It triggers the youth to actively participate in Church masses, and urges them to share in the creation of a ritualistic experience amongst the faithful community.

As future leaders of the Church, Rev. Fr. Pila says that the youth are primary instruments in spreading the Good News and bringing God to everyone. They will thus be the ones to continue passing on the tradition of attending Mass every Sunday from generation to generation. Therefore, if the combined efforts of Mass Media and the Church will continue to develop and inculcated among the youth as early as now, they will be trained and nurtured to have deep sense of faith in God.

Msgr. Valera furthers that STVM’s most basic goal is to attract and encourage people to be present in the church, physically and actively. By highlighting the benefits of being in church, STVM should urge people to have stronger interest and devotion to the Holy Mass.

4.2 2 Implications

The survey and the answers of both the respondents and the key informants clearly showed the relevance of Sunday TV Mass among the participants and how STVM became an evangelizer that cultivates and creates a community of faith among the youth and unravels ritualistic experience.

The respondents agreed that there is a need for STVM in catechesis and spreading the Word of God. It is noteworthy to mention that the advent of televised mass did not affect the youth’s preferences of hearing mass in church every Sunday; rather, it encouraged them to attend mass in their respective parishes and understand the Word of God better. The key informants, meanwhile, said that the youth would help the Church relay to the people the importance of attending mass every Sunday and ultimately keep this Filipino religious tradition.

Sunday TV Mass is also a clear proof of the success of the fusion of mass media and the Catholic Church, as it fulfills the purpose of spreading the Good News and to bring back the people, particularly the youth, in Christ.
5. Conclusion

The Church is continuously finding ways to keep people in religious attendance to masses, and STVM provides an avenue to pursue this mission. As STVM is a promising ritual that can and will invite the youth to be physically present in the celebration of masses, it fulfills the passing on of the religious ritual from generation to generation.

Data cited by the studies above show that religion occupies a vital role in inculcating values to young Filipinos. Through the absorption to media use as ritual, viewers develop a habitual consumption and utility of media aimed at involving themselves in the celebrations – case in point: none of the popular religious events that the Filipino observes would have been communicated well in the absence of media.

This brings to focus how media, or television in this case, successfully creates a worldview that becomes the reality because people believe it to be so (Baran and Davis, 2012). Rituals are thus developed as certain beliefs and practices are cultivated in the minds of its viewers through repeated exposure.

The combined effect for massive television exposure by viewers over time subtly shapes the perception of social reality for individuals and, ultimately, for our culture as a whole. Gerbner (1998) adds that mass media cultivate attitudes and values that are already present in a culture; it maintains and propagates these values among the members of the culture, thus binding its members together.

And yes, it encourages even the individual-expressive religious to be actively participating in the spiritual experience, because STVM is not a substitute for the participation in Eucharistic services, but an aid to develop practicing (over nominal) Catholics.

With the current shift from physical to virtual communication, STVM schemes to establish new community believers who take part in the ritual. It also leads people to understand the value of being physically present in the mass. STVM can eventually prove to be instrumental in the merger of a ritual and its physical community. This furthers that STVM as a ritual, addresses the Church’s need to adapt to the demands of society’s ever-changing landscape.

Everything, indeed, is rooted on the dominance of the influential religion in a Filipino’s life.

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