

Digital technology and family rituals

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The pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela

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The new information and communication technologies (ICT) are having a significant influence on family life and its rituals. The social model of the family has evolved, but rituals continue to form part of its internal dynamism. Thanks to them, family members build the symbolic structure that gives them cohesion and a horizon of meaning.

The family and its rituals

The work of E. Durkheim highlighted the social function of rituals (Durkheim 2014). A. Etzioni also highlighted their importance, going so far as to state that “we are what we celebrate” (Etzioni 2004). Many definitions have been given of them. Pisco Costa gives this name to any practice, undertaken in family interaction, “that has a specific purpose and a symbolic or special meaning” (Pisco Costa 2013, 272).

Family rituals include customs, ceremonies and traditions that are symbolic or meaningful to the family that performs them. Family festivals and celebrations are a propitious framework for rites. Today, many of these rituals lack explicit religious connotations.

Despite today's hectic pace of life, family rituals are still numerous, sometimes conditioned and driven by the consumer society. In fact, some of them have been simplified but others are now celebrated in a more elaborate way, such as weddings. Likewise, young children's birthdays have become very emotional moments, especially for families in crisis and separated or divorced families (Pisco Costa 2013, 277).

Below we will analyse some testimonies of families on pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela to see how their members perceive the influence of ICTs and regulate their use. A similar study could be carried out on the use of ICTs during the main meal of the day, which is an important family ritual that allows its members to celebrate what unites them, share meaningful experiences and build a common narrative together.[1]

Families on pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela

Processions and pilgrimages are an important part of the religious and ritual experience of the Catholic faithful. By making them together, families can have an important liminal experience that helps them to review their relationships.

Recent studies indicate that, during the Camino de Santiago, many families regulate the use of ICT and social networks. Positions range from total renunciation to intensive use. In fact, some families have opted to dispense completely with digital devices in order to focus on the human and spiritual dimension of the pilgrimage. Others have regulated their use, reducing it to certain times of the day, or designating one person to take care of ICTs on behalf of all (Jenkins – Sun, 2019, 568, 574-575). Those who opt for intensive use justify it on the grounds that ICTs help them to enhance their own experience and include others in it virtually

The experience of the Camino today is strongly influenced by new technologies. N. Frey states that, in the 1990s, most pilgrims wanted to live a liminal, "out of time" experience and tried to disconnect from their ordinary life. Today, however, the experience of pilgrimage tends to be much more fragmented, due to the possibility of being always connected. Few are willing to 'disconnect' from the virtual world.

"Instead of physical and mental immersion in a single space, outside of time, pilgrims in the Internet age often have a fragmented experience, in which their bodies are physically on the Camino, but their minds navigate between realities that have nothing to do with it. Instead of focusing on the Way, they seem to want to continually step out of it. They find it difficult to accept serenely being where they are" (Frey 2017, 15).

In fact, the first question pilgrims now ask is no longer: "Do you have hot water and washing machine", but "What is the password? Responding to popular demand, civil authorities have prioritised providing good Wi-Fi in pilgrim facilities over addressing more basic sanitary needs such as public toilets (Frey 2017, 15).

The security of being able to remain in contact with family and friends back home has made it easier for many people to follow the Camino de Santiago. Many families confirm that the use of ICTs has allowed them to enhance the ritual and spiritual experience of the

pilgrimage, to share it with relatives and to extend it over time through photos and other digitised memories. While on pilgrimage, they shared photos, memories and created stories in collaboration with the people who followed them through the Internet. [2] They were able to deepen their experience, reflect together and strengthen the foundations on which their family life is based. The absentees also felt immersed in this experience of intimacy and transcendence.

Subsequently, these narratives and memories were used in family meetings of a symbolic and ritualistic nature. In these, they evoked and relived the moments of spiritual intimacy they had experienced during the pilgrimage, thus creatively prolonging its beneficial effects over time.

Conclusion

Rituals play an important role in the family, enhancing its internal cohesion, strengthening it emotionally and increasing the sense of belonging to the common project.

ICTs are driving a new way of living relationships and are also influencing the way the family celebrates its rituals. We need to learn to use them in a wise and balanced way so that the rituals continue to fulfil their social function and so that communication is always integral, empathic, harmonious, an expression of closeness and encounter.

Fr. Martín Carbajo Nuñez, OFM

[1] We have analysed this second case study in the article on which the paragraphs of this post are based: CARBAJO-NÚÑEZ M., “Technology and family rituals”, in *Anthropos* 118 (2023).

[2] Families creatively utilized ICT “to produce and experience visual memories of ritual connectedness and intimacy, what we term “mediated spiritual intimacy.” (Jenkins – Sun, 2019, 574).

Bibliography

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