

The Church and the Digital World

Easter Message from Bishop Karel Choennie transcribed by Melvin Mackintosh

Pontifical High Mass

In his sermon during the pontifical high mass on Easter Sunday, Mgr. Karel Choennie, bishop of Paramaribo, called on the religious community to be present in the digital world and to make use of the opportunities that the digital world offers to proclaim Jesus and to testify that He's alive. "The digital world has many options. It also has shadow sides," said Bishop Choennie. "I call on you to use the possibilities of this world to proclaim Jesus, to proclaim that He lives and that he gives us the power and the possibilities to start all over again, where there is destruction, where there is division, where desertification takes place, where animals extinct, where humans endanger themselves. The spirit of God will give us the power to be resurrected." The pontifical high mass in the cathedral basilica Sts. Peter and Paul's in Paramaribo, on Sunday April 21, was also broadcasted live by Apintie Radio & TV and Radio Immanuel, the diocesan radiostation.

Digital world

The bishop began his sermon by remarking that the world has entered a new era; that's what he calls the digital world. He indicated that the developments in that digital world are characterized by rapid and radical changes. "The world has changed dramatically. Political and geographical boundaries are blurred and the world has become smaller," said the bishop. "The world has become a global village." He took the fire of the Notre Dame in Paris as an example. "We could all witness the first clouds of smoke from the roof of the Notre Dame, Our Lady in Paris. We stood close, with the Parisians full of disbelief, bewilderment and powerlessness, watching the devastating sea of flames. We sympathized." Mgr. Choennie said that although we were thousands of miles away in a country with a completely different history and culture, we felt hurt. That now, he said, is the power of the digital world. "Everyone can be present anywhere in the world, in real time, when it happens."

Resolute attitude

Mgr. Choennie continued by saying that we could share in the fear, in the bewilderment and in the helplessness of the French, but also witnessed their resolute attitude. "The French said even during the ire we will rebuild it, we will make it more beautiful. And later the French president added a time period: we will do it in five years." The bishop quoted this and said it was not unimportant that it happened in the Holy Week. "The destruction, death, but also the resolute will to change, to start again, if everyone will participate. That can be a lesson for us in resurrection." Mgr. Choennie said that this event could never have been written so deeply into the consciousness of the world without the possibilities of the digital world. We can copy that resolute attitude, because destruction is also taking place in our region, in our forest, "in the Amazon and among our peoples, where animals extinct." The bishop believes that the world must also resolutely oppose this and "believe that we can bring about a change in the threat to creation."

Shadow side

The bishop believes that we as a Church should enter the digital age. "As a Church, as a Surinamese Church, we have the task of proclaiming the resurrection of Christ to all people of all times. Thanks to Apintie, we can be watched from anywhere in the world this morning. Surinamese and others in Amsterdam, Norway, and Miami are following this service with you. We are connected. And they will feel and experience what you feel." Mgr. Choennie warns about the dark side of the digital world. He said that anyone can get information quickly. But how reliable is this information, he questions. "We receive information quickly, but what is truth? That is why the Church must be present". The bishop indicated that our privacy is gone: "One knows, through the use of our mobile, what our preferences are, how we spend our money, which political party we will vote for. And we granted access voluntarily by signing up for Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and Twitter. By using algorithms such great providers can manipulate our behavior."

Own creation of the individual

The bishop believes that since the beginning of the digital world "more and more people have come to admit that they do not belong to a particular religion. They choose from a supermarket of options: some resurrection, a little incarnation, a little Buddhism, a bit of nothing and a bit of that." Mgr. Choennie calls this an own creation of the individual. He indicated that the Millennials, the generation born between 1980 – 2000, get information and process it in a different way than the generation born before 1980. "The millennials find this sermon boring and worthless and have long switched to something else. But we must be present to speak to them in their language and with their images." The bishop recalls a conversation. "I recently experienced how drastic this world is. I was walking home after midday mass and a girl, I think a fifth grader, came to me and said: 'You are the bishop, right?' And I said yes.

The girl: "The teacher sent me to you because I have a question. Where does man come from?"

I think: it is not that difficult. God created man, was my answer. But there is another theory, a large explosion, but we believe that God created man.

Girl: 'And how do you know that?'

Bishop: 'From the Bible, of course.'

She kept looking at me and then I thought: let me ask her what she believes.

Bishop: 'And what do you believe?'

And she said very seriously: 'Aliens. Aliens brought us here and then left.'

Mgr. Choennie concluded that the child has created her own world: "The authority of the parents no longer matters, the teacher did not know what to do with it, 'go and ask the bishop', the authority of the bishop did not matter anymore and when the bishop appealed to the Bible, the Bible also had no authority. That is the power of the digital world and the influence it has on our children."

Power of the family

It is becoming increasingly difficult to communicate values and norms in the usual way, the bishop said. That is why we must be there and be present in the digital world. Mgr. Choennie told the religious community that certain institutions should be strengthened, such as our families. "Our family is where true communication is present, where there is dialogue, where opinions can be formed." The bishop said that the digital world penetrates families and undermines the power of families. "I have seen children sitting at the table with their cell phones and their earplugs in. And if they are approached, they walk away angry. If we allow that, we let the digital world undermine all authority, completely dispel the power of the family, because then we can no longer pass on our values, our faith. Mobile addiction is a reality." Mgr. Choennie reiterated that the digital world has many possibilities and by using the possibilities of the digital world to proclaim Jesus, to tell the truth and to stand up resolutely for God's creation, we can pass on values and norms.