The Civilian Basilian: Marshall McLuhan and St. John Fisher College

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Abstract
In lieu of an abstract, here is the chapter’s first paragraph:

In 2004 I became a professor of philosophy at St. John Fisher College, a small liberal arts institution in the Rochester, New York founded in 1949 by a Catholic religious order called the Congregation of St. Basil (CSB). Some years after joining the college, while working on a project with Diane Lucas, our then-campus archivist, I was startled when she mentioned to me in passing that Marshall McLuhan’s daughter Stephanie had been doing research in our archives on her father’s work. Marshall McLuhan?! I was astonished to hear that name mentioned, as it had been years since I had thought about the communications guru who had coined the phrases “the global village” and “the medium is the message”. More to the point, what possible connection did he have with St. John Fisher College? To my astonishment, Diane told me that McLuhan had been a faculty member at St. Michael’s College, University of Toronto, which was run by the Congregation of St. Basil, the same order of priests which had also started St. John Fisher College. McLuhan, it turned out, had been on close personal terms with the founding fathers of the college, many of whom had been his students at St. Michael’s. In addition, he had been active in helping to found our Department of Communications, and often came to campus to give talks and meet with the faculty and students. Stephanie McLuhan had come to our archives to do research on a book she later edited of her father’s unpublished lectures, some of which had been delivered at St. John Fisher College. It was later published as Understanding Me: Lectures and Essays, edited by Stephanie McLuhan and David Staines, with a foreword by Tom Wolfe [MIT Press, 2005].

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Comments
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The Civilian Basilian: Marshall McLuhan and St. John Fisher College

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It's inevitable that the world-pool of electronic information movement will toss us all about like corks on a stormy sea, but if we keep our cool during the descent into the maelstrom, studying the process as it happens... we can get through.

— Marshall McLuhan, Playboy Interview, 1969

(Unessential McLuhan, page 268).

Unespected Connections

In 2004 I became a professor of philosophy at St. John Fisher College, a small liberal arts institution in the Rochester, New York founded in 1949 by a Catholic religious order called the Congregation of St. Basil (CSB). Some years after joining the college, while working on a project with Diane Lucas, our then-campus archivist, I was startled when she mentioned to me in passing that Marshall McLuhan's daughter Stephanie had been doing research in our archives on her father's work. Marshall McLuhan?! I was astonished to hear that name mentioned, as it had been years since I had thought about the communications guru who had coined the phrases "the global village" and "the medium is the message". More to the point, what possible connection did he have with St. John Fisher College? To my astonishment, Diane told me that McLuhan had been a faculty member at St. Michael's College, University of Toronto, which was run by the Congregation of St. Basil, the same order of priests which had also started St. John Fisher College. McLuhan, it turned out, had been on close personal terms with the founding fathers of the college, many of whom had been his students at St. Michael's. In addition, he had been active in helping to found our Department of Communications, and often came to campus to give talks and meet with the faculty and students. Stephanie McLuhan had come to our archives to do research on a book she later edited of her father's unpublished lectures, some of which had been delivered at St. John Fisher College. It was later published as Understanding Me: Lectures and Essays, edited by Stephanie McLuhan and David Staines, with a foreword by Tom Wolfe (MIT Press, 2005).

This chance remark by Diane led me to my own independent investigations—or probings—regarding McLuhan's connections with my college. I was surprised that most of my colleagues were equally unaware of McLuhan's visits or the role he had played in helping to start one of the largest majors on our campus. This was partly because interest in
McLuhan's overall oeuvre had lessened considerably since his death in 1980, as well as that most of the faculty members at St. John Fisher College—including me—had only come on board in the 1990s or later. However, some of the older faculty members, especially those who were priests in the Congregation of St. Basil order (colloquially known as "Basilians"), most definitely remembered him. Indeed, one of them, Father Leo Hetzler, the former long-time chair of our English Department, had taken several courses at St. Michael's College with McLuhan, and, along with his friend Father Joe Dorsey, had helped him paint his kitchen!

I asked Father Hetzler to write down his memories of McLuhan so that we could preserve them in our campus archives. In his written recollections, Hetzler states: "Marshall would pay a visit to Fisher about three times or more a year, for there he felt at ease among old friends. Some of the Basilians, such as the College President Father Charles Lavery, had been his former colleagues, while others, like me, had been his students. Over drinks in the Common Room before dinner, Marshall would sketch out his latest thinking and sought questions and comments from a group that was familiar with his books."

More to the point, Hetzler remembers the role that McLuhan played in helping St. John Fisher College start its new Communications Department. He writes: "Father Lavery told Marshall that he wanted him to help set up a new Department at the College that would be centered on his ideas and suggested that it be called simply 'Communications.' This Marshall did, and on every subsequent visit, he would spend much of his time talking with the students and staff of 'his' Department. One of those students was an English major, Tom Proietti, who was getting an M.A. in Communications at Syracuse University. Father Lavery offered him the chairmanship of the new department, effective upon graduation. That was the beginning of a very close friendship between Tom and McLuhan."

Father Leo also mentioned to me that during one of McLuhan's visits, the comedian George Carlin was performing on the campus at the same time, and he had hoped—in vain—to be able to introduce them to each other. What a meeting of minds that would have been: two men who both loved language, but in very different ways, and who had radically different views on religion, especially Roman Catholicism.

After learning from Diane about this previously unknown—at least to me—campus connection with one of the 20th century's leading public intellectuals and gadflies, I organized in 2008 at the college, a panel discussion on McLuhan's life and continuing influence with Diane, Father Leo, and the aforementioned Tom Proietti, who worked closely with McLuhan up until the latter's death and knew him well enough to call him "Mac."

MARSHALL McLuhan, PLAYBOY OF THE WESTERN WORLD

Several Fisher alumni attended the meeting and gave their recollections of this colourful and controversial character. In addition, Diane found a won-
derful photo in the archives of McLuhan giving the commencement address to the graduating class of 1969 (the same year, by the way, in which his *Playboy* magazine interview appeared. I was not able to find *that* in the archives, alas, and had to purchase a copy on the internet—solely for the interview, of course). Who should be sitting behind him on the stage, but none other than Fulton J. Sheen, who was then-Bishop of Rochester, looking magisterial in his bright red robes. In my office, I now proudly display a copy of this photo of the ‘Messenger of the Media’ and the ‘Television Priest’, together at last—two proud and idiosyncratic Catholics who truly understood the power of public communications.

This in turn led me to do further research in the St. John Fisher College archives, where I found both a written transcript and an audiotape of McLuhan’s commencement address presentation (how sad that there was no visual representation of this very, to put it mildly, lively occasion, for—as will soon be apparent—I am sure that half the fun was watching the stunned reactions of those in attendance). McLuhan was given an Honorary Doctorate of Humane Letters at the College’s fifteenth commencement, on June 8, 1969, just a few short months after his *Playboy* interview was published. McLuhan was then at the height of his public notoriety. Indeed, he was virtually a household name, as he had just recently been the subject of a poem by Henry Gibson delivered on the hit television show “Rowan and Martin’s Laugh-In”:

> “Marshall McLuhan
> What’re Ya Doin’?”

Indeed, the *Playboy* interlocutor Eric Norden began the interview with this oft-repeated one-line poem, to which McLuhan replied: “Sometimes I wonder. I’m making explorations. I don’t know where they’re going to take me” (*Essential McLuhan*, page 236). He made such an exploration shortly after that in his St. John Fisher College Commencement talk, which was, to put it mildly, an excursion into the absurd.

The 263 graduates and 800 attendees present were about to find out exactly what McLuhan was “doin’”. Perhaps it was a good thing that the St. John Fisher College graduating class was still all-male at the time (the college did not become co-educational until well into the 1970s), for his opening line was rather startling, to say the least (especially with Bishop Sheen sitting right behind him): “A stripper takes off her clothes in order to put on her audience—literally!”

I should add that reading the transcript of the talk while simultaneously listening to the tape recording was itself a rich communicative experience. For the unknown transcriber—perhaps perplexed by McLuhan’s jocular orotundity—made several transcription errors, a few of which struck me as downright Joyceian and made me laugh out loud, and which I believe McLuhan himself, no slouch when it came to appreciating wordplay and multiple meanings (as well as being a noted admirer of Joyce’s inscrutable *Finnegans Wake*), would no doubt have appreciated. Here are a
few examples: "When you put satellites around the planet, you create a world environment of unpresidented character"; “events are always ahead of observers”; “People say McLuhan is the enemy of print”; “total emersion” rather than “total immersion”; “Windom Lewis” rather than “Wyndham Lewis”; and “all the kids in Wedgewood Park” (no doubt the transcriber was unfamiliar with the noted Toronto area of Wychwood Park where McLuhan resided and where the Playboy interview had taken place). More to the point, the dry words on the page did not at all correspond with the rich performative powers of McLuhan’s delivery heard on tape. He did not need the help of George Carlin to know how to deliver jokes. However, the question is, what in the world was McLuhan doing delivering jokes at all at such an august occasion, especially beginning with an opening sally of a rather salacious connotation?

Before analyzing McLuhan’s address further, it might be helpful to take a few steps back and quote from Father Joseph Dorsey’s introduction. Dorsey, the aforementioned kitchen painter, was then the Vice President of St. John Fisher College, and—as the archives showed—had been instrumental in inviting his former teacher to give the commencement. He said of McLuhan: “Whether one agrees with his unfriendly critics who have called him a charlatan or his friendly critics who see in him the Socrates of the 20th Century, this age cannot dismiss him, and future generations of scholars will seriously study the thought and the works of this humane therapist of a troubled mass-age.” This was itself a rather clever reference to McLuhan’s recent work The Medium is the Massage, which he also claimed could be read as “mass-age.”

Dorsey continued: “During the past ten years Professor McLuhan has visited St. John Fisher College on several occasions to contribute generously of his inspiration and wisdom to this young institution. His influence has been a significant stimulus and guide to the direction of our development and a very considerable sector of our present student body are disciples of Marshall McLuhan, with undisguised enthusiasm, affection, and deep respect.” This was quite an appreciation—and like the Socrates of old, McLuhan used the occasion to both enlighten and provoke his audience.

Why begin with a one-liner (and one about a stripper at that)? Because, he made clear, there was not enough time to give a proper speech. After a moment or so for everyone to contemplate the meaning of his ec dysiastalusion, McLuhan continued: “It was Cecil B. DeMille, I think, who said a good movie begins with an earthquake and moves gradually toward a climax. I am going to try to make my talk like that—curt and brief. I am only allowed twenty minutes.” After making reference to his many friends present (some of whom, at least, must have heard him give similar off-the-cuff addresses elsewhere), he then added: “Now as a Civilian Basilian, I want to tell you the long, long trail of winding that brought me to this platform.”

The title of my paper,“Civilian Basilian”, is not only a pleasant rhyme, but nicely captures the rather interesting position McLuhan found himself
in, as a long-time professor at a Catholic institution, which was itself a component of a larger and more secular university system. As McLuhan himself stated in many other contexts, he was the worst sort of Catholic, a convert, and his address briefly alluded to those who had helped him in his personal journey of faith, mentioning Wyndham Lewis, Father Stan Murphy, and "of course, Bishop Sheen."

While peppered throughout with jokes and puns, the address had a very serious focal point: the loss of identity that occurs with technological advancement and its implications for the students about to graduate. He referred to the growing number of satellites circling the globe and how these were turning the planet into a garbage dump. "When you put satellites around the planet it literally becomes an old junk heap, a museum. Every one of the four corners of the planet is now a museum, an old archaeological dig." This, he stated, relates to the growing loss of identity. "When you push a new environment around the entire planet, like satellites, the planet becomes a Global Theater... All of you people are heading out into a world where there are no jobs but only roles. Literally, not figuratively, you are going to have to become involved and do your thing in a totally new way... The individual, the private individual, is gone. It has nothing to do with ideals, the desirable, the undesirable, it just happens, when nobody's looking—it's finished... The only mode of learning left for man today is total emersion [sic] in the Global Theater. I used to call it the Global Village. That is now passé."

The world, he pointed out, was becoming a single classroom, and colleges themselves, as isolated places of learning, were not keeping up with this radical change. At the conclusion of his talk, he obliquely introduced religion, particularly Christianity, into the mix. "Now, new environments scrub up or wipe out the identity of the preceding group, socially and individually, just as the advent of Christ wiped out the old identity of all men." One of the important roles of communication is to help people make sense of these radical changes, so that they are not overwhelmed or destroyed by them. Referring to his reputation as a cryptic sayer of unclear words, he wryly noted: "When people say they can't understand me, the communicator can't communicate—have these people ever considered whether they have ever communicated with anybody in their entire lives? Communication is a very rare event in any human life and for most people is a fatal shock."

Furthermore, to lighten his discourse again, he tells another joke, referring to the distinguished fellow sharing the dais with him: "Somebody said 'Paul never really recovered from that fall off that horse on the way to Damascus.' He was percussed. Bishop Sheen told me that one on the way in here. I always believe in telling jokes because it is the best way to remember them." Whether or not the good Bishop—himself noted for his puckish sense of humour—actually told McLuhan this joke remains a mystery. Indeed, as his biographer Philip Marchand makes clear, "McLuhan's wit was often labored and, like complicated shaggy dog stories, tended
sometimes to irritate rather than amuse, especially when his listeners had no idea what he was talking about" (Marshall McLuhan: The Medium and the Messenger, pages 184-185). Such was the case at the St. John Fisher College commencement.

So just what is McLuhan doin'? Why is he constantly using wordplay and jokes in what most would have expected to be a formal presentation? As Shakespeare said, "Though this be madness, yet there is method in't." Marc-hand gives some insight into this technique, which McLuhan used frequently: "Part of the appeal of bad puns for McLuhan was precisely their ability to evoke groans from literary souls. There was nothing like a bad pun, after all, to tear from words the aura of respectability conferred on them by print—to destroy what I. A. Richards had called the 'proper meaning superstition'" (Marshall McLuhan: The Medium and the Messenger, page 188). Furthermore, he adds: "After introducing himself to an audience with bad puns and jokes, McLuhan usually proceeded to offer a volley of what many considered to be outrageous and contradictory statements. In 1958, after a talk at Hart House, the athletic and social center of the University of Toronto, a student rose up and claimed that McLuhan had contradicted himself twenty-eight times in the span of a half-hour lecture. McLuhan is reported to have replied, with his characteristic air of amused tolerance, that the observation was the result of the student's habit of thinking in a linear fashion" (ibid). Father Hetzler points out: "In times of the free play of ideas that he enjoyed so much, where ideas are born in the heat of free creativity, he admitted on more than one occasion that he didn't necessarily agree with everything he said. That is why he sought out discussion as a testing ground."

McLuhanatics of the World, Arise!

The commencement then veered toward a thought-provoking conclusion, alluding to the future of print, particularly the book form. "When people say McCluhan [sic] is the enemy of print they seem to forget that he has spent the last 35 years of his life in minute analysis of the printed page and in the minute teaching of kids how to spell. . . But I have a statistic that will reassure all those who live in a state of anxiety about the future of print or the book." The following words revealed McLuhan's views on religion, particularly Catholicism, which most of the students, parents and others in attendance knew so well:

"Let me say that the book will survive because of Scripture. It did so in the Dark Ages and the Middle Ages. It had no commercial value but it thrrove thanks to Scriptural study and in the next thousand years the book will thrive, not because of electricity but because of Scriptural study."

Doubtlessly, many, if not most, of the students and parents sitting in the auditorium were completely befuddled, and perhaps not a few were wondering why the good Basilian Fathers not only had invited this man to speak, but sat there seemingly pleased by this disjointed talk. As the
archives make clear however, both Father Dorsey and Father Lavery endorsed McLuhan's invitation. The program for the day itself stated: "Both Vice-President Dorsey and President Lavery are close personal friends of Dr. McLuhan, having been colleagues for many years at the University of Toronto." In unpublished remarks also found in the archives, one understands well just why Father Dorsey in particular was so eager to have his former professor and long-time mentor come to campus.

Dorsey began by pointing out the reasons why so many, not just at St. John Fisher College, but also in the more global academic world, found McLuhan disturbing, if not downright scandalous: "Because he is an English professor ranging over disciplines such as linguistics, psychology, history, sociology, anthropology, physics, economics, biology, mathematics, philosophy, etc., he is looked upon often as a shallow dilettante, a quack, a fraud, and especially because he posits unconscious powerful shaping forces affecting the rational conclusions of deeply researched and tightly argued scholarly investigations, he is regarded by academics with a grave suspicion. The capricious humor which pervades his work does nothing to encourage the traditionally sober and serious scholarly equitone of his colleagues."

Dorsey's respect for McLuhan is also quite evident in the words that follow: "To me he is essentially the teacher as educator—dialoguing out loud with his data and including data from all the disciplines but publicly where his professional peers may rebuke him if he is out of line—but where if he is on target he is illuminating human experience for other humans. And what I think especially creates McLuhanatics is the freedom of the devotees to pursue their own pattern recognitions and achieve a satisfaction that is not vicarious, but genuine, tactile, intelligent, and personal."

Returning to the contemporary Playboy interview (later reprinted in Essential McLuhan, edited by Eric McLuhan and Frank Zingrone), one can better grasp McLuhan's approach as demonstrated at the commencement talk. "First of all—and I'm sorry to have to repeat this disclaimer—I'm not advocating anything: I'm merely probing and predicting trends. Even if I opposed them or thought them disastrous, I couldn't stop them, so why waste my time lamenting? As Carlyle said of author Margaret Fuller after she remarked, 'I accept the Universe': 'She'd better.' I see no possibility of a world-wide Luddite rebellion that will smash all the machinery to bits, so we might as well sit back and see what is happening and what will happen to us in a cybernetic world. Resenting a new technology will not halt its progress" (Essential McLuhan page 264).

Surprisingly—although with McLuhan one soon learns to expect the unexpected—while not perhaps advocating it, in the Playboy interview McLuhan does discuss a rather Christian interpretation of what is occurring through the increasing interconnectedness of people through technological means: "Psychic communal integration, made possible at last by the electronic media, could create the universality of consciousness foreseen by Dante when he predicted that men would continue as no more than bro-
ken fragments until they were unified into an inclusive consciousness. In a
Christian sense, this is merely a new interpretation of the mystical body of
Christ; and Christ, after all, is the ultimate extension of man” (Essential
McLuhan, page 262).

What did McLuhan mean by all this in his address to the Fisher grad­
uates? In many ways, it seems to relate to the teachings of the silenced Je­
suit thinker and priest, Father Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955), whose
posthumously published writings—which he was forbidden to disseminate
during his lifetime because the viewpoints seemed heretical to orthodox
Catholic teachings—were all the rage in some intellectual circles in the late
1960s. Teilhard postulated the concept of the “noosphere,” analogous to
atmosphere or the biosphere—a growing union of human awareness and
connectedness, leading to the evolution of a genuine global “Word Con­
sciousness”. Once achieved, this “Omega Point” or final goal of human ex­
istence would herald the return of Christ. This would be the true meaning
of “the Logos,” or the Word made Flesh, finally and forever bringing all hu­
manity together in one body. Heady stuff, to say the least. Not surprisingly,
many people past and present drew the conclusion that Teilhard foresaw
the Age of the Internet. In the late 1960s many Catholics felt that Teilhard
best understood the changes the world was then undergoing, including the
radical shifts the Church itself was feeling in the aftershocks of Vatican II,
shifts he himself did not live to see—much as McLuhan would not live to
see the rise of the personal computer, Facebook and texting.

Was McLuhan one of those influenced by the “Teilhard Phenomenon”?
Tom Wolfe—who knew and admired McLuhan—for one thinks this to be so.
In his foreword to Understanding Me, Wolfe explicitly states: “Privately
McLuhan acknowledged his tremendous debt to Teilhard de Chardin. Pub­
licly he never did. Why? For fear it would undercut his own reputation for
originality? That would have been very out of character. . . .The more likely
reason is that within Catholic intellectual circles—and we must remember
that McLuhan was on the faculty of the University of Toronto’s Catholic col­
lege, St. Michael’s—Teilhard de Chardin was under a cloud of heterodoxy. . .”
(Wolfe, Understanding Me, pages xvii-xviii). Perhaps McLuhan veiled his re­
ferences so as not to disturb his non-Civilian Basilian friends and colleagues.

However, McLuhan’s biographer Philip Marchand is not convinced that
Teilhard’s views necessarily corresponded with McLuhan’s:

... a follower of Teilhard de Chardin might be forgiven for thinking that
McLuhan was giving new substance to the good Jesuit’s planetary visions.
It is hard to know just how committed McLuhan was to such statements—
he reserved the right to disown these “probes” at any times, and it is even
possible that they were basically put-ons, teasing exaggerations, from the
beginning. Indeed, the entire Playboy interview has the flavor of an ex­
tended put-on, as when he put on the mask of the academic futurist to as­
sure Playboy readers that, “projecting current trends, the love machine
would appear a natural development in the near future—not just the com-
puterized datefinder, but a machine whereby ultimate orgasm is achieved by direct mechanical stimulation of the pleasure circuits of the brain" (pages 216-217).

Hence, the man who "put on" his St. John Fisher College audience by beginning a commencement address referring to strippers "putting on" their audience might just as likely have "put on" his Playboy audience—most of whom would not likely have appreciated references to Dante or Teilhard, let alone to Jesus—by giving a Christian take on the times.

**What's It All About, Marshall?**

For us today understanding modern media and the effects it has on our senses remains a vital topic, long after Marshall McLuhan’s death. It is important to note how our connections to the global village or theatre of today were fostered by such a fascinating figure.

McLuhan is often considered to be a prophet of the Information Age. While he died just before the computer revolution launched his theories on communication and mass media remain both provocative and relevant. However, my own explorations of McLuhan’s life and works lead me to the conclusion that he was no starry-eyed advocate for innovation in the means of communication. Indeed, much of his writing can be considered to be a strategy for maintaining human dignity in a time of rapid change, by making us aware of the forces shaping our perceptions. As he often said, "fish don’t know water exists until they are beached." His was an ethics of awareness. "The central purpose of all my work," he stated in his Playboy interview, "is to convey this message, that by understanding media as they extend man, we gain a measure of control over them" (Essential McLuhan, page 265).

In both the St. John Fisher College commencement address and in the Playboy interview, as well as throughout his work as a whole, McLuhan offered strategies for making us more aware of the various ways that media shapes our sense of reality, and how one can use such knowledge to escape being subsumed by such onslaughts. One of his favorite metaphors, as mentioned in the quote at the beginning of this paper, is from Edgar Allan Poe’s short story “A Descent into the Maelstrom,” in which a sailor caught within a whirlpool is able to survive by ascertaining the powers of the destructive force and adapting himself to it. “By studying the patterns of the effects of this huge vortex of energy in which we are involved,” McLuhan notes, “it may be possible to program a strategy of evasion and survival” (Understanding Me, page 285.) Of course, as Marchand perceptively observes, "McLuhan never mentioned that the hero of the story was broken in mind and body after the experience" (Marshall McLuhan: The Medium and the Messenger, page 76).

As he also quickly pointed out to anyone who thought he was an advocate of the “Death of the Book,” McLuhan was a professor of literature with a deep love for the printed page. As the Age of Gutenberg was coming to a
close, McLuhan was one of the first to speculate about what new Beast was slouching towards Bethlehem to replace it. Ironically, he managed to become a media darling himself, often interviewed by television reporters who never quite understood his cryptic remarks, but who knew a good sound bite when they heard it. He even appeared, as himself, in a famous scene in Woody Allen’s film *Annie Hall,* thereby achieving a kind of cinematic immortality. It was perhaps precisely because he became so famous, and such a media darling (albeit—if for more than a Warholian fifteen minutes—still for a rather short time) that McLuhan remains so relatively little-studied today. His fall from grace was unfortunate, for in many ways it is only now that we can really begin to understand some of his more puzzling observations about the nature of media. One suspects that his theories on communication are even more pertinent in the era of Skype, Netflix and YouTube than in the era of AT&T and network-programmed television in which he initially wrote his “probes” on communication.

**The Fisher King Returns**

In conclusion, it is my hope that St. John Fisher College, one of the places in which McLuhan first launched so many of these probes, can be of help in the ongoing attempt to revive interest in his theories. There are already several projects in progress to this end. First of all, while Diane Lucas, the archivist who first introduced me to the McLuhan connection has now retired, our current archivist, Nancy Greco, is very interested in preserving the college’s records and making them more readily available. It is her goal that the letters between McLuhan and his Basilian colleagues in the St. John Fisher College archives, along with other visual and oral materials, can be digitized and made accessible on our website. In addition, we are planning to do oral and visual histories with alumni, former faculty and other campus members, to record their memories of this fascinating and often-infuriating man, and the influence he had upon them.

While these efforts focus on the past, McLuhan himself would have likely been interested in knowing about the ongoing re-evaluation of the Communications Department at St. John Fisher College and the future course it is setting. In order to keep abreast of current trends, it is offering a new major entitled “Digital Culture and Technologies,” which is aimed at helping students learn how to use social media strategically and develop skills in producing digital media. In other words, it hopes to show them how to survive the maelstrom and even thrive within it. How appropriate that a Department which was influenced by McLuhan at its start should now try to fully confront the technological environment we all currently find ourselves in. It is perhaps time to go “Back to McLuhan”—or, as the modernist poet he so admired, T.S. Eliot, might put it: “In Our End Is Our Beginning.”

Furthermore, the college has founded a new Catholic Heritage program, named in honour of the late Father John Cavanaugh, CSB—another of
McLuhan's "apostles"—the purpose of which is to develop programs to foster and further promote Catholic studies in an interdisciplinary way. One way to do so is to focus on the role which the Civilian Basilian played in its early days, and the ways in which McLuhan's Catholic faith influenced his communication theories. As Father Dorsey pointed out in the quote above, McLuhan was far ahead of most in appreciating and encouraging interdisciplinary studies. He was a true "Catholic" in the original meaning of that term.

Personally, I myself have incorporated McLuhan into my own teachings, especially in my Introduction to Philosophy classes. As Father Dorsey so wisely observed, McLuhan was in many ways a Socratic figure. Since I begin my course by discussing Socrates and his method, it is appropriate to end my paper by discussing the ways in which McLuhan—who, unlike the late Athenian, actually walked the halls of my institution—emulated him.

Just a few examples: There is the original Platonic paradox, in which we are warned by Socrates to beware of the written word, for it freezes the truth and can be easily misunderstood—an admonition which was itself, of course, written down in the dialogues. McLuhan would have loved that irony. Socrates urged us to pursue truth through dialogue and discussion, stressing that often new ways of thinking arise through such collaborative explorations. As Marchard points out: "The notion of dialogue as a means of gaining insights and erasing an individual's 'fixed point of view' (a mental stance that was itself a product of the visual world of print) was very important to McLuhan. From time to time, he would seize upon some bit of information offered by a student with the excitement of an angler hooking a trout in a stream that most other fishermen scorned" (Marshall McLuhan: The Medium and the Messenger, page 148).

Even more pertinent is the connection one can make between the famous "Parable of the Cave" found in Plato's Republic—in which unwitting prisoners sit and stare at shadows on a wall they think to be real while behind them unknown individuals manipulate the images that keep them captive—and McLuhan's explorations of the ways in which such modern media as radio, television, and the computer enhance our sensibilities while simultaneously “captivating” us. One can only imagine what he would have made of a world in which most people are enthralled by baby words such as "Google," "Yahoo," and "Twitter."

Most importantly, McLuhan remains, like Socrates, an elusive illusive figure. Like Socrates, his humor is often both funny and disturbing. Why not tell jokes about strippers at a religious setting, or make references to Christ in a nudey magazine? What would Socrates have done? After all, it was Socrates, who at his own trial, in which he knew he faced the death penalty, compared himself to an annoying, stinging pest. McLuhan, too, is a genuine gadfly, provoking us through his constant probing to re-examine our beliefs and explore with greater wonder the environments we find ourselves within. Long after his death, we can still dialogue with the 'Sage of Wychwood Park'.
Finally, McLuhan was a prophet without honour in his own time and place. While often quoted as saying of himself: "I'm not a prophet. I'm trying to understand the present," in several instances he did foresee the ways in which technologies were reconfiguring the human condition. In his Playboy interview, he also pointed out that "humor is often prophecy," giving the following example: "A recent cartoon portrayed a little boy telling his nonplussed mother: 'I'm going to be a computer when I grow up'" (page 265). As my students become more and more wedded to their iPhones and iPads, I am not so sure this is funny anymore! Fittingly, he ended his interview—as he ended his commencement address—on a high note.

"Personally I have a great faith in the resiliency and adaptability of man, and I tend to look to our tomorrows with a surge of excitement and hope. I feel that we're standing on the threshold of a liberating and exhilarating world in which the human tribe can become truly one family and man's consciousness can be freed from the shackles of mechanical culture and enabled to roam the cosmos. I have a deep and abiding belief in man's potential to grow and learn, to plumb the depths of his own being and to learn the secret songs that orchestrate the universe. We live in a transitional era of profound pain and tragic identity quest, but the agony of our age is the labor pain of rebirth" (Essential McLuhan), page 268.

One cannot be sure if that was a tear or a twinkle in his eye.

Since finding truth in humour was such a constant in McLuhan's life, it is fitting to close with his final words at the 1969 St. John Fisher commencement, in which he referred back to Henry Gibson's query: "So, there is hope and I wanted to end my talk on a strong note of optimism. When people pester me with this remark, 'Mr. McLuhan, what are you doin'? I have now a very simply phrase: 'I am thinking of nothing.' To which they reply, "You egotist."

References


