“A View from the Chair”

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A View from the Chair

9-27-13

Each year on the day of the liturgical feast of the Archangels (Sept. 29), the Vatican announces the theme for the annual World Communications Day, which takes place in most countries on the Sunday before Pentecost. World Communications Day is the only worldwide celebration called for by the Second Vatican Council, whose “Decree on the Media of Social Communications” (Inter Mirifica) was published 50 years ago this December.

The papal message for the Day is traditionally published on the memorial of St. Francis de Sales, patron of writers (January 24). The theme highlights a particular concern in the interaction between faith and the media, and the compilation of these messages – 47 so far (archived here) – represents a treasure of theological thinking applied to the ever-changing and ever more influential world of social communications.

Here at Saint Charles Borromeo Seminary, two related announcements are in the works: the launch of the newly-designed website (coming in October) and the inauguration of the John Cardinal Foley Chair of Homiletics and Social Communications.

As the first incumbent of the Cardinal Foley Chair, I’ll have the opportunity to write and speak about the new digital world. In his last apostolic letter, Blessed John Paul II described the digital world as “the first Areopagus of modern times” because “Ours is an age of global communication in which countless moments of human existence are either spent with, or at least confronted by, the different processes of the mass media” (“The Rapid Development,” no. 3).

Like St. Paul in the original Areopagus (Acts 17:16-34), and like Cardinal Foley in his more than 20 years at the helm of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications, I look forward to making use of the media of our time to contribute to the Church’s mission of sharing the Gospel message. For students here, as well as other groups throughout the country, I hope to engage them, virtually and really, in the new world of CyberTheology! It’s a world where people are enthralled by the wonders of ever-improving technology. More importantly, it’s a veritable culture that both creates and expresses a new understanding of ourselves, others, and the world in which we live.

On a regular basis, I hope to offer here a weekly view into this digital culture, including a look back 50 years at the prescient teaching at Vatican II. I’ll do this from the “casual” perspective of the seminarians’ blog, a communications tool that is an increasingly important medium. Consider this statistic from the most recent CARA Report (2012) about Catholic media use in the United States: “Sixty-three percent of respondents who follow Catholic blogs agree ‘somewhat’ or ‘strongly’ that they do so to get a balance from secular news sources” (page 3.) And if you were wondering, 63% equates to roughly 36.7 million adult Catholics!

We’re glad you’re one of those followers and we hope you visit this blog often.

Featured image from KofC.org
If necessary, use words (10-4-13)

On October 4 the Church celebrates the saintly legacy of Francis of Assisi. Soon after his election, Pope Francis told journalists at an audience that this saint came to mind when choosing his unique papal name. While the motivation in that inspiration was primarily the saint’s concern for the poor, another Franciscan trait has come to the fore in this papacy. Pope Francis appears to the world as one who lives out the famous quip attributed to the saint (though its actual source is unknown): “preach the Gospel always and if necessary, use words.”

Consider his inaugural words from the balcony of St. Peter’s Basilica. After a simple and rather non-traditional greeting (“Good evening”), the new pope’s speech comprised almost entirely words of prayer and blessing. Those words were not, as some surmised, a substitute for his not knowing what else to say upon such a momentous occasion. Nor were the formularies used there merely words of traditional ecclesiastical rites.

No, the pope’s words were chosen purposefully. He prayed for his predecessor (an historical first). He called for prayer for one another and for the whole world. He asked for the crowd’s prayer for him, and the more than 100,000 strong responded with a deafening silence, creating an atmosphere that transcended the moment and astonished the assembled media hordes.

Novel as this was, it should not surprise us. Prayer is the primary language of Francis – the saint and the new pontiff. Prayerful words have become central to Pope Francis’ leadership of the Church on what he called its “journey” of charity, of fraternity, of trust. That is as it should be, for the Church is not merely a social or political or cultural institution. It is, first and foremost, a spiritual reality, for which its operating language is and must be liturgical. That Pope Francis’ first act was to pray with the people of his new diocese and ask them to pray for him, was not only appropriate, but telling.

Other words included in that first address “to the city and the world” (“Urbi et Orbe”) were perhaps less noteworthy but no less telling, because they offered an indication of the pope’s point of view on what faces the Church operating in the world today. To those who, in the conclave preceding his election, saw an internal-external division of focus between the “operational management” of the Curia and the “evangelical outreach” of the Church, Pope Francis made clear the priority when he noted that his vicar “will assist me … for the fruitful evangelization of this beautiful city.”

Preaching the Gospel is the pope’s primary job; doing will require many more words. Managing the minions who work under his authority represents a monumental challenge; shifting the Curia’s “Vatican-centric” focus to an emphasis on the “community of God’s people” is a daunting task. But that outreach remains the Church’s mission, and the pope’s chief concern. All else is secondary to this spiritual mission and is to be at the service of that evangelical preaching.

An approach that puts the spiritual first, that begins from words of prayer – that is how Pope Francis puts into practice the Franciscan dictum to preach always and use words when necessary. It’s a personal method that yields “A Big Heart Open to God,” as he reveals at the conclusion of his famous interview. It’s a mode of outreach that has jump-started this papacy, which continues to enjoy worldwide appeal. And it’s a worthy approach for carrying out the New Evangelization, a task for all of us who work in and for the Church.

Featured image from Reuters.com
Philosophers once theorized that “nature abhors a vacuum.” People today seem to agree, as they seek to fill the void of social space through online chat rooms, personal blogs, and a variety of networking sites. But the domain of one’s life is no longer just my space; it’s fast becoming the whole world’s. Think of Facebook ... not even a decade old, it now has 1.15 billion monthly active users, including the Pope (with the help of very active interns, that is!).

Responding to this growing phenomenon, some fear its insidious potential; parents, especially, see in this medium a threat to their never-ending quest to exercise vigilance over their children’s social habits. Why do people feel compelled to post information about themselves for all the world to see? What drives the apparent need to share profiles and pictures with anyone and everyone?

In the past, personal space was something to be guarded. To invade another’s space meant getting too close, crossing a boundary that actually curtailed communication; to be that close was considered rude, even disrespectful. But now, through the marvels of digital communications, “friends” can become immediately present to anyone with a user account and password and can “like” each other (or not!) with one simple click.

Personal profiles are posted as a beneficial way to keep in touch with one another; but predators can surf, too, as they troll for victims or search for identities to steal. Photographs can reveal meaningful events in one’s life; but employers view those snapshots, too, and an unflattering image now can lead to unemployment.

Social networking via the Internet is not merely a popular pastime for a new generation; it also offers an instructive metaphor with regard to the cultural shift affecting human relationships today. The thin threads of the “web” that connects people also suggest the superficiality of current interpersonal communication. And the tangled trap a web creates offers an uncannily accurate picture of the unintended or even malicious connections that online sharing can sometimes produce.

Still, people crave human connections. Just ask the seminarians who earlier this semester had to maintain a digital blackout during their six-day retreat! We all want to find a place in the world we can call our own, a place which we can also share with others. The church recognizes that fundamental human need ... and seeks to respond to it. In fact, the recently announced theme for World Communications Day 2014 is “Communication at the service of an authentic culture of encounter.”

In the meantime, we realize that social networking can never replicate the wonderful mystery of personal identity and the joyful interchange that takes place when actual lives, not just factual information, are shared through a living encounter with another. To quote the insight of Blessed John Paul II, the rapid development of computer technology increases the facility of communications, but it does “not favor that delicate exchange which takes place between mind and mind, between heart and heart, and which should characterize any communication at the service of solidarity and love” (no. 13).

Facebook is now the social meeting place for much of the world. It no doubt helps keep people in touch across time and space. But no number of bytes or pixels will fill the vacuum of interpersonal relationships. For that, only actual, not virtual, friendship will suffice.
Lights, camera, action at the Vatican
10-18-13

As birthday celebrations go, this one had no candles … though there probably were lots of flickering backlights from the bank of television monitors in the control room. Happy 30th birthday to the Vatican Television Center (CTV)!

Created in 1983 by Blessed John Paul II, the CTV does it all when it comes to showing images of the Holy Father or of events at the Holy See: from live broadcasts (about 130 each year), to footage of daily services, to production of documentaries and a weekly magazine program. Perhaps most significant is the CTV archives, from which sounds and images of the popes are routinely shared with agencies around the world. And thanks to a new master control room, begun in collaboration with Sony, those images can now be housed as digital files (rather than tapes), thereby facilitating HD distribution and improving archival preservation.

What sets this television center apart, however, is not its technical capabilities but its “sacred” subject, something that requires a wholly different approach to television broadcasting. As the director of the CTV (Msgr. Dario Edoardo Viganò) explains, journalism narrates historical events, but telling the Church’s story presupposes a spiritual hermeneutic. And this priest from Milan has all that. His talent shows not just in his academic training (with a doctoral degree in the history of film) or in his cinematic craft but in his religious sensibility, which he makes vividly evident in what he produces/directs for the world to see.

Consider that just a few weeks after he took over CTV, he had to arrange for the unusual spectacle of two popes at the same time. The incredible images of the events of those days remain vivid in the world’s eyes. Much of it was scripted and some of it even rehearsed for CTV – like the aerial scenes of Pope Benedict XVI leaving the Vatican (filmed with the intent of conveying a sense of the world’s accompaniment on the trip) or the dramatic “extra omnes” shot of Msgr. Guido Marini closing the doors on the conclave (emphasizing not the secretive nature of the election but the mystery of a supernatural process). The views are extraordinary, the message both sublime and substantive. (You can see more about CTV's distinctive work in the fascinating “Witness” episode with Msgr. Vigano presented by Salt & Light TV. The interview is in Italian but the English subtitles are quite thorough and accurate.)

In an era of instant access to news footage from around the world, CTV will play an increasingly important role in the new evangelization. After all, the “language” of social communications today is dominated by images, and television remains a ubiquitous medium for conveying the Church’s image to the world.

Nowadays that image is the face of the Holy Father and his multiform activities. Blessed John Paul II was known for his dramatic gestures during apostolic voyages, Benedict XVI for his astute lectures from the chair of Peter. And now Pope Francis is acclaimed for his authentically simple and ordinary activities around town. Hopefully, CTV can keep up with him, because thanks to their expanded coverage, the world is (still) watching.
O, Holy Tweet!
10-25-13

Even popes have gotten into the act!

Pope Benedict XVI was the first to tap his electronic tablet to send a Twitter message (on 6/28/11), in which he announced the Vatican news portal and sent prayers along the electronic way. Of course, that doorway to Church happenings around the world was captured on video for a YouTube link.

And earlier this year, a global communications report on “Twiplomacy” declared Pope Francis to be “the most influential world leader on Twitter.” Why? Because at the time his messages were re-tweeted on average more than 11,000 times! (The next closest was the U.S. President, with an average of only 2,309 retweets.)

Yes, the global Catholic Church has certainly come a long way in terms of the modern means of communications. But this novel adventure is far from simply catching up with the technological times. Instead, it is an actual (and not just virtual) means by which the Church does what it was founded to do — bring the good news of salvation to the world.

Whereas the Areopagus of St. Paul’s time was the arena in which Christianity encountered the culture of the day, today it’s in cyberspace that religion meets society. As Pope Benedict wrote in his message for World Communications Day 2011:

To proclaim the Gospel through the new media means not only to insert expressly religious content into different media platforms, but also to witness consistently, in one’s own digital profile and in the way one communicates choices, preferences and judgments that are fully consistent with the Gospel, even when it is not spoken of specifically. Furthermore, it is also true in the digital world that a message cannot be proclaimed without a consistent witness on the part of the one who proclaims it. In these new circumstances and with these new forms of expression, Christians are once again called to offer a response to anyone who asks for a reason for the hope that is within them.

But some wonder whether a pope should be using Twitter, as if that rather limited means (with messages of no more than 140 characters) somehow lessens the importance or denigrates the dignity of the sacred message. Can there really be such a thing as “Twitter Theology”?

Fr. Antonio Spadaro, S.J., who literally wrote the (e)book on the subject, explains how, in some respects, the Church is “the ultimate social network” because it fosters the interconnection of the faithful as opposed to the inherent solitude of the human condition. But he admits the metaphor is inadequate; the sense of “belonging” in the Church is neither the result of a consensus nor the product of communication. Nevertheless, he points out that the logic of today’s means of social communications leads to the realization that meaningful messages, including religious ones, cannot simply be transmitted; they must be shared.

Given our world’s never-ending need for hope, it’s certainly beneficial that the pope evangelizes by sharing the Christian message via Twitter ... especially if we re-tweet it as far and as wide as we can.

Featured image from Catholicism.about.com
The Poetic Pope

11-1-13

As we celebrate All Saints day, we also look ahead to the canonization of two new saints on April 27, 2014: John Paul II and John XXIII. Concerning the former, John Paul II’s vast legacy of writings continues to be mined for the profundity of his wisdom and holiness. What is lesser known of his work, though, is the collection of poetic compositions he published, often under a pseudonym.

There, in his lyrical words, we see the true artist at work. As he wrote in Gift and Mystery (1996), “The word, before being pronounced on stage, lives in the story of man as a fundamental dimension of his spiritual experience. In the ultimate analysis, it leads back to the inscrutable mystery of God. Rediscovering the word by way of literary and linguistic studies cannot help but draw me near to the mystery of the Word, of that Word to which we refer every day in the prayer of the Angelus: ‘And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us’.”

But in that poetry we also see the saint (to-be) at work. As Antonio Spadaro points out in his guide to the pope’s poetry, Nella Melodia della Terra (In the Melody of the Earth): “It has a ‘mystagogical’ value, that is, it guides the reader to have a real experience.”

Karol Wojtyla writes about many real human experiences: creation, work, anguish, prayer, motherhood, and especially his Polish homeland. And he contemplates real religious experiences, too, from that of Mary’s Magnificat, to Simeon of Cyrene and Veronica along the way of the cross, to what it’s like to sit before Michelangelo’s “Last Judgment” in the Sistene Chapel during the election of a pope. Common to all these reference points is their power to disclose fundamental truths about the aspirations of human life. As the poet-pope proclaims, “man bears in himself the secret structure of the world.”

For example, John Paul II sees in “the crowd that navigates behind the neon shadow” modern-day examples of the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4). So, too, in commenting on Jacob’s wrestling with the angel at the river Jabok (Genesis 32), he writes of how “man suffers above all from the lack of a vision” of what really counts in life.

The former poem, says Fr. Spadaro, points to a secret of the heart, the mystery of our lot in life that only contact with the Christ reveals. The latter, he says, uncovers an anxiety about human existence that only the divine Someone (the title of the poem) can penetrate. In both we see that “Human restlessness cannot find any other place of repose than in marvels.”

According to Spadaro, the metaphorical architecture of Wojtyla’s poetry shows the interconnection between restlessness and peace that operates in our conscience. There, says Wojtyla himself, man “continues to search. But for what? Perhaps I have searched enough. I searched among many truths. However, these things can only mature in this way. Philosophy, art, etc. The truth is what finally floats to the top as oil in water. In this way life reveals itself to us … little by little, in parts, but continually.”

Thankfully, we will soon celebrate again the life of one who revealed so much to the world. His gifted way of contemplating the key truths of human existence shows us that Karol Wojtyla / John Paul II had a penetratingly poetic frame of mind, one from which can still learn, if we but enter into the melody of life.
From a spiritual to a virtual place ... and back
11-8-13

The campus is picturesque, the open space rather serene, the autumnal beauties quite evident. At the crossroads to the metropolitan mainline, Overbrook stands as a 75-acre oasis ... an ideal location in which to undertake significant spiritual formation.

Since 1838, Saint Charles Borromeo Seminary has served as a place to train future priests for the Church. Nearly 175 years later, it’s still a peaceful spot, even with the expansion of the city surrounding it. But it’s no longer just a holy habitat. With the rapid development and technological advances that mark today’s world of new media, the spiritual place is also becoming a virtual place.

That transposition is evident with the launch this week of the seminary’s new website (www.scs.edu). This digital domain now welcomes virtual visitors to a place that is both intellectual and spiritual, a space for learning that encompasses the mind and the soul.

There’s a practical dimension to developing a website that is indispensable in our world. While redesigning a site entails countless hours of tedious work, and keeping it up-to-date even more staff time, this labor is no longer a luxury since life today is lived more and more online.

As a marketing and communications tool, a website provides for those seeking to know more. Through its creatively-designed layout, its inclusion of images, and its navigability, the website appeals to visitors to “come and see” without needing to move beyond a computer screen. Its content – whether in print or audio-visual format – serves as both a public relations instrument and as a repository of knowledge and information. The website opens the door of what may seem like a place of seclusion to any and all who wish to enter through its portals.

But beyond the practical and, by contemporary standards, necessary aspects of hosting a website, adoption of this digital medium also has a significant cultural dimension. It affects how we communicate. We think in bullet points more than paragraphs. We learn more through links than through speeches. We understand by way of seeing images more so than by reading texts. Nowadays, to click is to connect.

In this way, the digital domain becomes even more so the place of encounter. Obviously different from actually setting foot on the campus, a virtual visit still makes it possible to connect with those who reside there. From photo tours to personal testimonials, the well-constructed cyber-place can make the reality come to life. And though there may not be a transmission of actual grace through the fiber-optic lines (since the sacramental always involves the physical), nevertheless beauty can be revealed and rediscovered online. For the contemporary transmission of the faith, this medium amplifies the Church’s evangelizing mission beyond the borders of the property.

As such, the seminary’s new website is far more than a technological tool. It creates an ambience that says “welcome to our world.” What you discover there, one hopes, is an environment that responds to the fundamentally human desire for interacting with others, including the human-divine relationship. When it does that, the virtual place, in turn, becomes a spiritual one.

photos by David Anthony
There are no sacraments online. (11-15-13)

At Overbrook we recently celebrated the traditional Forty Hours and the solemn patronal feast of the seminary – four days of ceremonies replete with bells ‘n smells and even a candlelight procession! I was intrigued, then, when I saw the new edition of Worship, which included an article about “Vatican II’s Liturgical Vision in a Digital World” that ponders the possibility of active participation in cyberspace.

The author admits valid presuppositions with respect to both the divine and the human. On the one hand, “God can mediate God’s saving grace both online and offline,” and on the other, “being ‘online’ has become part of [people’s] daily life and social existence.” She also proffers interesting reflections about liturgy no longer being “place-based” when it is online and how the mediation of sacramental grace might change when it is done digitally. But in-between, the analysis is flawed, and the fault line runs right through the notion of participatio actuosa which lures the reader into pondering the possibility of an online sacramental experience.

In terms of participation, it’s true that the physical co-presence of worshippers does not, of itself, guarantee community. It’s likewise evident that the interactivity of social media can build an online community. But between these affirmations one cannot claim that a properly “liturgical” community could result from numerous people interfacing with a computer. A liturgical community is of a specific kind, the kind that evolves in and through active participation in an actual liturgical event.

Here “active” and “actual” are not merely the opposites of “passive.” The participation Vatican II calls for entails more than merely doing something (like the actions one takes to be online). It seeks the engagement of the whole person: one’s intention, one’s attention, and one’s real interaction with the event that is taking place again in and through the liturgical celebration. And that with which one interacts is not simply a computer. Rather, interaction is what happens “between” people; liturgically, in the course of re-enacting a salvific event, it leads to an acting between those people (individually and collectively) and God.

And while it’s true that some materiality is involved even in online worship, that materiality is, by definition, more virtual than actual. Flickering candles on iPads may have been a fitting tribute to the death of Steve Jobs, but those candles are depictions, not reality. The screen shot of a monstrance may evoke prayerful adoration of the Eucharist, but it’s still just an image, not the actual sacrament. And no matter how many times your avatar takes communion at the church of St. Pixels, it’s the computer-generated figure, not you, who “receives” what is imaginatively given.

Yes, online worship makes for “spiritual self-expression ... [that] becomes more accessible and visible to the wider culture” (citing Heidi Campbell). But that’s a problem, not a plus. Worship is not, primarily, about the self, but instead about the God whose salvation is re-presented to me and which I can only humbly and graciously accept. Admittedly, not all persons participate as actively as they could in this divine-human drama. But in online worship, that kind of full and active participation is not even possible; as the Catholic Church affirms, in its 2002 document on the internet, “there are no sacraments online.”

Why? Because sacraments are experiential, and for experience to be fully human it needs to engage the whole human person. Technological innovations make possible the viewing and hearing of religious rituals; inasmuch as life online aids those who cannot otherwise be personally present, the ever-improving ways of rendering liturgy in cyberspace can be helpful. But without the presence (not merely interface) of an actual person actively engaged with his/her bodily being (not just with two of the five senses), something significant is missing – the “me” to whom the divine comes, calls, embraces, forgives, and unites.

Featured image from www.facebook.com/stpixels
Finally I had the chance to view the latest installment of the Catholicism documentaries, this one on the New Evangelization. As with the groundbreaking original series, this segment presents the Catholic faith through strikingly beautiful videography coupled with the insightful analysis and engaging thought of Fr. Robert Barron. He and his multi-media team at Word on Fire are amazingly gifted, and their talents are and will be a boon for the Church.

In this latest episode, what struck me most was the people. Contrasted with majority of those who subscribe to what Fr. Barron’s calls “the ‘whatever’ culture,” the persons shown and heard from in the video display an energy and enthusiasm for the faith that is contagious. As one worker in this virtual vineyard commented about spreading the Gospel via new media, “we’re not selling screwdrivers here.” His point, of course, was not to demean hardware suppliers! Rather, he recognizes, as we all should, the incredible power and potential of social communications as a means to evangelize the world.

What the new media makes possible is outreach on a global scale. (Consider, for example, that there are now 1.2 billion people using Facebook!) And from that outreach to others, the vast majority of whom rarely, if ever, set foot in a church, a dialogue about faith and its import for human existence can be initiated. Today, the “courtyard of the Gentiles” has gone from a particular place in the Temple to the virtual space that knows no geographic bounds.

But how many of us take advantage of this medium to spread the message? Church groups, organizations, movements, not to mention every parish in every diocese – all should undertake this media examination of conscience. It is not a question of whether to be online; today we must ask how we can integrate the faith with the digital culture in which the world now lives and communicates. (For a local example, see this CatholicPhilly story.) No longer is social media simply a mechanism or instrument; it has become the very fabric (a “web”) of everyday life. As such, we all have the duty and responsibility to “go out to all the (digital) world and tell the Good News.”

Fortunately, several ecclesial efforts are gaining ground in this new realm of evangelization. For example, the Vatican offers a multi-faceted news aggregator and the Pope’s online app. Anyone can watch international Catholic television (like Salt & Light TV) or join virtual Catholic communities (such as iCatholic.com). And the number of blogs and vlogs and other Catholic internet sites continues to expand.

But, as the Catholicism documentary vividly shows, the medium is not the message – people are! And this includes, especially, those people who will be the next generation of leaders in the Church. Although it is not currently part of the “Program of Priestly Formation,” seminaries nowadays should include education in the technology and the theology of social communications. Given the numerous areas of study already required, this will no doubt prove challenging. But without it, the work of evangelization will be made more difficult because priests and deacons and lay ministers will not be as well-equipped to meet people where they are – in the virtual but ever-present spaces that constitute our contemporary world.

Featured image from www.brandonvogt.com
An historic turning point for Church & Media (11-29-13)

In addition to the deaths of John F. Kennedy and C.S. Lewis, another 50th anniversary is now upon us – that of the Decree on the Media of Social Communications (*Inter Mirifica*), which was passed in the council assembly on November 25 (with a bit of voting drama!) and promulgated by Paul VI on December 4, 1963.

Looking back on the text from the vantage point of 2013, it’s clearly not in sync with the current state of affairs in digital media. The same could be said of the decree’s companion documents: *Communio et Progressio* (1971) and *Aetatis Novae* (1992). It also applies to John Paul II’s apostolic letter “The Rapid Development” (2005). Indeed, the development in media communications has been far more rapid than anyone could have imagined; in just two decades Internet usage, social networking, and mobile connectivity have combined to transform the universe of communications into an entirely new social operating system.

Nevertheless, *Inter Mirifica* remains a 50 year-old sign that the Church was reading and willing to enter into this new realm. The decree itself marks the first time an ecumenical council dealt specifically with media. It’s also the only document of Vatican II that led to an annual celebration – World Communications Day, which takes place on the Sunday before Pentecost and is accompanied by a papal message on some contemporary concern in the field. And its legacy continues through the prolific work of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications.

*Inter Mirifica* proclaims the “inherent right of the Church ... to employ any of these media” in mission of proclaiming the faith. The decree rightly emphasizes the moral responsibility of all those engaged with the media, including producers and consumers, governments, and even the Church itself. And it strongly encourages the establishment of Catholic press and media offices or organizations, and calls for the proper training of all those involved in communicating via new media inventions.

Owing to its historical provenance, *Inter Mirifica* is limited in its perspective. In addition to its heavy emphasis on “rights,” the decree envisions communications as a unidirectional enterprise (i.e., producers proclaim, consumers receive), in contrast with what is now peer-to-peer and networked communications. The decree also reckons with media only as a means or mechanism, an instrumentalist approach that has now been surpassed by the view that digital media is the environment in which we live.

Still, *Inter Mirifica* marks a significant turning point in the Church’s engagement with the modern world. Its insights have borne fruit in the continuity of papal teaching about the importance and influence of social communications in the life of the Church. John Paul II recognized the cultural implications of the media as “first areopagus of the modern age.” Benedict XVI insisted on the need for theological reflection on the media’s methods and impact. And now Pope Francis’ use of Vatican media has made him the most influential “voice” in the Twittersphere and as the most prominent name on the Internet!

It all began 50 years ago with Vatican II’s prescient recognition of the “wonderful technological discoveries” in social communications.
Joy to the World (12-6-13)

Kathryn Jean Lopez recently hit upon an essential truth underlying the world’s continuing fascination with Pope Francis: “People see a man of joy. And they want something of it, they want to follow.” A man of joy ... it’s evident in almost every photograph! But his is not merely an optimistic demeanor. Nor is it a calculated display put on for strategic purposes.

No, what the world is witnessing is the real joy of a missionary disciple. His engaging, at times playful, interaction with people expresses a profound faith conviction, namely, that salvation has been wrought for us in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The appropriation of that truth is the source of his joy, and of the peace that characterizes this time of year. As he made clear in one of his (delightful) daily homilies: “this joy is true peace,” not something quietly stoic or tranquilly blasé; no, he says, “Christian peace is a joyful peace, because our Lord is joyful.”

Real joy, which comes from experiencing the mercy of God, cannot ever be taken away, no matter what happens to us or around us. That’s the joy people want and need. That’s a contagious joy that draws record numbers of people to look upon and listen to this pope.

Joy is Pope Francis’ message, one he shares endearingly in person and now enduringly in words. His first solo document –Evangelii gaudium – focuses on it, pleads for more of it, and exhorts us all to share it because “The joy of the Gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus” (no 1.). Likened to another “I Have a Dream” speech, the papal text offers inspirational reading in this Christmas season, and not just for Catholics. It discloses the key not only to the pope’s personality, but also to the work of evangelization, a task heretofore impeded and still threatened by a lack of joy in the Church and in the world.

Whatever be the “bold new vision” of this pontificate, or the theological tensions inherent in the text, the core of Pope Francis’ message, to the Church and through it to the world, can be encapsulated in one word: SMILE! But how many times, instead, have we encountered a religious educator, deacon, or priest with a “bad face”?! Serious need not mean somber; the latter look is hardly engaging. Formal does not mean dour; the latter sound can be downright depressing.

In his exhortation, the pope describes this all-too-common look and sound with characteristic wit: “There are Christians whose lives seem like Lent without Easter” (no. 6). “An evangelizer must never look like someone who has just come back from a funeral!” (no. 10.) From “the gray pragmatism of the daily life of the Church” comes a “tomb psychology” that “slowly transforms Christians into mummies in a museum” (no. 83). The lack of joy leads to a pessimistic attitude, which reveals itself in the look of “sourpusses” (no. 85).

Put simply, Church personnel who don’t smile while they work will be hard-pressed to convey “good news.” Without showing an appreciation for the beauty of the faith, they cannot “radiate light and communicate life” as they are called to do (no. 83). In the next post, we’ll examine the pope’s timely instruction on how all of us can have the joy we desire, and why it’s essential to the message we believe and proclaim.

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Yes, it’s another Friday the 13th. The day/date conjures up an ominous image for those who entertain such superstitions. Yet even for realists times can be dark. This includes Christians as they confront the tensions and confess the sins of life in today’s world.

Pope Francis is both a realist and a Christian! But his is not an ominous view of things. In fact, his recent exhortation on “The Joy of the Gospel” emphasizes just the opposite.

The realist in him acknowledges how “the hearts of many people are gripped by fear and desperation” such that their “joy of living frequently fades” (no. 52). He knows that the unhappiness of some who do the Lord’s work leads to a stifling of the Church’s joyful mission (no. 79). He confesses that even some can be paralyzed by acedia and view “the task of evangelization (as) a dangerous poison rather than a joyful response to God’s love which summons us to mission and makes us fulfilled and productive” (no. 81).

Put simply, the temptation for all Christians these days is to look like “sourpusses” (no. 85). Sadly, that lack of a smile comes with and from preaching. Holding his tongue only slightly in cheek, the pope acknowledges that “both they (the faithful) and their ordained ministers suffer because of homilies: the laity from having to listen to them and the clergy from having to preach them!” (no. 135.)

Fortunately, the Christian in him recognizes the joy of the Gospel despite the tediousness of its proclaimers. Thus, he offers us a different vision. Though not a step-by-step guide, the papal exhortation indicates some key ingredients to a more joyful life ... and thus a more joyous proclamation.

Even when “God’s voice is no longer heard, the quiet joy of his love is no longer felt, and the desire to do good fades” (no. 2), the Christian can know joy because of the gift of salvation. It begins on the inside, with an interior life of prayer that transcends personal interests and concerns. It proceeds by way of “grateful remembrance” (no. 13), first and foremost for that “great stream of joy” (no. 5) proclaimed in the Gospels, into which we can always enter. It also remembers and celebrates all those “throughout history who were filled with joy, unflagging courage and zeal in proclaiming the Gospel” (no. 263). In sum, the enduring Word of God – narrated in the biblical texts, lived in saintly lives, and mercifully experienced in the sacraments – remains a constant source of the joy all people want and need.

Perhaps this is why the pope dedicates such an extensive portion of his exhortation specifically to those who preach the Word (nos. 135-159). Without saying so explicitly, he tells them quite frankly and in pointed prose that they should give far greater priority to preparing and delivering their homilies. In terms of content, preachers should link what they say to real-life situations through images that appeal more to people’s hearts than to their heads. In terms of form, homilies should be marked by simplicity, positivity, and brevity! Done well, a homily makes abundantly clear that the Lord, not the preacher, is the center of attention and that there is truly Good News to share.

If preachers would take to heart the papal exhortation, and lead listeners to realize that “With Christ joy is constantly born anew” (no. 1), perhaps then we will see more people in Church and more smiles on their faces ... no matter what the day and date.

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‘Tis the season for song (12-20-13)

Christmas is almost here, time to exchange gifts and glad tidings, all in celebration of a child’s birth. What child is this is who grabs the world’s attention once again? The news of his unexpected birth comes not by way of email or instant messaging, no press conference or television coverage, not even a blog. No, the ethereal event that silent night was harkened by the song of angels heard on high.

Upon that midnight clear, the history of the world changed forever. It happened once in royal David’s city, where political conflict still bears witness to the ineptitude with which we humans fail to get along. It happens again with a promise for those who see and believe.

Not everywhere will this Christmas be white with snow, but every one of us shares the wish of being blanketed by that color’s climate of peace. To fulfill this global dream, we must wander again to the scene of that first noël and wonder anew about what it portends for us today. For the joy this day gives to the world will become a lasting reality only when we appreciate the primacy of the person and the fullness of humanity that this birth reveals.

The scene was ordinary, yet stricken by poverty like so much of the world still. There were no red-nosed deer, only sheep and oxen and other animals. There the Creator came to dwell, one with the simplest of creatures. No high-tech medical marvels accompanied this birth. Human triumph would come not through the technological advances but in a babe lain in a manger and wrapped in swaddling clothes.

Yet this is not just any child. His birth is a mystery, one that reaches far beyond that little town of Bethlehem in years past. This is the nativity of God, the very One whom some scientists today consider a far-off fantasy, too distant from humanity to know as real. Yet in the event of that so holy night, we celebrate the power of the divine Word still speaking to our world.

No wonder, then, that this birthday comes with carols. In contrast to the everydayness of political speeches or scientific formulas or economic strategies, this season is one of angelic song. No ordinary speech gives way to the idiom of lyric, for “there is something new here that can scarcely be articulated, and the articulation must match the reality of the newness” (WALTER BRUEGGEMANN).

Christmas caroling reflects that newness. These seasonal sounds have a unique musical character that may be attributed to a chord pattern dating back as far as the thirteenth century. Later, in the nineteenth century, church services combined the singing of carols with biblical readings (“lessons”) of the Nativity. Today, even outside of church, the lyrics remain so popular that they pass into the lexicon we adopt in this season, as readers might have detected in the fifteen allusions in this piece!

The music comes in many forms: choir voices in melodious union, bells rung in harmonious tones, even drums played by little boys. Whatever be the words we use or the tunes we hum, the sound of the season is first and foremost played in our hearts and souls. There, no matter what else is going on in the world, we can recognize the gift our world has been given. Doing so will make this a Merry Christmas.
And the word became digital (12-27-13)

No, you won’t find that line in the Gospel of John, whose feast the Church celebrates today. The thought lacks the personal profundity and divine mystery of the original: “And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). And surely the revised verse won’t be seen on any big screen, as “John 3:16” used to be flaunted by fans on camera at football games.

We acclaim St. John the Evangelist for having written of the Word in many words, by authoring the fourth Gospel, three New Testament letters, and the Book of Revelation. In his writing, he brought the emerging Christian religion into direct contact with the heritage of Greek philosophy. The result: a new understanding of “logos” that lyrically links faith and reason.

Today, in a world where communication is more digital than philosophical, the Christian task remains the same: to spread the word so as to encounter the Word. The poetic splendor of John’s prologue won’t fit the character limit of Twitter. And, despite the rich artistic legacy focusing on Mary and the Incarnation, there are no images of the event to pin or links to post.

Still, as Pope Francis recently told the plenary assembly of the Pontifical Council for the Laity, “Among the possibilities offered by digital communications, the most important concerns the announcement of the Gospel.” For this pope, whose own words have been tweeted more than 220 times (so far!), we can discover in digital media “precious opportunities to lead people to the luminous face of the Lord.”

Just as that heavenly light took on the real flesh and baby face of Jesus, so too are real men and women of today the focus of the Church’s use of social communications. As the pope reminds us, in the digital environment in which we now live, “technology is not sufficient.” The Gospel announcement – the Good News that John proclaims – “requires authentic and direct human relationships” that will “flow into a personal encounter with the Lord” – as the beloved disciple knew so well.

Encounters today tend to be scheduled on Outlook, or coordinated through a Facebook event, or initiated by checking in on Foursquare. But the eternal Word needs no calendar. The event of divine grace is ever happening. And to encounter God’s presence, all we need do is “check in” on the inside, in our heart and soul, to be cognizant of our deepest longings and the enlivening presence of the Word who calls us into being and toward eternal communion.

For this divine-humane encounter, the biblical writing of St. John remains a rich literary and theological source. Like it, follow it, post it – by whatever virtual means, the Good News beckons to be heard.

But to keep it real, go back and read John’s Gospel from beginning to end. There you will come to know that “in the beginning was the Word” and “through believing you may have life in his name.”

*Featured image from pastorjd.wordpress.com / 509 words*