“A View from the Chair”

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Sound and Space (9-5-14)

Two things I’ve noticed since returning to a university campus: the ubiquitous digital technology, and how LOUD students can be! About the first, see last week’s blog. Now to the second …

The onslaught of 18- to 22-year olds that attends the opening of an academic year brings with it a cacophonous clamor. The optimist in me attributes that to the youthful exuberance of an overjoyed throng eager to begin again the shared pursuit of truth. (Here insert tongue in cheek!) The realist in me ponders whether it may have something to do with the spaces they occupy? On the one hand, the vastness of a dining hall in which a thousand voices speak at once quite naturally raises the decibel level. On the other hand, the close-knit quarters of a seminar room, in which students are crammed together at desks, leads to increasing chatter as friends from the previous year re-acquaint and recount their summer exploits.

Perhaps the two phenomena are connected. Does the increasing use of digital technology – either to plug-in to headphones or to text rather than talk – function as a way to avoid grappling with the ever-increasing volume of voices? Digging deeper, might the profusion of Ipods and keypads be a subconscious cry for young people to be heard in a more existential sense? Who knows?!

Beyond campus, there also seems to be an increasing level of sound in sacred spaces. For whatever reasons, churches have become louder … and not just with the “joyful noise” of saying or singing the divine praises.

The risk, of course, is that human-talk (that of the chatting kind) can get in the way of God-talk (that of the prayer kind). Without any disrespect intended, folks freely talk on cell phones in church, announcements to the contrary before Mass notwithstanding. With all due politeness intended, folks chat with each other after they enter church, perhaps not even realizing that this is what the foyer is for. (Note to ushers: that’s why there is a second set of doors inside that should be kept closed, to keep the social conversations from intruding on the silence of the sacred conversations going on inside.) And sometimes, when the festivity of the occasion seems to call for it (like at a wedding), cheers and yelps and other forms of applause spontaneously break out, all but muting the solemnity of the sacrament being celebrated.

The joy of the Gospel is what we are called to share. So, exuberance is a good thing, even in religious contexts. Sociability is also valuable, especially for a worshipping community. But encountering the sacred requires that we cultivate a reverence for the Presence. The time to talk to/with God is increasingly rare in our fast-paced world. Let’s give each other a chance to enjoy the silence for which the soul years.
A Digital Cross (9-12-14)

The “crux” of the matter – play on words intended – is that the relationship between Church and the news media has often been a puzzling or difficult challenge. In an insightful essay twenty years ago, AVERY DULLES laid out a number of reasons why the contrast is inherent, based on the differing nature of the two enterprises.

The Church’s message concerns an eternal mystery, but the press seeks to investigate and expose daily realities. The Gospel message is traditional in that it exhibits permanent validity, but the press covers “news” or things novel. The Church strives for reconciliation and unity, but news happens via conflict. The Church opens people to spiritual graces, but the press concentrates on material happenings. The Church’s teachings, especially on moral matters, is complex and rife with distinctions, but the press needs to report things briefly and simply.

Despite these differing missions, both serve a mutual purpose: the betterment of human beings. Especially in today’s world of social communications, the “crux” of the Church-Media relationship is an essential feature of evangelization. If we, as Church, want to share the joyful message of the Gospel, the media is central to that task.

Now the “Crux” is a digital mechanism for the Church-Media connection. The Boston Globe has recently launched “Crux” as an online venture:

![Crux Logo]

The driving force behind Crux is none other than JOHN ALLEN, JR. – the dean of the Vaticanistas as longtime correspondent for the National Catholic Reporter and frequent guest expert for any number of radio and television outlets.

As Allen explains, the pragmatic dimension to this new site is the Globe’s effort to revitalize the newspaper through special-interest targets. But on the evangelical side, he hopes this news will reach various circles of readers (the casual Catholics as well as the professionals, non-Catholics and the “seekers” as well) and serve as a sort of “town square” for all things Catholic.

Of course, as a journalistic venture, the site will carry interest stories more than theological teachings. It will also present, as fairly as possible, both sides to the hot topics … which both sides on the topic will benefit from hearing (as “dialogue” presupposes). As Allen the journalist rightly states: “we don’t carry water for anyone”!

With the still-engaging personality of Pope Francis, Crux will show, in Allen’s terms, that news about the Church today is no longer merely episodic, reporting on happenings every once in a while. Rather, today’s media recognizes that the Church is an “everyday story” – and keeping that story alive will be good for us all.

A concluding note: John Allen, Jr. will offer the second annual John Cardinal Foley Lecture on Social Communications at Saint Charles Borromeo Seminary on Monday, January 26, 2015.
Some great myths perdure … even in the digital age (or because of it). In what may be the first grand “selfie” in history (though the image came from a pool of water rather than an iPhone), Narcissus encounters his own face. But instead of posting or sharing it (which is hard to do in a social network of just one), Narcissus is doomed by it. Unable to connect with the one whose image he sees, without stirring the water and thus disturbing the view, Narcissus eventually dies, alone and sad.

In a self-deprecating blog post last week, Tod Worner links this recurring truth about focusing on me, myself, and I with our ever-growing reliance on cell phones and social media. Based on his experience when his iPhone ran out of power, he says he has reached greater insight into the mythic claim of Narcissus’ mother, that “If ever he knows himself, he surely dies.” For Worner, this means that “If we know only ourselves, our interests, our priorities and we neglect our greater calling to God, to family, to life, perhaps in some small way, we surely die, too.”

Earlier, in a more extensive essay on The American Reader, Rosa Inocencio Smith calls upon the great myth of Narcissus to explain the deluge of digital posts on social media. Likening the phenomenon to the same reality narrated in Doestoevsky’s The Double, Smith proffers the perspicacious claim that those made anxious by, or even obsessed with social media suffer from “paranoid narcissism.” On the one hand, we fear missing out, and so we have to “like” or post or push or share. On the other hand, we are captivated by things (comments, images, links) that may (or should) be exposed as being utterly insignificant.

These authors are on to something … but it’s nothing new. Whether mediated by technology or expressed by self (I-) centered words or actions, narcissism is a danger to which we are all prone by the uniqueness of our identity. Today it may take the form of shutting oneself off to environmental sounds by plugging in the ear buds or using the camera-phone shutter to take one’s own picture (whether as a selfie or the now more popular “usie”). But in every age it reveals a self-centered focus whether consciously or not. The unintended, and quite ironic, consequence is that in our time of greater social media connectedness, we risk increasing our isolation.

The solution is not, as some would claim, to turn off the phones and abandon the social networks. After all, as Fr. Antonio Spadaro rightly pointed out last year to an assembly of the Pontifical Council for the Laity, “If we need to turn off the cellular in order to rediscover relationships, that does not mean that we are balanced but that we do not know how to live the challenges of our time.” (Note: his book on Cybertheology: Thinking Christianity in the Era of the Internet is now available in English translation.)

The challenge of our time may well be how to foster face-to-face human interaction in a world of digital distraction. But overcoming the narcissism that today’s communications media inadvertently foster is a challenge as old as the human being.

It’s also the challenge inherent to being Christian – and heeding Jesus’ command, after having washed his disciples’ feet, to “do as I have done to you” (John 13:15) by considering and treating others as more important to me than I am to myself.
Sharing Faith every minute of the day  
(9-26-14)

It’s billed as a “worldwide event with local presence and global reach across five continents.” With 1,000 events, led by 3,000 speakers in 11 cities around the world, the theme of Social Media Week is readily apparent: we’re always on, always connected.

The celebratory week captures the reality that Archbishop Claudio Maria Celli described at a meeting of the Pontifical Council for the Laity last year. “With the advent of digital media, we have a new change of perspective,” he said, “and the Magisterium speaks of inhabitants in this reality, for whom the environment is the Internet and the media can be considered today as connective tissue (Siemens, 2004), the nervous system of our culture by means of which we communicate, produce cultural contents, construct and express our identities, transmit values, (and) relate to each another.”

Like the body’s nervous system, the data that traverses our various senses is in continual motion every minute of every day. Consider the staggering statistics in this recent infographic.

Cyberspace is where the world now lives and moves and has its being, through the same Spirit that, as Pope Paul VI said fifty years ago, mutually interacts with technological progress. How important it is, then, for the Church to be present there, to be active there, to make the Gospel message known there.

The question to ask now is: how much of this minute-by-minute activity is infused with faith? How much of our own use of social media proclaims the Joy of the Gospel?

Being who we are as believers and being that well on social media doesn’t mean that we have to flood the digital airwaves with religious images and sayings and references. It does mean that we should be authentic digital disciples in every facet of our social communications. As Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI wrote in his 2011 message for World Communications Day, our role in a world where data never sleeps is “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 judgements that are fully consistent with the Gospel, even when it is not spoken of specifically.”

*If you want to learn how to do this, join us for a Digital Church Conference on October 18th!*
Angels to the aid of Family (10-3-14)

As is tradition, the theme for World Communications Day was made known on the feast of the archangels (September 29). With the mighty ministrations of heavenly messengers, the theme appears to have a celestial character while it focuses on a profound human reality.

Today, that theme – “Communicating the Family: A Privileged Place of Encounter with the Gift of Love” – stands at the forefront of the Church’s work. Concern for marriage and family life is the subject of the pontifical message (to be published on January 24, 2015), the focus of a worldwide meeting (to be celebrated in Philadelphia on September 22-27, 2015), and the pastoral topic of two Synods of Bishops, the first of which begins in Rome this weekend. How might the archangels play a role in these earthly endeavors?

MICHAEL is the warrior, known for his victory in the apocalyptic battle between good and evil. It may not be a sign of the end times, but the status of marriage and the family today certainly has epochal dimensions. In a vocation that calls forth lifelong commitment and an institution that forms the foundation of society, an angelic power with the name “who is like God” can assist in the current struggles. With clashing ecclesial positions described as “gospel” or “hope” or “truth” making news, and scholarly arguments being published in consideration or assessment of the issues, the dialogue is heating up. It stands in need of divine inspiration that we might get it right – not as a matter of institutional force or public preference, but in terms of a right understanding of God’s will.

GABRIEL is the bearer of Good News, known especially for the Annunciation to Mary about the conception and birth of Jesus. Whatever the disputes about it, marriage remains good news for all. Pope Francis signaled this in remarks to the Cardinals: “We are called to acknowledge how beautiful, true, and good it is to start a family, to be a family today; and how indispensable the family is for the life of the world and for the future of humanity.” The catechesis for the World Meeting 2015 proclaims it: “Love is our mission, and it is by loving God and one another that we will be fully alive” (Archbishop Chaput). Divine inspiration from the angel named “God is my strength” will help to keep the proper perspective on announcing the good that marriage is and family does.

RAPHAEL is the guide, known for aiding and accompanying Tobit. On the journey that is marriage, and in our thinking about marriage, the challenges are growing. Poverty and welfare, violence and abuse, lower birth rates, higher divorce rates … these and other troubles abound. Legislative definitions and judicial decisions raise fundamental questions about the future. Now as always, marriage and family life stand in need of compassionate care and of faithful companionship along the way. From an angel whose name recalls how “God heals,” we move forward in hope. And to accompany this work, we should pray, as Pope Francis bids us:

Jesus, Mary and Joseph, in you we contemplate the splendour of true love, to you we turn with trust. Holy Family of Nazareth, grant that our families too may be places of communion and prayer, authentic schools of the Gospel and small domestic Churches. Holy Family of Nazareth, may families never again experience violence, rejection and division: may all who have been hurt or scandalized find ready comfort and healing. Holy Family of Nazareth, may the approaching Synod of Bishops make us once more mindful of the sacredness and inviolability of the family, and its beauty in God’s plan. Jesus, Mary and Joseph, graciously hear our prayer.
Another social media app is making big news (thanks to social media!). The headlines are haunting, but in the often unthinking world of social communications, lots of news means lots of interest.

**Yik Yak** – an outrageous popular messaging app that aims “to create a feed of what people are saying, thinking and doing around you” – purports to be an anonymous means to chat with people in close proximity to a college or university campus. Anonymity baits the hook. Popularity casts the line. Dehumanization becomes the sinker.

The fishing idiom is not far off. College students are easily drawn to the prospect of anonymous postings by way of a “no sign in, no profile” medium. Young people seeking to find their voice become less reticent (and less prudent) when they think they can speak freely – and think that doing so means they can say whatever is on their minds (or, more likely, in their guts). What they don’t know, though they should, is that voice is always linked to a speaker. Anonymity may be desired, but digital forensics uncovers the illusion – as those students facing disciplinary action, and even arrest and prosecution, now know.

Popularity is another enticing prospect. Young people seek to be entertained. They revel in sharing sentiment, which Yik Yak facilitates through its voting messages up or down (making the posts move to the “hot” list or disappear). But popular is rarely purposeful. Too often, in fact, it’s scathingly de-personal. Venting may be vicarious, but vicious and violent voices are no less unacceptable. Free speech is never at liberty to harm.

Every form of discourse, even the digital kind, involves someone saying something to someone about something. When the saying hides or ignores the someones, danger abounds. When the something takes no account of the very real persons to whom or about whom it is said, communication lacks its social sense. As one sociology professor rightly states the concern, “When you strip away that human contact, there is a tendency to stop thinking about the receiver of your message as another person with a life and feelings.”

The app is not at fault. It may facilitate the expression of thoughtlessness and even become a medium for meanness. But the problem with a “seething slimepit” like Yik Yak will not be solved by administrative regulation or campus-wide constriction of these means of communication.

What we need, instead, is to expand the value of human encounter, even (or especially) when it takes place digitally. As Pope Francis notes in his message for World Communications Day 2014, this means being more neighborly, being more engaged with others than with ourselves, being more concerned with humanity than with anonymity.

The young will always be restless … and often reckless. Social communications can also be unsociable, as the Yik Yak phenomenon ably demonstrates. To counter this trend, our mission, and our message, must embody what Pope Francis reiterates, namely, that “communication is ultimately a human rather than technological achievement.”

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*featured image from [www.facebook.com/yikyakapp](http://www.facebook.com/yikyakapp)*
Pope Francis has gotten what he wanted! At the opening of the current Synod of Bishops, he asked that the participants speak with boldness (biblical parrhesia) and listen with humility. Now it seems everyone outside the Synod is speaking boldly, too.

The summary report (relatio post disceptationem) has evoked claims on the progressive left of a “seismic shift” in the Church and cries on the conservative right of a heretical schism in the making. Boldness makes for engaging headlines and generates extremist positions. But, as Archbishop Kurtz, the president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, recently said (more eloquently than this), everyone should chill out. We need also to heed the call to listen humbly.

Media mania has fueled the furor over the Synod’s report by drawing particular attention to one line in the document (#50) that asks “Are our communities capable of providing [a welcoming home], accepting and valuing [homosexual] orientation, without compromising Catholic doctrine on the family and matrimony?”

It’s a valid translation (contrary to subsequent reports), but it’s a two-part sentence. The first part is pastoral; the second, doctrinal. The two necessarily go together. Valuing presupposes some standard. The value of people – ALL people – is not bound to sexual orientation; rather, they (we) are children of God, possessing an inherent human dignity worthy of universal respect. The value of marriage is its transcendent vocation to life and love, which can only be integrated and fulfilled in the sacramental matrimony of man and woman.

So, nothing has changed in the realm of Church teaching. The Church has not caved in to the wishes of a secularized society. Nor is it suddenly adopting a new, “gradualistic” moral strategy. Why, then, all the hullabaloo?

Some may ascribe it to the numerous protest groups clamoring on the outside. Others bemoan a lack of proper theological and canonical formation of speakers on the inside. But the bigger cause may simply be us – and the way we have come to think and speak (or not) in the age of digital media.

In a world of headlines and images, a world where communication is constricted by Twitter limitations or over-saturated by Facebook posts, meaning often comes without reading. But understanding gets short-circuited if positions depend only on headlines, or perspectives rely only on certain authors. Social communications today favors the rapid release and widespread sharing of information (a good thing). But complex issues require that we put greater intellectual effort into what we think we know.

There, too, lies another rub. We tend, naturally, to begin from our own point of view: right/left, liberal/conservative, subjective/objective, theological, juridical, ecumenical, etc. Sometimes that perspective prejudices the accounts of things, and we hear what we want rather than read what is actually written. Sometimes we also forget that we profess faith in the Holy Spirit to guide the work of the Church. Case in
point: anyone who got past the startling sub-titles (e.g., “positive aspects of civil unions and cohabitation” or “welcoming homosexual persons”) and read the report to its very end would see clearly what this document was intended to be. The conclusion (#58) baldly states: “The reflections put forward … are intended to raise questions and indicate perspectives that will have to be matured and made clearer …. These are not decisions that have been made nor simply points of view.”

Media accounts will not, because they cannot, express or facilitate mature reflection. But they certainly have the world talking about marriage and the family – a conversation we should robustly join because it remains critical to our collective future.

*featured image from www.vatican.va*
“Be not afraid” … of media (10-24-14)

This week the Church celebrated for the first time the liturgical memorial of Saint John Paul II. His signature saying – “Be not afraid!” – continues to reverberate in a world ever in need of faith and hope. The bold opening to his first cyclical remains the point of departure for that faith that inspires our hope: “The Redeemer of man, Jesus Christ, is the centre of the universe and of history” (Redemptor hominis, no. 1).

This week, too, the Church celebrated the beatification of Pope Paul VI. Despite the backlash at the time, his courageous proclamation about the conception of life in Humanae Vitae has proven a display of farsighted wisdom. He championed the work of evangelization as “bringing the Good News into all the strata of humanity, and through its influence transforming humanity from within and making it new” (Evangelii nuntiandi, no. 18).

What these two celebrations share is not simply the memory of two global church leaders, but their witness to faith. Each in his own pontifical way was convinced of the power of faith to affect the modern world. Each taught that faith through modern means of social communications.

Nevertheless, fear of the media continues to characterize Church communications. Does the secular media “hijack” publications to serve their own agenda? Unfortunately, yes. But it’s not their job to serve the Church’s mission; that’s the work of the faithful, who need to embrace their responsibility to understand the teaching of the faith from its authoritative sources rather than basing it on the mania created by headlines. Does the secular media sow a “confusing message” among public ranks? Sadly, many do. It’s regrettable that people of faith have thus become “strangers in a strange land.” We need to combat devilish deception. We need to work harder (or better) at proclaiming the truth for the renewal of our land.

To do that, however, we need first to “be not afraid” of the media and be willing, instead, to speak more publicly, even as digital disciples.

Catholic voices could avoid the mess the media may create by not publishing things or by not subjecting themselves to interviews. Some even call for a retreat from the use of electronic gadgets altogether, as if the means distracts from understanding or mars the message completely.

Avoidance of modernity, though a natural reaction, runs counter to the incarnational principle. The Word that dwelled among us transformed our existence by entering directly into it with saving grace. The Word that “fully reveals man to man himself and makes his supreme calling clear” (Gaudium et Spes, no. 22) did so with a bold message preached from the mountain tops. That message was revolutionary. That message was misunderstood and misrepresented. That message caused a furor that led to the public attempt to silence the Word.

But the Word prevails. The redemptive message – the Word spoken in the Gospels, embodied on the Cross, celebrated in sacraments, and proclaimed by the Church – is ours to share. Distrust of the media may come from a fear that what we believe is jeopardized by public opinion. To the contrary, as Saint John Paul II reminds us, the conviction of our faith provides the antidote to all fear. Modern media now have the world talking more about matters of faith and culture. Emboldened by belief, we need not be afraid to speak there.
“I see a future in which people will not use sex to reproduce. That’s a very dangerous thing to do.”

No, this is not a Halloween prank, despite the date of publication. It’s a prophetic affirmation voiced publicly by Lee Silver, a Princeton University professor and molecular biologist, on last week’s edition of 60 Minutes.

In a segment entitled “Breeding out disease,” Silver shared his vision in an interview about the work of his new company, GenePeeks. That work involves the creation of what he calls “digital babies.” In a computerized process, he obtains DNA and combines it with genetic information from prospective parents (not necessarily spouses) to make a thousand simulated “babies.” By analyzing their DNA, he can calculate the risk that the prospective real child will have of contracting one of 500 severe recessive pediatric disorders. This virtual testing aims to reduce drastically the possibility of genetic disease much like, in Silver’s comparison, antibiotics and vaccinations reduce the risk of infectious disease.

GenePeeks may have a beneficial aim, but its mission betrays a troubling mind-set. Sexual reproduction is dangerous, unless science clears the way. The conception of children is risky without a peek into their potential. For a reasonable cost ($2,000 according to the transcript), technology can quell the fears of future progenitors. But at what price to actual persons – parents and children alike, not to mention the citizenry?

For people of faith, this mentality is a glaring, and glamorized, example of how we have become “strangers in a strange land.” In his magisterial Erasmus Lecture by that title, Archbishop Charles Chaput of Philadelphia lays bare the progression of thought underlying contemporary cultural thought and points out that “These new [technological] tools have changed the nature of our reasoning.” Indeed, with a virtual peek into a person’s molecular make-up, our first thought about children now sees them as potential problems, genetic time-bombs waiting to go off in an unsuspecting womb. To protect our offspring, ourselves, and our society from such an abhorrent risk as a sick child, it’s better to take advantage of scientific know-how to find a safer donor match.

For whatever good it might do in identifying disease so as to treat it early and effectively, GenePeeks does far more. It changes our view of people and does so insidiously if not intentionally. It alters our vision of every living person’s inherent dignity by assigning it a genetic value. It replaces our sense of biological creativity with that of laboratory productivity. In this, it fulfills what the archbishop identified as the goal of modern technology, namely, “to subdue the natural world; to put it at the service of society in general, and individual consumers in particular.”

Preventing disease is laudable. Progress in science and technology aids that quest. But when parental preference dictates the act of human conception down to the genetic details, what we really get is a peek into “progress” unworthy of the name, for it is a movement that will, instead eradicate “common meaning, classic virtue or shared purpose” – as if that triad were also a deadly disease.

What a strange land, indeed. And how haunting a prospect far beyond this Halloween.
Digital Challenges for Pastoral Work (11-7-14)

“What will spirituality be for those persons whose modus cogitandi is going through a ‘mutation’ because they dwell in the digital environment?”

It’s an intriguing and alarming question, posed by Fr. ANTONIO SPADARO, S.J., author of Cybertheology. In a recent conference to European bishops, he outlined six “challenges” for the Church’s pastoral work that arise from this new way of knowing. They’re worth translating here for all to ponder. In a series of posts, we’ll examine each of them and also offer some tentative thoughts on how we might deal with them.

The first challenge is this: to shift our pastoral approach from answers to questions. Spadaro notes that the digital world is overloaded with information. Thoughts abound. Posts proliferate. Videos go viral. Everyone has an answer to give! But, to quote Pope Francis, “we should never respond to questions nobody asks” (Evangelii gaudium, no. 155).

With so much information now online, the Church as Teacher risks getting lost in the shuffle, and the “answer” the Church has gets viewed as just one among many possibilities. To counteract this, Spadaro urges a renewed attention to the art of spiritual discernment.

It’s an ancient term for a complex task. In the new digital world discernment means developing an ability to listen, even on social media. Can we hear, among the “trending” topics online, what people are really interested in? Can we figure out, amid the multitude of posts and comments (where ranting prevails over rejoicing), what people are really saying and searching for? To slog through all the “noise” on the ‘Net is tough going, but it’s there that people are engaged, so it’s there that we must reach them.

Digital discernment seeks to identify the fundamental questions in life, those at the root of the various experiences that people share, however disquieting those may be. To put it in Augustinian terms, before giving answers we must first discover what it is that makes the human heart “restless” today.

This listening before answering shifts pastoral work from debate to dialogue, from positioning to pondering. Evangelization is spreading the Good News. But before we share the News, we need to establish that it’s Good, that it will fulfill what people need. To discern how the Gospel responds to human life today, we need to help people sort out the fundamental questions in their lives. We can’t begin with the conclusions!

The recent Synod of Bishops offers a fine example. Having married couples from different cultures speak freely about their sorrows and joys, their worries and hopes, gave to those gathered there a needed dose of realism, prior to their discussion of doctrine and practice. The discernment on that subject now continues.

But that mode of communicating is one which can be emulated elsewhere, even online. Listening to those who are affected by our teaching is crucial if we want to bring the Church to them … and them to the Church.

Up next: the Church cannot be a “container”!

featured image from www.ccee.eu
Another Digital Challenge
(11-14-14)

Continuing our dialogue with Antonio Spadaro, S.J., about digital challenges to evangelization, let’s consider the second shift he proposes: the need to move from content-centered to person-centered pastoral work.

In our online world, content is there. In fact, it’s everywhere! Stored in a cloud and transmitted wirelessly, digital content is orbital, swirling around us continually. Like a radio or television station playing non-stop in the background, it’s always on. But does it really “speak” to anyone anymore?

Church teaching also tends to be broadcasted, and suffers from the same lack of attentiveness. Quoting Archbishop Celli, Spadaro calls us to “learn to surpass the model of pulpit and assembly that listens out of respect for [the preacher’s] position.” Instead, we need “to express ourselves in a way that engages others and convinces them, in turn, to share our ideas with their friends, ‘followers’ and partners in dialogue.” In other words, says Spadaro, the Church cannot simply be a “container” of faith lest its pastoral work become like that television that is incessantly talking but hardly communicating.

In terms of evangelization, long gone are the days of memorizing and regurgitating the Baltimore Catechism (however effective that may have been). Gone, too, is interest in lengthy magisterial lectures (however profound they may still be). People today communicate and learn selectively, choosing among their own interests (e.g., what to “follow”) and contributing their own commentary. In the digital realm, Spadaro rightly notes, “The life of the Church is called to assume a form always more communicative and participative.”

As a result, evangelization today needs to focus less on the information and more on the communication, less on the lecture and more on the audience. Preachers and teachers who communicate with a multiplicity of references and a density better left to footnotes will simply be tuned out. And if it’s not heard, the Good News cannot be convincing.

Centering pastoral work on the person before the content means getting people’s attention so as to open the proverbial door to a further consideration of what the Church offers to ease restless hearts. We can do that by acting and speaking normally not professorially … at their level. We should connect the content of what we believe to the ordinariness of life … which is the real stuff of their existence. We need to touch them where they are rather than where they should be … in order to bridge the way. In short, we have to give them something to ponder … that’s so wonder-ful it becomes something they will want to share with others.

It’s always been true, but now more than ever the Church’s message needs to be proposed, not imposed. A person-centered pastoral work will invite consideration rather than require assent. One practical way to make this happen would be to invite feedback on what we teach and enable a digital dialogue to begin … something I invite you to do right here by posting a comment!

Up next: learning how to share.
The challenge of spreading Joy
(11-21-14)

In just three days we mark the first anniversary of the apostolic exhortation by Pope Francis on “The Joy of the Gospel.” Spreading that Joy of the Good News (properly understood) is the task of evangelization. To do this today we consider Fr. Antonio Spadaro’s third challenge to pastoral work in the digital world, namely, to move from transmission to testimony.

With content orbiting all around us in the digital environment, learning is now selectively customized and user-generated. As noted in the previous challenge, the appeal of magisterial lecturers or imperious preachers has passed. A one-man, top-down approach to communications is being replaced by “sharing” information via social “networks.” Authority is giving way to authenticity.

People prefer to engage with what they “like.” They “link in” to and “follow” what appeals to them rather than what is conceptually true and good. This digital reality demands that evangelization be concerned with witnessing before teaching, with giving personal testimony to the faith prior to elucidating the thought of it.

Quoting Pope Benedict XVI, Fr. Spadaro reminds us that using any form in the digital realm (texts, posts, likes, videos, etc.) also implicates the character of the person doing the communicating, for “when persons exchange information, they are already sharing themselves, their vision of the world, their hopes, their ideals.”

Sadly, research suggests that the vast majority of digital exchanges come from and spread anger more than happiness. A year later, the current pope’s exhortation is still very much needed!

To heed it, we should reconsider our pastoral approach. Evangelization must first take the form of an encounter, in which we share who we are as believers, before delving into the details of what we believe. How do we reach out to others in the digital world? Is it with joy? Is it with faith? Since we don’t get a second chance to make a first impression, the initial encounter is critical.

But communicating joy goes far beyond the display of religious pictures or Bible quotes. These may be personal favorites, but they also may be potentially off-putting. Spiritual texts or images are not nearly as convincing as spiritual people! The challenge of sharing the faith in the digital world comes down to the courage to share “me” – even in a profile, a post, a comment, or a video clip. It means giving witness to what we believe not in a photo-shopped way but through the living example of actual believers.

As the pope emeritus tells us, there is a Christian way of being present in the digital world and of proclaiming the Gospel there. It 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 judgements that are fully consistent with the Gospel, even when it is not spoken of specifically.”

If we who dwell online, live there joyously, others will notice … and maybe the News will spread!

Up next: the mystique of living together.

featured image of Fr. Billy’s new book from www.newcitypress.com
The “mystique” of living together (11-28-14)

Black Friday, the commercial high holy day in the USA, evokes excitement and horror, the promise of good shopping deals and the specter of unbridled materialism. But somewhere in-between, there’s also room to spread the Gospel!

Not unlike a crowded mall, the digital world also gives space to the chaos of daily living. There Fr. Antonio Spadaro identifies a fourth challenge to evangelization, in the need to move from propaganda to proximity. In keeping with pastoral work as primarily about discerning life’s fundamental questions, focusing on persons, and offering a witness to joy (the first three challenges we considered), this fourth challenge entails a shift in focus from the long-term objective to the immediate need.

Evangelization that is merely propagandizing or proselytizing misses the persons for whom it is intended. There’s a big difference, says Spadaro, between “emitting” religious content and “sharing” the Gospel.

Quoting Pope Francis, Spadaro sees the “gift of God” offered by today’s technology in the power of digital communications to offer a greater opportunity for encounters among people. As the Holy Father says in Evangelii gaudium (#87): “Today, when the networks and means of human communication have made unprecedented advances, we sense the challenge of finding and sharing a ‘mystique’ of living together, of mingling and encounter, of embracing and supporting one another, of stepping into this flood tide which, while chaotic, can become a genuine experience of fraternity, a caravan of solidarity, a sacred pilgrimage.”

How do we communicate this nearness, this accompaniment, this living together online? It doesn’t happen if all we do is preach to the choir of the like-minded or if our message only rages against the night of society’s ills. Either extreme – the safe or the sanctimonious – closes us in on ourselves and offers more of what Pope Francis calls “the bitter poison of immanence.”

Today, instead, the reality of the digital world challenges us to wade into the crowds. In the vast network there we can draw near to others by sharing real experiences, celebrating personal milestones, or confronting difficult questions in charitable dialogue with the masses. Whatever the particular format, to be effective pastoral workers, we need to be willing to meet others where they are, not by hiding behind digital media but by using it, as the pope says, to “go out of ourselves and to join others.”

Proximity can be painful, as the madness of Black Friday demonstrates. But in the mission of the Church, we can’t get others to the goal, to join us in belonging and believing, unless we first join near to them ... even in the crowded digital world.

Up next: the power of story-telling.
For Spadaro, the fifth challenge for evangelization today is to move from ideas to story-telling. He points out that in the digital world, communication happens by way of emotive updates, photo albums, and film fragments. Together these constitute the streaming story of our lives.

Evangelization, at its root, is narration, not conceptualization. It involves the telling of a story – the story of redemption from sin and the offer of eternal life. The protagonist of that story is He for whom we prepare the way in this Advent season, the Lord Jesus Christ.

With so many new opportunities offered by social communications, the challenge today is to tell (and to live) that Gospel story through the enhanced power of digital media (web sites, blogs, podcasts, videos, etc.). Still, the message, not the medium, remains paramount.

That message is God’s answer to the question of human life. It’s centered not on religious content but on persons, human and divine. It’s not a transmission from on high as much as a living witness to how God “so loved the world.” It’s not about historically- or religiously-limited propaganda, but the actual drawing near of God to humans in the day-to-day reality of our living together.

While the life of Jesus – His birth, ministry, death, and resurrection – lies at the core of the narrative, other people also belong to the story. Today the cast of characters includes all of us: the faithful and the nominal, believers and non-believers, the nones and the dones, and everyone in-between. The message of salvation is universal. It’s a story to be told to all the world.

Nowadays the Gospel as a sacred book to be studied and taught takes a secondary (but still important!) place to the Gospel as an inspired life to be liked and shared. Our task, even in the digital age, is first to interiorize that Good News for ourselves – to live it and be enlivened by it – and then to interact with others in our networks (on- and off-line) so as to walk them and to bring the Gospel to them.

This is a story worth telling – the greatest story of all time! – and it’s a story we, as believers, are called to stream through the entirety of our lives ... and with every means of social communication at our disposal.

Pope Francis concluded his first message for World Communications Day (2014) with this exhortation: “The revolution taking place in communications media and in information technologies represents a great and thrilling challenge; may we respond to that challenge with fresh energy and imagination as we seek to share with others the beauty of God.”

As this sacred season begins, that divine beauty comes to us again, in the story of the coming-to-birth of Emmanuel, God-with-us. Happy Advent!
“The pope and the communications revolution one year later” is the subtitle of a new book by the director of Vatican Radio. Massimo Enrico Milone has reviewed all of the pope’s interactions with journalists. He argues that, while the message is in continuity with previous popes, the modality and style and objectives are revolutionary.

Below are six key claims from the book, extracted and translated from an online article by the Pontifical Council for Social Communications.

(1) **The Pope and Social Communication** – Considering social communications a field for mission and a new place people “inhabit,” the pope urges us to be present there in two ways: in search of an authentic encounter with others and in search of truth by way of questions about the meaning of life.

(2) **The Internet and Conscience** – The Pope recognizes “the risk of a distracting use of the media,” which offers people an excess of answers to questions never asked! He affirms that technology “should simplify and improve the quality of life.” But he also notes that “the speed with which information is communicated exceeds our capacity for reflection and judgment.” When our daily routines online create disorientation, he suggests “reminding ourselves of our Creator who allows us to live, who loves us, who accompanies us on our journey.

(3) **Against Technological Determinism** – A crucial concern for the pope is the media’s ability to predetermine personal relationships without necessarily being respectful of the truth of who people are. Calling the media to pursue truth and meaning and unity – which according to Pope Benedict XVI “remain the deepest aspiration of being human” – Pope Francis reminds us that “communication is ultimately a human rather than technological achievement.”

(4) **The Internet as a New “Existential Periphery”** – Because the web relativizes space and time, the meaning of “neighbor” has changed. In a world now of “social networks,” Pope Francis exhorts the Church to go out also to the digital streets, which are “crowded with a humanity that seeks salvation or hope.” It’s there that communications requires us to be more neighborly.

(5) **Internet and Mission** – The logic of communications today has passed from one of “transmission” to one of “sharing.” As a result, Christian witness in the new digital environment works best not be bombarding the airwaves with religious messages but by exhibiting a willingness to encounter others there “with respect to their doubts, on the path of searching for truth and the meaning of human existence.”

(6) **The Example of Pope Francis** – In 2013, Pope Francis claimed the greatest visibility of anyone on the Internet (with more than 49 million mentions!). Even more, his popularity in the digital realm reflects his deep awareness of the nature of the new means of social communications. The pope uses new media not simply to transmit messages but to create a participatory way in which to encounter others personally.

Beyond what the author claims, I’d venture to say that the papal “revolution” is not really new! He’s actually demonstrating the experience of the season we now celebrate. Through social communications Pope Francis gives flesh to his words; ultimately, though, he shows us how to share the Word – the One that comes to encounter and transform all human life.

*featured image from www.pccs.va*
Awaken … open … speak! (12-19-14)

Rudolph, Charlie Brown, Clarence the angel … these are just some of the beloved characters that come home to us each holiday season via television. And even though we no longer hear his melodic voice, the pioneering work of John Cardinal Foley in television allows us to partake of the liturgical beauty of the Christmas midnight Mass from the Vatican.

Recently, Pope Francis spoke to employees of TV 2000, an Italian broadcasting network that carries Catholic programming. He shared three thoughts he considers central to contemporary communications. We share these three thoughts here because they also go to the heart of what we celebrate in this sacred season.

The first duty of the communicator is to awaken words. Beyond the tactical and technical, Christian communication must be bold and courageous. Not subject to propaganda or ideology, we are to speak with the frankness and freedom of faith. “Every word has within itself a scintilla of fire, of life,” says the pope.

That spark of fire shines in a star that marks the birthplace of the Christ-child, the true light that enlightens everyone. His is the glory of the Father’s only Son. His are the words of eternal life. May we resolve in the New Year to awaken ourselves more to that Word … and to share that Word freely with all to whom we speak.

The second duty of the communicator is to open. This means to avoid the pitfalls of “filling up” (with an excess of slogans) or “closing off” (with brief and easy solutions). Christian communication seeks, instead, to embrace the tiring work of respecting and responding to the complexities of real life, the avoidance of which “is a frequent error within communications that is ever faster and less reflexive.”

The carols and speeches and drama made popular at this time of year reflect simple joys. But the only medium that truly captures the depth of beauty in the Word-made-flesh is prayer. Only in meditative wonder, guided by the action of the Holy Spirit, will we fully appreciate the perfect gift given to the world. May we resolve in the New Year to give more time to prayer … and open ourselves to the power of the Spirit present in our lives.

And the third duty of the communicator is to speak to the entire person (mind and heart), “so that they may know to see beyond the immediate, beyond a present that risks to be fearful and forgotten.” Christian communication must avoid the three sins of modern media – disinformation, calumny, and defamation – and instead renders concrete a real culture of encounter.

And that, ultimately, is what Christmas engenders – a real encounter between God and human beings, come to life in the baby Jesus. The eternal enters into our time. The divine assumes our humanity. No matter the troubles we fear or the past we’d prefer to forget, God is with us. May we resolve in the New Year to encounter one another more gracefully … and ever more cognizant of the image of God that every person is to us.

*Merry Christmas!*

*featured image from www.facebook.com/Tv200i*
How Pope Francis says “Merry Christmas”  
(12-23-14)

From headline hype to online commentary, many have missed the mark about Pope Francis’ Christmas greetings to the Roman Curia.

The media message (even from pro-Church outlets) is designed to grab attention with the depiction of a pope who supposedly “chides” or “blasts” or “attacks” his own staff with a “blistering rebuke” directed at “greedy gossips” or “power-hungry hypocrites.”

Those headlines are inaccurate on several levels, including the intent, the form, and the theology of the papal address. One reason for this may be the incomplete English text, which hits the 15 high points (or low ones), but fails to include the opening and closing, which provide the necessary context.

That context is the annual event of the pope’s sharing a Christmas message with his Curial staff. Beyond the seasonal niceties which such greetings assume, the pope wishes instead to give a properly spiritual talk. He makes clear his intent at the outset: “I would like that our encounter and the reflections I share with you should become, for all of us, a support and stimulus to a true examination of conscience to prepare our heart for Holy Christmas.” That’s not chiding or blasting or attacking or rebuking; it’s leading, as a true spiritual father would.

The type of speech is an examination of conscience. It takes the traditional form used by "the Fathers of the desert,” namely a “catalogue” of things to think about in one’s own life. These are possibilities, not statements of fact. These are temptations, not accusations. These are the sorts of things that people in their position are potentially subject to, not a list of wrongs being entered into evidence.

And the pope makes it clear that these “ailments” are not limited to curial clerics but “are naturally a danger for every Christian and for every curia, community, congregation, parish, ecclesial movement, and can strike both at the individual level and the communal level.”

Might some who heard this take offense or feel impugned? Quite possibly, yes – especially if the ailments so pointedly described actually apply! But in that case, it’s actually something good to hear, for self-knowledge can effect change. No examination of conscience is comfortable. Conversion is challenging. But that is our Christian lot in life – to acknowledge humbly our faults and to entrust ourselves to the redeeming love of God, the very God who comes in person to bring salvation to the world.

And that’s the actual conclusion to the talk – not a “so there” excoriation of the papal collaborators, but a call to be who they are and be that well as a model to the entire Church. Before wishing them a Merry Christmas, the pope says: “Let us ask Him (the divine Father) to make us love the Church as Christ, his son and our Lord, loved it, and to have the courage to recognize ourselves as sinners and those in need of his Mercy and to not be afraid to abandon our hands into his maternal hands.”

That abandon, that mercy, that love – that is the real greeting of Christmas, to which the Holy Father courageously calls his own and all of us.

featured image: CNS photo/Paul Haring
The Power of the Crèche  (12-26-14)

“The Power of the Crèche” (12-26-14)

“Let us draw near the crèche, where ‘a great light’ dawns ...” With these words Jorge Mario Bergoglio (Pope Francis) begins a meditation on Christmas. With this post, we share some his vision, as enlightened also by Fr. Antonio Spadaro in Civilità Cattolica.

To meditate on this mystery is to place ourselves in the scene, to become witnesses through the grace of imagination. Prayer thus activates a theology of the “as if” – in our own experience of the nocturnal peace of Bethlehem and the silence that dominates the night.

At the crèche we see the “hidden light” of the Lord – a “kindly light” that neither blinds nor dazzles. Rather, the light of Christmas is intimately dynamic: it awakens the numb conscience, shakes the soul, and sets us on our journey as pilgrims. “The way that the crèche promises us is different from that cultivated by our ambition,” says the pope. It “transforms us not only by enveloping us from the outside but by changing (our) heart, desires, and love.”

The ones who receive this light “are the simple, the faithful: the shepherds, the Magi, Elizabeth, Zechariah, Simeon, Anna, Joseph, Mary. They are summoned by the light, in the midst of apparent gloom, in the mediocrity of an ordinary life.” But there they experience glory! In the body of a crying baby takes shape the apocalyptic image of the Lord who comes. Precisely there, in the ordinariness of our lives, the light awakens us: “we should draw near the crèche of Jesus,” says the pope, “in the desire that his grace touch us and help us to continue to grow in his service.” Keeping company with the child, we see who we are, loyal and sinful, knowing that “this baby will be our savior.”

To meditate as if we were there is also to act as Mary and Joseph did. They held the newborn child in their arms. So, too, we are to embrace the hope of the Gospel, welcoming it in our arms and handing it away to all people, especially those experiencing difficulties and crises.

The contemplation of Christmas and the “power of the crèche” leads Pope Francis to understand that God, the center of the universe and Lord of history, became a child in silence, illuminated by a “hidden light” in a periphery of the empire and manifest to poor shepherds who live on the periphery of life. The profound meaning of Christmas inspires him to consider that the truly central events in life don’t happen in the “center” but on the peripheries, whether they be geographical or existential.

For Pope Francis, Christmas reveals what it means to be divine. In the horizon of the Kingdom of God, the infinitesimal can be infinitely grand, and immensity can be a small hutch. God is hidden in what is small and in what is growing, even if we are not able to see him.

That, ultimately, is the power of the crèche – the strength of a God who humbles Himself to be born human like us, so that we might be enlightened to grow in that divine love and bring God’s light to the world around us.

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