“A View from the Chair”

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Inveterate intrigue at the Vatican (10-16-15)

Recently, media mania at the Synod of Bishops focused the world’s attention on a private letter secretly delivered to Pope Francis. Supposedly signed by cardinals who “occupy positions of first rank in the Church’s hierarchy,” the letter purportedly railed against the new procedures at the Synod and raised the specter of dire consequences.

Amid subsequent denials by some of the signatories, loud cries of a new “Vatileaks” scandal, and official complaints about the disturbing publication of the letter, the story lives on … precisely because it’s intriguing. News of intramural Church conflict like this now goes viral. Too bad it’s nothing new!

A first thing to note is a “private” letter is just that – private, personal, between individuals. It’s not intended for public consumption. Nevertheless, even without knowing its content, some commentators write an entire piece about what it said … as if the world just has to know. (One professional apology for stirring the prelates’ pot has already been issued.)

But more to the point, this isn’t breaking news. People talk. Leaders lament. Decision-makers debate. It’s the nature of discernment and dialogue, however messy those group efforts may be.

And it’s happened before! Case in point: the Second Vatican Council’s deliberations on *Inter Mirifica* – the decree on social communications. At that time, many thought a discussion of the media was not a matter befitting episcopal attention. Some in their midst were so alarmed by the draft document that, on the day of the final vote, they distributed pamphlets against it in St. Peter’s Square and begged the participants to vote against the decree, lest its promulgation “damage the honor of the Council.” The Swiss Guards were called to action. The scuttlebutt poured over into the Basilica.

But the decree was resoundingly approved. And fifty years later, we’re coming to recognize and respond to the central importance that social communications play in the Church and in the world.

Today’s “lettergate” story may make for appealing headlines, but synods are not gatherings intended to pit sides against each other in competition. Difference of backgrounds, of interests, of opinions, and of propositions necessarily arise in such a large group. So be it. That’s what makes for a lively discussion! And that’s what makes this recent controversy little more than the proverbial “tempest in a teapot,” as Cardinal Dolan rightly described it.

Intrigue may spark interest. Politicking always takes place. The media needs a message to convey. And all too often readers desire something juicy rather than something substantive.

But the real voice to which all must attend is that of the Holy Spirit. Granted, the Spirit blows where it will, and the theological seas sometimes get choppy. Our hope is that those raising their voices in the aula, or writing their thoughts in a letter, or conversing among themselves over good pasta and wine will ultimately heed Archbishop Chaput’s call to ecclesial unity. Only then will they make headway against the cultural currents and lead us safely to the shores of truth and mercy.

*featured image from cruxnow.com (AP/Alessandra Tarantino)*
Communicating with candor (10-23-15)

In his disarming, yet to some alarming, style of getting straight to the point, ARCHBISHOP CHARLES CHAPUT recently described a key to Church communications. Responding to a reporter’s question about differences of opinion among bishops at the Synod on the Family, he said:

Bringing bishops together makes no sense unless you want them to speak frankly. And candor is something Pope Francis has welcomed — which I find very healthy. The Church could use a lot more of it at every level: honest discussion, always ruled by charity and respect. And those last two words — charity and respect — need to be more than just pious language that gives us some cover while we destroy people whose ideas we don’t like. There’s already too much of that in ecclesial life. It was obvious in the media coverage of the synod.

Though obvious, indeed, the point so well put here bespeaks a perennial need, perhaps even more so ion today’s world of social communications.

The media today compete for attention in an attempt to tell (and to sell) a story. To be successful, this too often means headlining conflict, real or supposed. With no malice necessarily intended, this is simply how the media approaches religion, and has been so for a long time. As AVERY DULLES noted in a 1994 article in America magazine:

the essential message of the church is the one and eternal Gospel. Convinced of the permanent validity of God's revelation in Christ, the church seeks to maintain continuity with its own past. It cherishes stability and shuns innovation. The press, by contrast, lives off novelty. It thrives on the ephemeral and panders to the “itching ears” of its readers. In reporting religious news, it accent's what is new and different, thus giving the impression that the church is in continual turmoil.

Thanks to the speed and reach of new communications technology, that reporting now happens through instant transmission and viral images. As a result, says MIT psychologist SHERRY TURKLE in her new book, we have learned to flee from real conversation, which in turn profoundly affects the way we relate to one another. The power to talk, it seems, is getting lost via the power to post and share and like (and maybe, someday dislike).

Communicating with candor is what happens when people care for each other. Communicating the truth with candor is what the Church should do because that is what the Church is — in its divinely appointed mission to proclaim the Good News of salvation.

The medium used for communicating doesn’t change this simple truth. Nor does the topic under discussion. Argument doesn’t mean anarchy. Disagreement doesn’t signal disunity. Opposing views don’t have to create interpersonal conflict.

If we speak only with those with whom we agree, what can we learn? If we dismiss outright those with whom disagree, how can we thrive together (and not merely co-exist)? Preaching only to the choir is useless for real evangelization. If we can’t be honest with one another, and say what we think for the common good without exasperation and without being disparaged by interlocutors, then we will lose much more than an argument.

Philadelphia’s archbishop exemplifies what would be good for all: “The key lesson we need to learn is very local and personal. We need to behave like the Christians we claim to be — people who belong to Jesus Christ, people of love and truth; not tomorrow, but right here and right now.” We might add … even, or especially, via social media.  

featured image from cruxnow.com (CNS/Paul Haring)
"We should lock them into their pulpits until they display the world of the Scriptures!"

On this eve of Halloween, that admonition sounds rather scary, especially coming from a bishop! But Robert Barron uses it to highlight the difference between homilies heard today and the great preaching of the past.

It’s not just an observation about history. It addresses a significant shift in the liturgical medium.

The great poets and preachers, Barron says, “took their listeners/readers on a careful tour of the densely textured world of the Bible,” a world where God is to be found. Today, though, preachers prefer to be “relevant.”

Stories, jokes, personal experiences – these may serve as effective attention-getters. But when more attention is given to our world than to the Bible’s, we misplace the message. When a preacher preaches without even mentioning God (yes, I’ve heard some of these!), where’s the inspiration?

Thankfully, the good people who put up with our words are kind. They listen dutifully (more or less). They routinely thank the preacher, perhaps even offering a compliment. But they long for so much more. They deserve better. If they remember the punch line but not the message, then what’s the point?

Bishop Barron makes a good point about reversing this trend: “a good preacher unfolds the patterns of meaning within the biblical universe – precisely so as to draw our world into that world.” That world, the biblical one, is where divine revelation happens. That’s the world we’re invited to inhabit. It’s a new world – with revolutionary ideas, transformational challenges, miraculous possibilities, and above all, the divine drama of human redemption. What a delight it would be to make that world our own.

One of those great preachers of the past – St. Francis de Sales (1567-1622) – offers a similar viewpoint in his letter “On the Preacher and Preaching.” There he told a new bishop, who had asked him for advice, that “We must preach the word of God … nothing further is needed.” With that focus, the homilist can and should “bring light to the intellect and warmth to the will.”

Preachers preach well, and congregations live well, when they are moved to act in new ways. They will only be moved if they are persuaded to do so. They will only be persuaded to do so if they are actually inspired by God. That’s the point of divine revelation … and the point of a good homily in any age.

With the celebration of All Saints Day, we recall those who embodied this transformation and who now dwell eternally in that new world of God. About them St. Francis de Sales writes, “what else is the life of a saint except the gospel put into practice? There is no more difference between the written gospel and the lives of the saints than between music set down in notes and music that is sung.”

The Bible may sound strange, with stories that are dense, complex, and downright weird, according to Bishop Barron. Yet, the Gospel remains Good News for our world today. And saints show us the way to live there. Our task – our real joy – is to speak boldly about, and listen intently to, this life-giving Word.
It’s time for a conversation (11-06-15)

It sounds so simple: Let’s chat. Let’s talk. Let’s have a conversation.

Unfortunately, we don’t quite know how.

Those who now spend most of their time in the throes of social media appear less and less capable of actually speaking to one another.

So says Sherry Turkle in her new book, *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age*. This follows upon her ground-breaking *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*, the rudiments of which she explores in a popular TED Talk.

But it doesn’t take an M.I.T. psychologist to see this. Any university teacher could probably tell you something similar from his/her experience of trying to generate discussion among students.

Based on research studies and common observations, Turkle reasons that the denizens of the digital world are failing to learn what it takes to have a meaningful conversation. The ability to focus is difficult in a world of constant notifications. The ability to reflect intelligently is stymied in a world where thoughts are limited to 140 characters of text. The ability to appreciate where someone else is coming from is shunted in a world where real emotions are reduced to emoji.

Even more simply – young people struggle nowadays to with questions about anything other than factual information. Those accustomed to getting an answer from Google in 0.7 seconds, or a voiced explanation from Siri, fall silent when queried about God, the meaning of life, or other profound ponderings. (One new search engine admits this wisely!)

Asking and answering questions is how a discussion progresses. Inquiring or probing is how a dialogue runs more deeply. Pondering the meaning of things is how people search for truth.

To be sure, many, if not most, conversations aren’t philosophical in nature. Nor do they need to be. But truly communicating with another person means more than texting tidbits or sharing photos.

We learn to “encounter” one another when we move beyond simply exchanging information. To do this well requires attentiveness, listening, and thinking. It presupposes interest, wonder, and curiosity. It entails asking questions to learn more, and offering responses to explore further.

Yes, chats can be facilitated via social media. And social networks connect real, not virtual, people. But devices alone won’t work (not even a “No Phone”!) if we want to reclaim conversations. To fulfill that natural human aspiration to enter into relationships with others, we need to remember (and to teach) that communication always involves the sharing of oneself in the process.

I suppose I’ll have to issue a trigger warning, but perhaps my next assignment will be to have each of my students speak directly with one other student for the entire class period!

“No Phone” image from washingtonpost.com (Ingmar Larsen)
college image from theatlantic.com
Bigger-than-life Preaching (11-13-15)

The lede from the local newspaper said it best:

“Cardinal Timothy Dolan arrived at DeSales University on Wednesday just as advertised – a jovial, often hilarious man of the cloth who held a crowd of 2,000 spellbound by sketching the pontificates of Pope Francis and his two immediate predecessors as a sort of anatomical model of the Catholic Church.”

The largeness of the man was matched by the largesse of the preacher. Whether he was greeting guests, dining with donors, or speaking to the masses, this Church leader put the Gospel into vibrant color by modeling how to preach today. As Pope Francis recently reminded a newly-ordained bishop, “‘Sermons should just be the communication of God’s grace and should be simple so that everyone understands and everyone leaves with the desire to be a better person.”

The Cardinal needed no coaxing from the boss he helped to elect. Though it was a university lecture and not a homily, the 40-minute speech achieved what Pope Francis said is the purpose of preaching. How Dolan did so provides a good lesson in communications of any kind.

He manner spoke volumes. His words conveyed meaning. His style made it memorable.

The Cardinal understands and exemplifies Gospel communication as fostering a relationship with Jesus. Like the divine preacher from Nazareth, this one from New York encountered people, with a point, a wave, or an arm wrapped around their shoulders. He engaged them, with questions about their lives and works. He evangelized them by sharing Good News in ways both serious and self-deprecating.

The Cardinal’s words were organized around three points: soul and mind and heart. His speech conveyed plenty of information, in a summary review of recent papal history, but without being pedantic. The content wasn’t meant to impress an audience, but to inspire a flock. The focus remained spiritual, as preaching should.

The Cardinal’s style brought the message home. His simple approach enabled understanding and assured remembrance of the message. He spoke directly to, not at, people. He spoke of meaningful matters, about which people do care. He spoke with the passion of one who believes wholeheartedly in what he was saying. His soul, his mind, his heart was on display for others to see and hear. In turn, he lifted up theirs.

Cardinal Dolan came as a bigger-than-life figure on the stage of the Church and of this lecture series. He preached about bigger-than-life topics, for one’s soul and mind and heart transcend the mundane concerns of earthly existence. In person and in words, he is a new evangelizer … as we all should learn to be.

featured image cropped from video at www.mcall.com / lecture image from Mary Colleen Romendio
"And with your (virtual) spirit" (11-20-15)

In Catholic churches, the congregational response to “The Lord be with you …” does not make room for a digital community. As made clear in a 2002 document from the Pontifical Council for Social Communications, “Virtual reality is no substitute for the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist, the sacramental reality of the other sacraments, and shared worship in a flesh-and-blood human community. There are no sacraments on the Internet” (“The Church and Internet,” no. 9). But could there be?

After more than a decade since that pronouncement, the digital revolution has changed the way we act and interact. In an insightful article recently published in Worship, Daniella Zsusan-Jerome explores the interface between sacramental theology and the digital culture. She acknowledges, rightly, that “the face-to-face, communal encounter remains the standard for understanding presence as church.” But she likewise admits that nowadays, “we know that digital information can carry the presence of a person to us” through a variety of communication techniques and elements.

The complexity of the matter arises from the fact that “in the liturgy, the sacramental encounter with the Lord is not face-to-face; in fact, it is his absence that allows for the condition of faith to emerge and grow.” What the church does in worship is to mediate that absent presence so that the “living memory” of Jesus prevails and His redemption is made present. Hence the question: can human presence be mediated for the sake of participating in the liturgy?

Today I asked that question of my class … all of whom are digital natives (or at least digital consumers). They rebuffed the idea of someone “going to Mass” in his/her pajamas before a computer screen in the comfort of home. But each objection they voiced gave rise to other questions.

“IT would just be a convenient excuse not to go to church.” But how do we include/accompany those who, for various reasons, are impeded from going? What if a church is not readily accessible, as in war-torn areas? What if there aren’t enough clergy to go around?

“IT would turn worship into something available on Netflix.” What if it had to be a "live" event? What if it incorporated, somehow, the dialogic and interactive elements of active participation?

“IT would be individualistic, not communal.” What about massive papal Masses that people view on jumbotrons? Don’t we already livestream Mass for “overflow” crowds in a church basement on the big feast days? What if the broadcast had to happen (at both ends) with a group of persons?

“IT would remove the sacredness of the event.” What if it took place in a sacred space, like a closed church? Wouldn’t it make possible celebration with a bishop, who otherwise only visits a parish rarely?

“IT would not be possible to receive Communion.” If a blessing, even an indulgence, can be given and received via social communications, why can’t the Eucharist be consecrated in a similar way? Or why can’t the people in remote places receive what is already consecrated (something which happens at most Masses already). If this is the only way for the People of God to receive the sacraments, don’t they have a right to do so?

Fortunately, the time for class to end came along and next week I have to start a new topic!
Going on the offensive with mercy (12-4-15)

TRIGGER WARNING: Reading this post may offend your sensitivities … just as writing it partially offends mine! The time has come to take offense at taking offense at things.

This isn’t circular reasoning. It’s an observation based on a slew of recent headlines. Anything and everything now seems to offend someone.

It’s rampant on university campuses, where safe spaces have been weaponized and trigger warnings loaded as ammo against thought-provoking ideas. With alarming speed, we are witnessing a new epidemic – the rise of college crybullies. Raised by a generation of entitled parents and coddling institutions, today’s thin-skinned students bemoan anything that might in the slightest way aggrieve them. The list is growing: some ordinary words are to be banned as biased (e.g., “elderly” and “American”), and some commonplace activities curtailed as contentious (clapping applause, eating burritos, even engaging in small-talk). And don’t dare offer a yoga class on campus, unless you can defend it from accusations of colonial oppression and cultural genocide. So widespread is the dis-ease that comedians are steering clear of campus gigs.

But it’s not just on campus that micro-aggression occurs. It reaches back to kindergarten, where playing with Legos risks fomenting gender inequality. It reaches forward, where the prospect of marriage taught in a Christian way warrants civil injunction or prosecution. It reaches outward, when recitation of the Lord’s Prayer on film is banned as potentially harmful to movie-goers. It reaches inward, when pledging allegiance to the flag is forbidden because it could offend citizens of other countries.

You can’t make this stuff up! The list of lowlights could go on and on. And in the warp speed of our digital culture, the “ideological junkspace” of modern media tends to incite people more and more to complain about things smaller and smaller.

So, it’s time to go on the offensive … with mercy. Not pity – which does nothing but augment the self-esteem culture. Not pacification – which mistakes loudly-voiced wants for legitimate demands. Not permissiveness – which relativizes truth and turns sensibilities into self-justified movements. What we need is real mercy which, instead of condoning or condemning, looks first to the dignity of persons before it thoughtfully engages the difference of ideas.

That’s the distinctive mark of this year’s holiday season in the Catholic Church. Next week (on December 8) the Jubilee Year of Mercy begins. As Antonio Spadaro explains it, “mercy” is more than just a favorite word of this popular pope; mercy is the key to understanding Francis’s entire pontificate. His words and deeds demonstrate that mercy generates a pastoral attitude, expresses a doctrinal truth, and reveals the substance of the Gospel message.

In the midst of real aggression, discrimination, and oppression, showing mercy is our way, as followers of Christ, to go on the offensive. Coming to see the face of God embracing us, we will be better able to go out and recognize that same divine face in others who need our welcoming.

Then, perhaps, the proliferation of giving and taking offense will end. Then, hopefully, the Church will be seen as the “oasis of mercy” that it is meant to be (Bull of Indiction, no. 12). Then, finally, we shall all have a truly safe space in which to live.

featured image sketch from www.nationalreview.com 
logo image from www.im.va
There’s a reason for the season (12-11-15)

It never ceases to amaze me how Christmas can cause such consternation.

There’s the annual clamoring over what greeting to offer – because apparently wishes for merriment and happiness improperly worded can be taken as microaggressions. Why reference to what angels announced and shepherds sang about is offensive to anyone may be an even greater mystery than the glorious event itself.

There’s the Knights of Columbus campaign to “Keep Christ in Christmas” featuring television and radio ads, poster contests, and magnetic decals for your car. It’s a worthy goal, dutifully upheld by faithful gentlemen, though one may wonder why their banners are unfurled outside places of worship. Are church-goers the real cause for concern?

And there’s the savvy evangomercial from Catholics Come Home, which seeks to remind viewers of the real priority at this time of year, despite the visually odd juxtaposition of Santa Claus and the newborn child.

This year, thanks to social media, there’s even more to gripe about in this sacred season.

Starbucks caused a different kind of stirring in their cups because of their cups. The classic “Charlie Brown Christmas” led the first couple to proclaim that Christmas is all about the environment since the cartoon characters “teach us that tiny trees just need a little love.” And the American Atheists are now proclaiming to drivers that “The things that are most important during the holidays … have nothing to do with religion.”

Whether championing the Christmas cause, or enduring the seasonal calumny, the trends reveal a deeper truth. Christmas – the Incarnation of the Son of God as a baby born in a manger – touches people deeply, in every age and place. Whether affirmed or denied, the holiday is a holy day, for it speaks to that natural inclination shared by all human beings to reach beyond themselves and be united with a transcendent source of all goodness.

By now, Virginia knows there is a Santa Claus. For thousands of years, Christians (and people of good will) have known that there’s another reason for the season … “The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us.”

And this truth endures, no matter what madness the world experiences. It’s up to us to make it known. Whether in greetings or ads, but most of all in our daily outlook and personal bearing, this is once again the real reason for our joy.
O … it’s time to sing (12-18-15)

The time is nigh. The day draws near. We have entered the Octave before Christmas.

It’s not to be confused with the Octave of Christmas (Dec 25-Jan 1), nor those twelve days of Christmas about which children, and now minions, gleefully sing.

No, the Octave before Christmas brings the Advent season to its culmination. For seven days (the Christmas vigil being the eighth day), we are invited to join in prayerful anticipation of the blessed event, as was done in monasteries of old. Each evening they would sing the “O” Antiphons – a series of exclamations that find their origin in biblical prophecies. Some even think that the clever monks used the antiphons to spell out (in Latin) what we believe and what we hope: “Tomorrow, I will come.”

The haunting verses invite meditation on the cosmic meaning of the Incarnation. They also offer a concise Scriptural treatise on the identity of the Messiah and on what our waiting world hopes from Him. (Click here to listen and learn.)

O WISDOM, O holy Word of God …
come and show your people the way to salvation.

O SACRED LORD of ancient Israel …
come, stretch out your mighty hand to set us free.

O FLOWER OF JESSE’S STEM …
come, let nothing keep you from coming to our aid.

O KEY OF DAVID …
come, break down the walls of death … and lead your captive people into freedom.

O RADIANT DAWN …
come, shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death.

O KING OF ALL THE NATIONS …
come and save the creature you fashioned from the dust.

O EMMANUEL …
come and set us free, Lord our God.

Each offers a good thought in our minds to say … and a hope for which our world needs to pray … so that next week we will have, a truly Happy Christmas day.

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