“A View from the Chair”

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SPRING 2014
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“Times change ... Feelings remain the same.”

So ends the Digital Story of the Nativity, a cleverly creative rendition that makes use of many “new” media to tell anew the ancient tale of the Christmas season, from Annunciation via text message to the Epiphany check-ins via Foursquare.

It’s a contemporary tribute to the many types of social communications by which “wise men” (and women) interact with and encounter one another in the world today. And it is fast becoming the way in which we experience God and express faith.

Fifty years ago, Pope Paul VI spoke of how “The mechanical brain comes to the aid of the spiritual brain.” This year Pope Francis noted that, especially for youth, digital technology “has become a sort of environment of life, to reawaken the insuppressible questions of the heart on the sense of existence and to indicate the way that leads to Him who is the answer, the divine Mercy made flesh, the Lord Jesus.”

Yes, times change. But the truth of God’s great gift remains the same. Even via digital media, it’s wise to see in the Christ-child the one who “fully reveals man to man himself and makes his supreme calling clear” (Gaudium et Spes, no. 22).

Watch it and enjoy. Share it and rejoice.
Am I my brother’s keeper online? (1-10-14)

In his first message for the World Day of Peace, Pope Francis signals the anthropological foundation to what the world desires and desperately needs: “Fraternity is an essential human quality, for we are relational beings. A lively awareness of our relatedness helps us to look upon and to treat each person as a true sister or brother; without fraternity it is impossible to build a just society and a solid and lasting peace” (no. 1.)

The message roots this call to fraternity in the family as “the first pathway to peace” and in faith “since a fraternity devoid of reference to a common Father as its ultimate foundation is unable to endure.” It then addresses the search for peace amid troubling realities such as the economy, war, corruption, and nature.

But how does the papal plea play out in today’s world of digital communications? Social media has already demonstrated a power to galvanize people in search of socio-political change (as in the Arab Spring). But in terms of everyday connections, am I really my brother’s keeper online?

For the Holy Father, one of today’s sad realities is “a profound poverty of relationships,” one that “can be overcome only through the rediscovery and valuing of fraternal relationships … through the sharing of joys and sorrows, of the hardships and triumphs that are a part of human life” (no. 5).

Sharing life’s moments – that’s the stuff of social media! From status updates to check-ins to pictures of all kinds, people today capture life’s moments on their personal timelines and Twitter feeds. They then make the news available to anyone who befriends or follows them. It’s how we connect to others near and far.

These connections are no less real than the in-person ones. To claim that physical presence is more “true” than the digital one sets up a false dichotomy behind which too many people hide. As Fr. Antonio Spadaro points out: “This dimension of falsity, which we conveniently attribute to the web, in reality resides already in the falsity that is lived ordinarily in life and that, if anything, is amplified on the web thanks to the lack of physical contact. There is not a time for digital relations and a time for physical relations: there is life, which is one and is expressed in diverse modes.”

Though not the most interpersonal, the primary mode of communicating about life today is online. As result, the world of social media also calls for a fraternal approach as a new pathway to peace. Walking this path begins with ourselves and extends to the others we encounter online.

Regarding ourselves, authenticity is key. Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI describes this as “witness(ing) 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” (Message for World Communications Day 2011). The posts and pins and pokes all say something about ourselves!

Regarding what we say about others, fraternal charity should always be our norm. How often do we see (or make) comments that devolve into denigration? We may not be interested in someone’s post. We may think their photos are silly. We may even disagree with their point of view. But if we remember that even online those users are our brothers and sisters, then peace may prevail.

Featured image from theleaderassumpta.com/tag/world-peace-day / 562 words
CyberTheology comes to Overbrook (1-17-14)

Nowadays public events usually begin with a plea for folks to turn off their cell phones and other potentially distracting devices. But in a new course that begins today at Saint Charles Borromeo Seminary, just the opposite is required!

CyberTheology, an elective in pastoral theology, offers students the opportunity to weave digital technology into their seminary education. More to the point, the course takes a deeper look at the interface between Theology and Social Communications. Its two-fold emphasis is to seek the intelligibility of faith in light of our technological culture and to advance the mission of evangelization through social media.

The course owes its origin to the pioneering work of Fr. Antonio Spadaro, S.J. The editor of Civilità Cattolica, he garnered global recognition for publishing “A Big Heart Open to God” – the now famous exclusive interview he conducted with Pope Francis. Fr. Spadaro literally wrote the book (and the blog and the Facebook page and the Twitter feed) on Cybertheology – which will be published in English translation later this year. He also authored Cybergrace and Twitter Theology, both appropriately published as e-books.

In his view, Cybertheology deals with what machines cannot: the sense of things. “Technology is the power of organizing materials on the part of man who is a spiritual being. We are called to comprehend the profound nature, the very vocation of digital technologies in relation to the life of the spirit. In particular, the web and the culture of cyberspace pose new challenges to our capacity to formulate and listen to a symbolic language that speaks of the possibility and the signs of transcendence in our life. The distorted and ethically bad use of technology, paradoxically, confirms the fact that it has to do with freedom and the human spirit.”

Students at Overbrook will explore the place of that transcendent spirit in the iWorld. Through lectures and seminars they will examine the distinguishing features of the digital culture – its logic, its anthropology, its sociology. They will also analyze the Church’s teaching about social communications, from the Second Vatican Council to Pope Francis.

One goal of the course will be to connect the power of new media with the Church’s new evangelization. To that end, students will undertake a service-learning project that leads to the development of a social communications plan for the apostolic site in which they work (a local parish or archdiocesan organization).

As digital consumers, these seminarians are already purveyors of the power of social media. As future priests, they will soon be proclaimers of the wonders of salvation. Though distinct, these two realms are no longer separate. Digital technology has become the existential operating system for people the world over. The Gospel message offers them Good News as they continually search for hope. Integrating the two is now a critical task facing anyone who ministers in the Church.

Last month, Pope Francis told members of the Pontifical Council for the Laity that “it is indispensable to be present [in the digital realm], always with an evangelical style … to reawaken the insuppressible questions of the heart about the sense of existence, and to indicate the way that leads to Him who is the answer, the divine Mercy made flesh, the Lord Jesus.”

Today that evangelical presence must also inhabit cyberspace ... as these seminarians are about to learn!

Featured image from the Catholic Communications Campaign, www.uscb.com / 557 words
Only with a pope does voice mail become international news! CNN reports that Pope Francis called a Carmelite monastery in Spain to wish the community a Happy New Year. When no one answered the phone, the Holy Father left this message: “What are the nuns doing that they can’t answer? I am Pope Francis, I wish to greet you in this end of the year, I will see if I can call you later. May God bless you!”

So much of this pope’s normal activity has been newsworthy. Fr. Thomas Rosica recounts several actions that give strength to Pope Francis’ appeal: “A Pope who abandoned the red shoes – that were never an official part of the papal wardrobe! A Pope who dresses modestly, pays his own lodging bills, drives around Vatican City in a Ford Focus, calls many people on the phone, brings jam sandwiches to on-duty Swiss Guards at his door and invites street people to his birthday breakfast.”

Yet this Francis is not the only one to champion the ordinary as the pathway to holiness. ST. FRANCIS DE SALES (1567-1622), the bishop and Doctor of the Church whose feast we celebrate today, anticipated Vatican II’s “universal call to holiness” with his famous Introduction to the Devout Life. Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI calls him “an exemplary witness of Christian humanism” who “reminds us that human beings have planted in their innermost depths the longing for God and that in him alone can they find true joy and the most complete fulfilment.”

Salesian spirituality can be characterized as an “everyday holiness.” It’s a way of life that does not require heroic feats of sanctity but, instead, seeks to cultivate the “little virtues” appropriate to the routines of one’s state-in-life: “Occasions do not often present themselves for the exercise of fortitude, magnanimity, and great generosity, but meekness, temperance, integrity, and humility are virtues that must mark all our actions in life. ... In practicing the virtues, we should prefer the one most conformable to our duties rather than the one more agreeable to our tastes.”

For St. Francis de Sales, we practice virtue best in the “present moment” of the current day which is the only time over which we have any control! By focusing our energies there, and only there, we are more likely to remain at peace, neither disturbed about the past nor anxious about the future. As he writes in another letter, “Let us be firmly resolved to serve God with our whole heart and life. Beyond that, let us have no care about tomorrow. Let us think only of living today well, and when tomorrow comes, it also will be today and we can think about it then.”

This “normal” approach to holiness is the antidote to anxiety (which he calls the greatest evil that can happen to a soul, except sin). And here lies the saint’s anthropological genius. Like the pope, he recognizes that at the heart of human living is our intention, our willingness to try; as such, the outcomes of our efforts, along with the actions of others and the contingencies of life, are not something within our control. Yet these are most often the source of our discontent.

But if we learn to direct our intention, in whatever we do, to the fulfillment of God’s will, then our actions can never fail, no matter what the results may be. If our aim is to please God, then we do! And every day we start all over again, knowing that we are one day closer to our eternal salvation.
Peter’s stone is not rolling away (1-31-14)

If there is such a thing as a cover-pope, Francis certainly fits the bill. His image has graced the front of Life, Vanity Fair, and Time magazines, just to name a few. Now he’s made it on the cover of Rolling Stone. Dr. Hook would be thrilled!

While a picture, by common adage, is worth a thousand words, the five words that accompany the pope’s picture on the Rolling Stone cover – the times they are a-changin’ – are worth little when it comes to accurately portraying the substance of the current pontiff. The times may be a-changin’, but the implication that this pope will be changing the Church in ways hoped for by a secular world misses the mark by a long shot.

That Pope Francis has been a catalyst for changing the face of the Church and its culture of communication can hardly be denied. Almost a year into his papacy, he still enjoys the media’s attention far beyond the typical grace period for world leaders. He’s managed to capture such global appeal precisely because he preaches first and foremost the truth of God’s mercy – a message that world with so little hope desperately longs to hear.

But that message, foundational as it is to the proclamation of the Gospel, does not mean that those doctrinal and moral teachings with which the majority may disagree are soon to be overhauled or discarded altogether. The times may be a-changin’, but truth endures. As Fr. James Schall puts it, “Nothing the Pope says is ignored, except perhaps when he reaffirms that nothing basic in Christian teaching will or can be changed.” Schall’s recent article succinctly explains pop culture’s confusion when it comes to what “change” means.

A pope on a magazine cover may be wildly popular, and it’s certainly welcome attention in terms of publicity. As the veteran Vatican reporter, John Allen Jr., jokingly quipped: “In every region of the world in which public opinion can be scientifically surveyed, Pope Francis has approval ratings that politicians or celebrities would sacrifice their children to pagan gods to attain.”

The risk, however, is that such publicity will perpetuate the cultural myth that truth is something we determine rather than what we discover, or that the meaning of things is what a majority opines rather than what really is, irrespective of any individual or collective desire. The truths of the Church are not the pope’s own, or any person’s, to change with the times. Faith will always be a matter of divine revelation not social reconstruction.

To the first leader of the Church, Jesus said: “You are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my Church and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it” (Matthew 16:18). That’s a stone that will not roll away, no matter how strong the popular tide. On this, Pope Francis, too, is quite clear.

Featured image from music.yahoo.com / 477 words
Toward a new decade of digital “neighbors”  
(2-7-14)

This week Facebook celebrates its tenth anniversary. Looking back, it certainly has come a long way in a short time. It began as a college student’s project conceived in a garage as a way to gauge interest in and navigate relationships on campus. It has now become the social networking site of the world, with online connections among more than 1.15 billion people, about 750 million of whom visit the site every day.

Facebook seeks to make the world more open and connected. It enables people to share information that is relevant or important to them. It generates “social capital” and fosters “the strength of weak ties.” With nearly three billion “likes” a day, Facebook provides a way to validate our own interests.

These and other features led Craig Detweiler to include Facebook, after just one decade, in the pantheon of the iGods! As he explains in his book by that title, “Apple solved our computer problem – making technology more beautiful and human. Amazon covered our shopping needs – making infinite choice just one click away. Google addressed our information problem – making the internet more navigable. Facebook solved our human problem – connecting us in an era prone to depersonalization.”

But beware of idols! To be sure, Facebook and the other digital demigods have revolutionized the world in which we live. Notwithstanding the risks inherent with any technology, their innovations have advanced human capabilities tremendously and offer undeniable benefits to human interactions, whether social or political or economic. Even Pope Francis is on Facebook, as the subject of multiple pages that together are “liked” by millions of followers!

But the Holy Father wisely reminds us that “communication is ultimately a human rather than a technological achievement.” In his message for World Communications Day, he highlights the importance of treating digital technology as a way to be more “neighborly” to one another. After all, the web is not just a jumble of wires and tubes. It’s a network of people – real not virtual human beings – people who seek hope and long for salvation. Thus, he says, “It is not enough to be passersby on the digital highways, simply ‘connected’; connections need to grow into true encounters.”

Recalling the parable of the Good Samaritan, Pope Francis teaches us that really “connecting” with people entails more than marketing or messaging, more than updating our status or sharing what’s on our mind. Rather, he says, to facilitate true encounters, we need to be available to one another, by means of attentive listening; to be in dialogue with one another, out of respect for differing points of view; and to be personally engaged in the lives of one another, as fellow citizens of the digital world.

Over the course of ten years, Facebook has connected the world. It’s up to those who use Facebook to infuse the computer capability with real Christian charity. When “friends” become brothers and sisters, when “likes” lead to real relations, when social communication generates true communion – that will be the day worth celebrating!

Featured image from neotechmedia/brandignity ... 501 words
Can journalists be “good Samaritans”?  
(2-14-14)

Freedom of the press remains a pillar of the American experience. All citizens have the right to information. Communication about our shared interests and concerns unites a society, even when the content is subject to democratic debate.

Whether in print, on air, or online, journalists share the responsibility for fulfilling the daily communications that are essential to the life of a good society. In light of Pope Francis’ recent message for World Communications Day, an interesting question to pose is whether journalists should also be Good Samaritans.

For the pope, that parable (in Luke 10:29-37) “is also a parable about communication” and teaches that “(t)hose who communicate, in effect, become neighbors.” But I suspect that the vast majority of readers and viewers do not consider their journalists in that light!

The “neighborliness” of which the Holy Father speaks is a plea to all communicators to foster “true encounters” through their work, “to be concerned with humanity” and to engage one another personally as a basis for being trustworthy.

For most journalists, this is likely not an easy task! They labor daily under the constraints of time, the limits of space, and the demands of business. Patient exploration is cut off by deadlines. Thorough explanation gives way to sound bites. Abbreviated headlines can be misleading. Special interests affect story placement. The breakneck speed and global reach of social communications are realities that color the journalist’s craft.

Yet, as Archbishop Claudio Maria Celli responded to one journalist’s question about the realism of the pope’s message, the frenetic spiral under which communications takes place today is all the more reason to take the papal message to heart. What one person writes or reports, another person reads or hears. At its basic level, then, communication creates an encounter. It establishes, and should reflect, a relationship.

That relationship is mediated in a variety of ways, depending on the communications medium. But at its root, the encounter between journalists and readers/listeners/viewers is about people more than subject matter. As the Holy Father puts it, “communication is ultimately a human rather than a technological achievement.” In the same vein, Pope Francis recently reminded Italian television personnel that “In the end, the ethical quality of communication is the result of conscientious – not superficial – attention, always respectful of people, both those who are the subject of information and the recipients of the message.”

Attentiveness to readers as “neighbors” – now there’s a worthy goal for editors and reporters, for producers and broadcasters. It may be a goal difficult for many to reach, given the biases evidenced by some secular media outlets. Still, it is possible. And given the esteem with which the world speaks of “good Samaritans,” it’s something worth striving to achieve. For Catholic journalists, especially, this would be a salutary resolution to make during Catholic press month (this February) and to keep throughout their careers.

From HER with love ... NOT!
(2-21-14)

This past week I joined my CyberTheology students for a field trip to the recently-renovated Bryn Mawr Film Institute. There we took in a late afternoon showing of the new movie, HER by Spike Jonze.

The simple yet provocative plot tells a somewhat futuristic love story, when Theodore (Joaquin Phoenix) “falls in love” with his computer’s operating system (narrated with surreal believability by Scarlett Johansson). The ups and downs of how an actual human being cultivates a relationship with an OS makes for creative cinematography ... and raises important philosophical questions for a culture enamored of electronic gadgets.

The overarching question, not surprisingly, concerns the understanding of what real love is. Communication, both written and digitized, is highlighted as the vehicle for conveying deep emotion and personal meaning. But is there a physical, bodily dimension to love without which it cannot be fully realized? Or is the awkward, messy reality of interpersonal relationships something to be transcended? Is falling in love really, as one of the characters states, just a socially acceptable form of insanity?

Stepping outside of the film, so to speak – and so as not to reveal any spoilers! – a larger cultural issue lies in whether or not we can even answer questions about what love is. When Theodore tells his real-person friend that he is dating an OS, and then asks her if that is crazy, her response discloses the trepidation (or ignorance) of our social consciousness. She forthrightly states, as if it were obviously true, that because she is not in the relationship, she cannot say. It would seem, from this and other portrayals in the film of unthinking masses tethered to their devices, that the supposed intuition of an evolved digital technology has rendered human thought and judgment superfluous.

And there’s the rub. When narcissism takes a cultural foothold, and individual desires trump commonly shared reason, society devolves into thinking that whatever one considers to be a humanly fulfilling relationship really is so. But if an operating system replaces a human being as a suitable partner for life – when “it” becomes “her” – our consciousness is confused, not advanced. That so many in society are unable or unwilling to think this through, and all-too-willing to give it a try, suggests a frightening prospect for our collective future.

Dr. Aaron Balick, author of The Psychodynamics of Social Networking, offers a thought-provoking review of the film. He points to contrasting images that describe our connection to technology (the Buddha vs. the Borg) and suggests that the film’s captivating appeal comes from its promotion of a technologically-assisted transcendence. Humans naturally seek something more, to go beyond themselves, to find eternal meaning.

So, some will see the film’s technological progress as a digital Enlightenment. In reality, we should recognize it as nothing more than Gnosticism 2.0. Embodiment is a given for human beings, a necessary factor to our identity and the reality through which we exist and relate to one another. Without acknowledging that essential fact of life, we cannot fully be who we really –not virtually – are.

Featured image from www.herthemovie.com
Social media can sully our time in the sun!
(2-28-14)

‘Tis the season to escape winter! Universities call it “spring break,” which offers an opportunity to depart campus for service trips or tropical getaways or simply to go home and relax.

Fans know it as the season of Spring Training. The prospects of warm weather and nothing but baseball – what better way to break away from the doldrums of winter than by partaking in what A. Bartlett Giamatti once called the “festive sensibility” characteristic of all sport, especially one for which a national holiday looms nearer.

Except that there is no escaping the electronic environment. The desire to stay connected risks corrupting the simplest of pleasures. Rest no longer brings respite when everything is wired.

Beyond the balls and gloves, today’s gameday accessories include computers and tablets. It’s a sign of progress, I suppose, to be able to score the action directly into a computer program that generates the stats, averages, and other metrics that devotees of the sport never tire of studying. But simply watching brings its own delight.

Technology facilitates our ability to make productive use of our time, even when away from home. But laptops also blur the line between labor and leisure. Why is it that we cannot seem to leave them behind?

On the one hand, we value work not only as a means of earning our keep, but also as the mode by which we can give meaning to our lives. “Work is a good thing for man,” wrote John Paul II, “a good thing for his humanity – because through work man not only transforms nature, adapting it to his own needs, but he also achieves fulfillment as a human being and indeed, in a sense, becomes ‘more a human being’.”

On the other hand, we may also consider work as an antidote to loneliness. In this vein, we feel as if we “have” to work, because we are afraid of being left behind; we fear being replaced on the job if we fail to keep busy. So we work longer and harder in order to prove (to ourselves or to others) that what we do matters and that we who do it are necessary to the task. This work routine, now made possible round the clock by computer technology, enables us to deal with what the world-renowned psychoanalyst Erich Fromm calls “the deepest need of man … the need to overcome his separateness, to leave the prison of his aloneness.”

That existential drive compels us, however subconsciously, to log on even at the beach or in the desert or across the sea. We never want to lose contact; we desire always to remain connected. Social media facilitates a virtual encounter as a new means to achieve this longing for unity.

But work alone cannot fulfill the human person. And technology, however connected it keeps us, cannot substitute for the human spirit. To be fully who we are, to be at peace with ourselves and in harmony with others, we need the experience of leisure. As G.K. Chesterton astutely observes, “There is no obligation on us to be richer, or busier, or more efficient, or more progressive or in any way worldlier or wealthier, if it does not make us happy.”

Sadly, that whimsical Englishman never experienced the happiness of baseball. But he did appreciate the value of leisure, which he describes as encompassing three things: “The first is being allowed to do something. The second is being allowed to do anything. And the third (and perhaps most rare and precious) is being allowed to do nothing.” That last one invites us to log off ... at least long enough to enjoy a game in the sun!

Featured image from philliesnation.com ... 613 words
Francescomania! (3-7-14)

Almost a full year after the election of Pope Francis, the media mania continues. Most recently, His Holiness went viral (again!) for a phonetic foul-up in his pronunciation of an Italian word, which led to the eye-popping headline: “Pope drops F-bomb during Vatican blessing.”

Most reacted to this consonantal confusion with an “oops” or a laugh, a response that signals the now common, heart-warming welcome of the evident humanity of the pontiff. That humanity is born of his personal humility and expressed in his constant concern for poor (as in his Message for Lent this year). It naturally appeals to the public. It plays to the crowds. But it’s not a public relations strategy. The words of Pope Francis – even, or especially, the mistaken ones! – create a very realistic encounter.

The modern media eat this up and serve this atypical public image to the world. But the pope, himself, prefers to dismiss the hype and return the focus to its rightful place.

Just this week, on the day before Lent began, he granted yet another newspaper interview – an informal but not unimportant form of papal communication that has contributed to the new media perception of the pope and the Church. Published in Corriere della Sera, it contains no great surprises; in fact, the very straightforward Q&A seems to lack the charm or depth of previous journalistic dialogues.

But there the pope makes clear his own perspective on Francescomania. In his response to the question about his public image, he said: “I like to be among the people, together with those who suffer, to go into the parishes. I don’t like the ideological interpretations, a certain mythology of Pope Francis. When it is said, for example, that he leaves the Vatican at night to go and give food to the homeless on Via Ottaviano. It never occurred to me (to do so). Sigmund Freud said, if I’m not mistaken, that in every ideology there is an aggression. To depict the Pope as a sort of superman, a type of star, seems offensive to me. The Pope is a man who laughs, cries, sleeps tranquilly and has friends, like everyone else. A normal person.”

A normal person? Yes and no! Yes, the normalcy of his likes and dislikes, of his gestures and words, of his everyday actions reveals a bishop at one with the flock he shepherds. But, no, this is not normally how the world perceives the Vicar of Christ and leader of the Roman Catholic Church.

Then again, perhaps now it can ... and should.

But, beyond the “coverpope” image generated by newspapers and magazines the world over, we would do well to view Pope Francis in light of Marshall McLuhan’s famous dictum: “the medium is the message.”

With Pope Francis, the medium is a living person, one who, according to Archbishop Claudio Maria Celli, has a natural capacity to turn communications into an event. But the message he mediates and radiates, is not, ultimately, about him: “the real point of reference is not about Pope Francis but the love of God for human beings, the merciful, tender love of God for human beings.”

That’s the Good News of the Gospel that comes through in the pope’s words, even when they are mispronounced! It’s what Francescomania is really all about.

Featured image snipped from nypost.com ... 550 words
Looking Back, Looking Ahead:  
The One Year Anniversary of the  
Election of Pope Francis  
(3-14-14)

Folks the world over remember one year ago yesterday ... and the election of Pope Francis. Since then, the first American, first Jesuit pope has taken the Church and the world by storm.

The Vatican has commemorated the anniversary with virtual book of images and quotes. Here’s the link:

- Do you want to become holy? (Vatican Internet Service)

Numerous media have also marked the anniversary. Instead of adding yet another voice, I’ve collected here a number of links to the coverage.

- 3/6/14 – Media Coverage of Pope Francis’ First Year (PEW Research)
- 3/9/14 – In first year, Pope Francis has challenged 'all' to live Gospel (Catholic News Agency)
- 3/10/14 – ‘Humble’ pope shakes up Catholic Church (MSNBC)
- 3/10/14 – Pope Francis’ First Year: An Assessment – by Joseph Kurtz (Washington Post)
- 3/12/14 – Francis: The First Year – by Fr. Thomas Rosica (Salt & Light TV)
- 3/12/14 – Many points of praise for pope’s first year – by John Allen, Jr. (Boston Globe)
- 3/13/14 – Pope Francis’ Apostolate of Shoe-Leather Evangelization (Nat’l Catholic Register)
- 3/13/14 – Pope Francis’s First Year – by George Weigel (National Review Online)
- 3/13/14 – ALETEIA
  - Pope Francis and the Media, Round 1: Who Won? (James Schall)
  - Dear Papa Francesco: An Open Letter (Leonie Caldecott)
  - Pope Francis, Social Justice, and Pure Religion (Michael M. Miller)
  - The Pope of Surprises (Fr. Dwight Longenecker)
  - Kindred Spirits: Pope Francis and Josemaría Escrivá (Kathryn)
- 3/14/14 – A Year of the Pope in Pop Culture (NBC Today)

And here are several links that examine the “effect” Pope Francis has had ... so far!

- 3/6/14 – U.S. Catholics view Pope Francis as a change for the better (PEW)
- 3/7/14 – The Pope Francis effect in year one (Catholic News Service video)
- 3/9/14 – How to really measure the ‘Francis effect’ – by Daniel Burke (CNN)
- 3/13/14 – Pope Francis has irrevocably changed the papacy (Vatican Radio)

Featured image from http://saltandlighttv.org/thefranciseffect/
“Time is God’s messenger”  
(3-21-14)

Yesterday, our seminary’s faculty enjoyed a day of recollection at the beautiful Wooten Mansion in Bryn Mawr, home of the I.H.M. conference center. This annual Lenten exercise, held on the day when Winter turned to Spring (at 12:57 p.m.), was a welcome respite to the seasonal doldrums and the educational labors.

Among the themes drawn from Pope Francis’ apostolic exhortation on “The Joy of the Gospel” (thanks to Fr. Herb Sperger) was this thought of ST. PETER FABER (1506-1546): “Time is God’s messenger.” Faber, the first Jesuit theologian, is one of the first Jesuit pope’s favorite saints.

The pope refers to the saint’s spiritual assertion in the context of calling for personal accompaniment in the process of facilitating growth – a valuable message for seminary faculty and Christian educators everywhere. As the pope puts it: “Only through ... respectful and compassionate listening can we enter on the paths of true growth and awaken a yearning for the Christian ideal: the desire to respond fully to God’s love and to bring to fruition what he has sown in our lives” (no. 171).

It’s a rare gift to have a block of time free to enter into that kind of listening. Yet, as the Holy Father insists, such listening to God is essential if we wish to grasp not only the purpose of our work but the ultimate direction of our lives.

These days silent listening is complicated by the din of electronic media. Even without sound, messages still vibrate in seemingly non-stop fashion. Someone, somewhere is calling for our attention. Questions need to be answered. Decisions need to be made. News is breaking. Our daily duties don’t stop for recollection. Life continues to happen all around us, with or without us ... and no one wants to be left out.

It’s understandable, then, that the power of 24/7 connectivity lures us into thinking we need instant access and constant information. But saints know better, and so do popes! Although it may sound contradictory, silence is necessary for good communication.

Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI devoted his 2012 Message for World Communications Day to that theme. “When messages and information are plentiful,” he writes, “silence becomes essential if we are to distinguish what is important from what is insignificant or secondary.” The act of discerning also takes time, the unfolding of which can bring clarity to propositions which initially appear uncertain. That truth hasn’t been lost on Pope Francis, who points to St. Peter Faber’s dictum as a learning lesson in his own leadership and governance.

Unfortunately, most people’s harried lives leave no room for spending a day in recollection. Yet it is possible, even with a full schedule, to enjoy the sound of silence. As another Jesuit-formed saint (FRANCIS DE SALES) explains in his Introduction to the Devout Life (part II, chapter 12): “Indeed, our tasks are seldom so important as to keep us from withdrawing our hearts from them from time to time in order to retired into this divine solitude.”

If we could devote just a few minutes each day to “retreat” from the pressures of our myriad tasks – and occasionally turn “off” the media with which all of life is now wired – we make room for the Spirit to speak a word within us. Then, not only will the brief respite be a welcome relief; it may also open our heart’s door to the divine message we’ve been waiting for.

Featured image from www.ihmimmaculata.org/facilities/... 570 words
The image of the Cross says it all.

(3-28-14)

This week the Vatican announced that Archbishop Giancarlo Maria Begantini of Campobasso-Boiano will write the meditations for the Via Crucis that will be celebrated on Good Friday (April 18) at the Coliseum. The archbishop, who chairs the Italian Episcopal Conference’s Commission on justice and peace, will structure his prayerful thoughts on the theme “Face of Christ, Face of Man.”

The Good Friday tradition of celebrating the Via Crucis at the Coliseum dates back to 1991, but the pious exercise itself goes back to the Middle Ages. Msgr. Piero Marini, the former master of papal ceremonies, explains that the way of the cross fuses together three devotions: to the “falls” of Christ under the cross, to the “sorrowful way” on which He walked and to the “stations” or moments He stopped along the way.

While the number and order of stations may differ, the way, itself, has been steadily venerated by the Church, which knows that every episode discloses a mystery of grace and encloses a gesture of love. By participating in the Via Crucis, we meditatively walk along that way with Christ. As Marino concludes, the devotion allows each of us to reaffirm our adhesion to the divine Master: by weeping for our own sins (like Peter), by opening ourselves to faith in Jesus (like the Good Thief), by remaining near the cross (like Mary and John), and by welcoming with them “the Word that saves, the Blood that purifies, the Spirit that gives life.”

That spiritual participation in the Way of the Cross is augmented, today, through social communications. The Good Friday event is broadcast on television around the world. The setting could not be grander, and the nighttime images of fire and of faith shine a divine light upon this Roman wonder of the world. The Vatican web site offers texts, videos, and images from years past. Accompanying the meditations found there are creative renderings of each station commissioned for each year’s celebration, artwork that points to the universal power of this devotion and reveals a varied cultural appreciation of the faith.

Yet one image remains, the only one needed. As Pope Francis spoke plainly at the conclusion of last year’s Via Crucis: “One word should suffice this evening, that is the Cross itself. The Cross is the word through which God has responded to evil in the world. Sometimes it may seem as though God does not react to evil, as if he is silent. And yet, God has spoken, he has replied, and his answer is the Cross of Christ: a word which is love, mercy, forgiveness. It also reveals a judgment, namely that God, in judging us, loves us. Let us remember this: God judges us by loving us. If I embrace his love then I am saved, if I refuse it, then I am condemned, not by him, but my own self, because God never condemns, he only loves and saves.”

Tune in on April 18 to walk along this saving way.

Featured image from www.romewalks.blogspot.com/
This week marks fifty years since the foundation of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications.

The communique noting the anniversary explains that Pope Paul VI created the commission to coordinate the work of cinema, radio, television, and the press. Following the Second Vatican Council, this office would oversee the global celebration of World Communications Day, which takes place each year on the Sunday before Pentecost. Later, Pope John Paul II raised the office’s profile to that of a Pontifical Council, and with the subsequent revolutions in communications technology, its workload also increased dramatically.

For twenty-three of those fifty years, from April 1984 to June 2007, the Council was guided by then Archbishop John P. Foley. A Philadelphia native with advanced degrees in journalism and in ethics, Foley would bring to the council’s work a level of personal energy and professional competence that proved essential to the council’s central role in communicating the Church to the world. Under his watch, not only did the Council produce critically important guides and documents about social communications (e.g., on ethics in advertising, in communications, and on the Internet), but it also facilitated the actual work of communications, as, for example, through coordination of the worldwide television broadcasts of papal Masses, the great Jubilee 2000 celebrations, and the funeral of John Paul II.

With the rapid expanse of online communications, the Council has kept the Church current, for example by introducing the papal web site (www.pope2you.net) and Twitter feed (@Pontifex). Today, when digital communications have become the “connective tissue” of human existence around the world, the Council connects the Church to the world through its online news portal (www.news.va), which features information aggregated from multiple media offices of the Holy See, including the Fides News Agency, the Osservatore Romano newspaper, the Holy See Press Office, the Vatican Information Service, Vatican Radio, and the Vatican Television Center (CTV).

As with communications itself, the Council’s work is never-ending! In addition to proposing themes for World Communications Day, conducting educational congresses about the latest research, and collaborating with professional associations around the world, the Council also operates a Catholic multimedia online directory (www.intermirifica.net) that provides a platform for networking and communicating among those working on Catholic media projects across the globe. And the Council’s current leadership – particularly Archbishop Claudio Maria Celli (President) and Monsignor Paul Tighe (Secretary) – regularly take to the physical and digital highways to assist with Catholic communications around the world.

Hopefully, the Council’s personnel will at least get a chance to raise a toast in honor of fifty years of faithful service to the challenging task of bringing the Good News to the ends of the earth. Auguri!
A Gospel giveaway
(4-11-14)

Approaching Holy Week, we will soon hear again the master narratives of the Lord’s Passion and Resurrection. On these grand stories Christianity is founded. By them it continues to inspire the world.

To promote the reception of that Holy Word, Pope Francis last week distributed several thousand pocket-sized versions of the Gospels to those participating in the Sunday audience. He did so, he says, inspired by the ancient tradition of giving the Gospel to catechumens during Lent to assist in their preparation for Baptism. Even for those already baptized, the Word remains an indispensable source of guidance, which the Holy Father has made popular through his “meditations” on the Scripture readings at daily Mass.

Through the marvels of electronic communications, that ever ancient Word is now spoken and heard, read and pondered in ever new ways. At that gathering in St. Peter’s square, the pope himself acknowledged that technology gives the Gospel a far greater reach and a far faster access because now “You can carry the entire Bible around with you in a smartphone, in a tablet.”

Thanks to Bible apps, no one needs extra pocket space to keep the Word close at hand. And this week, the most popular Bible app underwent its biggest update ever. Already found on more than 130 million devices worldwide, the features of Bible App 5 allow users to connect with the Word, study it, and customize it. What’s new is that ability to engage friends in the process. This combination of connectivity and interactivity aims to facilitate a more communitarian experience of the Bible – and historically, that’s how the Word was originally heard.

Numerous Bible apps currently exist in the digital marketplace, each suitable to personal preference and price range. Whether for leisurely listening or more in-depth study, these electronic tools now make it possible to be well-versed in the words that have given meaning to life for millennia.

In the end, the digital version matters less than the Verbum Dei. Whatever app one chooses, what matters more is the appropriation of the inspired Word in daily life. As the Holy Father said after giving away the Gospel gifts, “The important thing is to read the Word of God, by any means – read the Word of God, it is Jesus who is speaking to you.”

Featured image from the New York Daily News at nydn.us/1k3yLyM
Communicating a festival of holiness

(4-25-14)

In just two days, the world will celebrate two new saints. On Divine Mercy Sunday (April 27), John XXIII and John Paul II will be canonized by Pope Francis.

The Eternal City has been bracing for the influx of more than five million pilgrims desirous of taking part in the events ... one of whom is yours truly! But even more will be able to join the festivities through their virtual presence.

Thanks to the availability of nine satellites, the Vatican Television Center (CTV) will livestream the celebrations in high definition. In addition, the 3D television broadcast will be screened in more than 600 movie theaters worldwide.

And every facet of the celebration will be communicated globally via social media. The digital portal can be accessed at www.2papisanti.org where visitors can find biographies of the new saints, press information, event details, other news, and links to the social media connections.

Live information will be available via Facebook (2papesaints), Twitter (@2papesaints), Instagram (#2papesaints), and YouTube (2papesaint), all of which are already providing daily themes related to the two popes and the media.

Google+ will offer daily briefings at their on air “hangout.” Smart phone and tablet users can also stay connected with the “Santo Subito” app created for this occasion.

The pastoral pope from northern Italy (John XXIII) initiated the aggiornamento at the Second Vatican Council with which the “wonderful technological discoveries” of social communications have assumed a central role in the contemporary Church. The missionary pope from Poland (John Paul II) brought the Church to the world’s stage with a dramatic sensibility fit for global consumption and with a theological commitment to the Church’s use of television, press, and other media of social communications.

How fitting that the week-long festival of holiness honoring these two saints will be shared with all the world by the very means of communication they championed.
The Church Alive in the World  
(5-2-14)

Having recently returned from the canonizations of Saints John XXIII and John Paul II on April 27, I am struck by the vibrancy of the Church, clearly evident in the throngs of people from every corner of the world who over-crowded the streets and piazzas of Rome and the Vatican. The “festival of four popes” showed all the trappings of high church drama, yet what was most visible was the force of the faith – a faith that moved millions to be there, despite the time or cost or inconvenience to be endured.

Faith moved the mobs of pilgrims – from tears to smiles to flag-waving admiration.

Faith moved those at worship to participate in the glorious liturgies after many hours on their feet, to kneel devoutly in front of the papal tombs, or simply to pray wherever they happened to be (which, often and at length, was standing in line waiting).

Faith inspired the many whose work made the celebrations possible – from the liturgical planning of such a mega-event, to the civil planning to organize such a massive crowd, to the volunteer service of thousands who provided assistance to so many foreigners and who did so in multiple languages.

Faith came before the world’s eyes through the scores of journalists and photographers who provided access and coverage to an estimated 1 million people in Rome and more than 2 million more worldwide via satellite.

With the grandiosity of a week that John Allen, Jr. described as “more Woodstock than World’s Fair,” it’s abundantly clear to anyone who saw it that the Church is alive and well in the world. Despite the never-ending challenges it faces, the Church’s faith continues to resonate with people of every tribe and tongue, of every place and nation. As Pope Francis reminded us in his homily during the canonization, the two new saints “were priests, and bishops and popes of the twentieth century. They lived through the tragic events of that century, but they were not overwhelmed by them. For them, God was more powerful; faith was more powerful.”

And the vitality of that faith continues beyond the singular events of last week. As evidenced by the three-fold increase in the number of people now visiting St. Peter’s, faith draws the believers, the seekers, and the curious alike to the message we proclaim this Easter season: The Lord is risen, alleluia!

Featured image from news.va
Look up ... even higher! (5-9-14)

With more than 27 million views, a new video gone viral called “Look Up” ironically takes to task the very media it criticizes. Billed as “a spoken word film for an online generation,” the message is making worldwide noise about machined.

*I took a step back and opened my eyes. / I looked around to realize
this media we call social is anything but / when we open our computers and it’s our doors we shut.*

The film rightly bemoans our cultural self-absorption with communications technology when it comes at the expense of fleeting moments of time that call for much more inter-personal attention. The concluding couplet calls for an obvious, though seemingly novel, action:

*Look up from your phone. / Shut down that display.
Stop watching this video. / Live life the real way.*

It’s hard to deny the film’s cautionary claims. Daily experience offers sufficient evidence that people are beholden to their digital devices. Pew research provides the underlying facts. Among teens, 95% are online and 81% use some kind of social media. Among adults, 90% have a cell phone, two-thirds of them check for messages or alerts when the phones don’t ring, and nearly half of them sleep with their phone nearby for fear of missing out on something during the night!

Still, the digital world is what it is ... and is becoming ever more the “connective tissue” of contemporary life. As Fr. Antonio Spadaro daringly says, “Internet doesn’t exist; it is lived.” Put another way, mobile technology is more than an efficient gadget or fashionable accoutrement. It’s fast becoming the means by which all things are done and therefore a necessary (though not sufficient) element of our social co-existence.

As with any and every social innovation, enslavement to it is not a given (due to the technology itself), nor is it inevitable (despite what the data above implies). It doesn’t take neurological science to show that screen-based multi-tasking interferes with attention. (But PBS offers some in a [program on “The Distracted Mind.”](https://www.pbs.org/wnet/psychology/adult-sleeping/)) Nor does it take psychological research to demonstrate that sharing oneself with an actual person leads to more meaningful interaction than does broadcasting egoistic “likes” to hoards of online “friends.” (But the “Psychodynamics of Social Networking” [blog](https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/social-networking) can give you the studies.)

Yes, we all could (and should) “look up” more often and more regularly. Doing so is a choice, a personal discipline to be cultivated rather than regulated (as in the new labor agreement in France about [email after working hours](https://www.pbs.org/wnet/psychology/adult-sleeping/)). Learning to prioritize, and to give fuller attention to what (and who) deserves it, is how we realize that freedom which always differentiates the gift of being human from the progress of technological innovation. No digital mediation can substitute for real encounters with real persons.

And while we’re at it, we could (and should) look up even higher ... to the realm of the eternal and the divine. It’s there, ultimately, that we aspire to be.

*Featured image snipped from [www.youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com)... 495 words*
Fashionable Cyborgs?
(5-16-14)

The word gets overused, but apparently there’s another “revolution” in the works. The voiceover in the promotional video sounds the proverbial horn: “We are at the beginning of a new era. Personal computing is being re-defined as the technology around us becomes a part of who we are. This is the wearable revolution.”

Who knew?!

The miniaturization of computer chips that made digital technology portable is now on the march toward new frontiers. Wearable gadgetry can enable touch-less communications so as not to disrupt social interaction. It can allow for continuous data recording to monitor and manage health matters. It can accessorize and even motorize garments for a more colorful personal expression.

These and other augmented experiences of daily life are the subject of Intel’s “Make It Wearable” Challenge, which seeks new ways to integrate the digital and physical worlds. Creative imagination will, no doubt, lead to fascinating technological projects.

But does this work cross a digital rubicon? Have we reached the point in which the digital die is cast and our experience of being human will merge into something new in the realm of cyborgs? Will technology that we can put on our bodies really make us better human beings, as one of the creators suggests?

Technological genius continues to emerge. But it’s no harbinger of metaphysical mutation. Human beings are such not because of their sensory capabilities, however digitally enhanced, but because of their unique abilities to know and to decide and, ultimately, to love.

Digital devices make life more colorful, more efficient, and more interactive. But they don’t – because they can’t – make it more human. Creative juices may be stirred at the prospect of becoming superhuman, but no technology can supersede the nature of the person who created it and uses it.

No matter how many chips or sensors can be put on us or around us or even in us, machinery does not become a part of who we are. It doesn’t make us something else. Rather, we are who we are by virtue of our generation as rational and willing creatures, made in the image and likeness of God, who alone is omniscient and omnipotent.

Still, we human beings have the marvelous ability to create new things, and through those things to encounter others anew and improve our shared humanity. As the soon-to-be Blessed Pope Paul VI once said (back in 1964), “the mechanical brain comes to the help of the spiritual brain.” Channeling our technological brainpower for the common benefit of persons, especially of those in need of help, gives a bright promise to the electronic future... whether we actually wear it or not.

Featured image snipped from the Make It Wearable playlist on www.youtube.com... 440 words
Into a sacred void
(5-30-14)

With the Ascension of the Lord, a time of waiting begins again – as the Church looks forward to the celebration of Pentecost and the coming of the Holy Spirit.

The void created by the departure of Jesus is quite real, even notwithstanding His farewell promises to remain with and within those who believe in His name and love in His regard. Absence begets apprehension. The apostles can do little but gather in the Upper Room to await the expected yet unknown Spirit.

If only the Cenacle had wifi!

The apostles could have checked-in, to alert others to their whereabouts. They could have tweeted their thoughts and questions to make it a “live” event. They could have posted pictures or videos that captured the suspense. They could have shared everything through social networking so as to let others take part vicariously in their experience.

But the interactivity would probably have run amok – as it usually does when one has nothing to do but wait! Waiting, alone or with others, gives pause. Waiting generates anticipation (which can create fear, too). Waiting in the void can feel empty, but it also opens space for expectation.

The time for social networking has not yet come. In the Upper Room, the real encounter will happen within.

As Pope Francis recently preached there, the Upper Room is the place that opened up new and defining experiences for the nascent Church. These “horizons” are triggered by the meaning of what took place there. In that room can be found many memories that serve as reminders of service and sacrifice, of friendship and fraternity, of promise and even betrayal.

That place, those people, these events – all are part of the reality of the apostles’ daily life with Jesus, a quotidian existence forever transformed by the Resurrection. Although we already know how the story continues, the novena of waiting can also give us the valuable opportunity to pause, and to ponder the realities and the horizons of our own daily lives.

Through faith in the Resurrection and the Ascension, our spirits, too, can be lifted, to rise above any tribulations that threaten to bog us down in existential isolation. Through the gift of the Holy Spirit, we are, in fact, never alone.

Soon enough, this Spirit will inspire the Apostles to proclaim the Gospel to all the earth. Renewed by our prayerful reflection in this period of waiting, we too can share that proclamation of Good News in today’s digital world.

Featured image from www.jesus-passion.com... 412 words