“A View from the Chair”

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The Wisdom of Desire (1-2-15)

The new year begins with a prayer for world peace (Jan 1) and a visit from the wise ones (Jan 6) who know that true peace is found in the birth of the Christ-child. The three who came from the East followed not only a heavenly star but a heartfelt desire – to see for themselves and encounter the newborn King. While we might prefer GPS for our travels, that same desire is at work within all who seek to be wise today.

For Pope Francis, following the soul’s desire is fundamental to the spiritual life. We see this in a newly published collection of spiritual exercises he preached, whose title tells us that “desire enlarges the heart.” The rest of the text shows how desire enables us to discern the voice of God within us.

In his introduction to the book, Fr. Antonio Spadaro points out why desire is so central to the pope’s teaching. “It’s important because in reality God himself is a Deus desiderans, is a God who desires to communicate himself and to arouse desires in our heart.”

That desire is realized in the Incarnation. That desire inspires the Epiphany. That desire, and its realization in the person of Jesus, demonstrates for Papa Francesco that God is “the sweet and unique obsession of every day in the course of all days.” God remains an obsession precisely because the manifestation of God, which happens in time and space, cannot be harnessed by moments in our history.

And thus we begin the year anew. God has come (again) and continues to reveal Himself to us, particularly in the desires of our hearts and souls. These are not simply natural, in the instincts of bodily life. Nor are they merely personal, in the expressions of what we wish or what we want. Rather, spiritual desire reflects that “restlessness” of the human heart to which St. Augustine famously pointed.

Speaking to the Augustinians last year, Pope Francis elaborated on this restless desire. He describes it as “spiritual seeking” of the God who waits for us and who never ceases to be the first to seek us. He explains that this desire is what moves us toward a personal encounter with Christ. And he notes that, as a result of this encounter, the desire to love arises as “an incentive to go towards the other, without waiting for the other to manifest his need.”

In her fiat, Mary acquiesced to this desire. In making their journey, the Magi followed this desire. Like them, says the pope to his fellow Jesuits, “We need to seek God in order to find him, and find him in order to seek him again and always.”

Perhaps, then, a most fitting resolution for the New Year would be for each of us to get in touch with this primordial desire of our heart and soul.
The Faces of Francis (1-16-15)

The sagacious Vaticanista, John Allen, recently wrote about the power of the media’s narrative in shaping people’s perception of Pope Francis. “He’s seen as a peace-loving advocate for the poor and downtrodden, as well as a maverick reformer steering Catholicism in a broadly progressive direction.”

(Note: John Allen is coming to Saint Charles Seminary on January 26 to give the second annual John Cardinal Foley Lecture on the Church and Communications.)

The first face is currently on display in the Philippines where more than five million citizens are expected to crowd surge for a glimpse of the visitor from Rome. The second face appears somewhat behind the scenes, as when the Holy Father grants a media interview or speaks to diplomats and other leaders. Still, even those encounters exhibit a public bearing when the pope’s words are published and shared via global social communications.

The peace-loving advocate abhors human violence, yet recognizes that free speech is not without limitation when it comes to showing respect for others. Comparing religious satire to a curse word spoken of his mother, he bantered with reporters that such speech might elicit a punch! (In a sad demonstration of the power of the media narrative, a spokesman had to “clarify” those words from the pope as not at all meaning that violence against speech is justifiable.)

The maverick reformer calls world leaders to attitudinal conversion by castigating the “throwaway culture” that leads to inter-personal, societal, and international conflict. In his latest interview, in the Italian newspaper La Stampa, the pope says: “When the center of the system is not man but money, when money becomes an idol, men and women are reduced to simple instruments of a social and economic system characterized, indeed dominated by profound imbalances.”

Yet, the duality of papal presence and proclamation in this narrative does not imply an intra-personal or institutional dissonance. The Holy Father’s persona and preaching are of one mind, integrated by a living faith in the divine person whose vicar he is, and whose Church he now leads.

The advocate seeks peace and the maverick seeks reform in the same way – through a renewal of Gospel values. As Pope Francis said in his latest interview: “The Church, when it invites us to conquer what I have called the ‘globalization of indifference,’ is far from any political or ideological interest whatsoever; motivated uniquely by the words of Jesus, it wishes to offer its contribution to the construction of a world where we take care of each other and are taken care of by each other.”

The papal narrative is accurate. The two faces, far from suggesting anything bi-polar, show forth in this pope the splendor of the Gospel – in a love that cares and a love that converts – so that all of us might become who we are meant to be.

Featured image from www.pacifika.com/
The Courage of Simplicity (1-23-15)

He said what?!

That question is asked whenever Pope Francis speaks “off script.” He does this in his homilies at the Casa Santa Marta, which the Vatican describes as “daily meditations” so as to distinguish them from formal teachings. He does this in interviews with newspaper reporters, though these are usually reviewed prior to publication. And he does this often on his travels, when he departs from prepared texts or conducts an in-flight press conference.

Three from his recent flights to/from Asia are making the rounds on the social media circuit. Opining about the terrorist attack in Paris, the pope observed that insulting commentary about his mother, no matter how freely expressed, would elicit a punch. Recalling a corrupt financial offer made to him in Buenos Aires, he pondered the possibility of kicking the speaker where the sun don’t shine. And commenting on birth control, he called for responsible parenthood in contrast to the view that to be good Catholics means being like rabbits.

The media revel in these extemporaneous remarks, which provide headline grabbing sound-bites. More appealing still is the “normalcy” with which the Holy Father converses. Readers no doubt hear a bit of themselves in his way of speaking.

With Francis, pope-talk is fast becoming world news. There’s a risk, of course. Spontaneous speech is never vetted and causes agida among church diplomats. Words spoken off-the-cuff are often misrepresented and easily misinterpreted (e.g., a “hoary slur” displaying “gossipy judgmentalism”) which leads to more work for papal spokespersons and parish priests.

But the benefits outweigh the risks. Comments made in his native tongue reveal the pope’s passion about topics that matter to him most. Neither boring nor boorish, Pope Francis cuts to the core of human interests. With or without clarification, his words give rise to thought. Indeed, his provocative phrases and idiomatic images lead to further discussion about, and continued attention on, important issues with which people are genuinely concerned.

Even more so, this kind of papal speech demonstrates the power of encounter. The pope’s spontaneity usually happens when he is touched by someone (like the young girl who tearfully asked why God allows suffering) or when he engages individuals (especially reporters) in ordinary conversation. In those moments, interaction supercedes preparation, and person-to-person dialogue trumps diplomatic caution.

In this, the pope exhibits a virtue near and dear to another Francis, the saint whose feast the Church celebrates tomorrow. In his Introduction to the Devout Life, St. Francis de Sales dedicates five chapters to speech in which he counsels not only charity but simplicity. For de Sales, simplicity is a “little virtue,” able to be practiced by anyone, that favors forthrightness in all that we say and show and do. For the Doctor of the Church, “No artifice is so good and desirable as plain dealing. … Lying, double-dealing, and dissimulation are always signs of a weak, mean mind.”

In the courage of speaking freely, we see Pope Francis’ mind – one convinced by faith, deeply concerned for the well-being of others, and bold enough to say so in terms that resonate with everyone.

featured image by Stefano Rellandin/ Reuters from www.newsdaily.com
Communication as Visitation (1-30-15)

Pope Francis’ annual Message for World Communications Day was published last week on the feast of St. Francis de Sales. Its focus – “Communicating the Family: A Privileged Place of Encounter with the Gift of Love” – fits right in with the upcoming World Meeting in Philadelphia and the next Synod of Bishops in Rome.

As brief and straight-forward as it is, it’s hard to believe the message is already being misinterpreted! Case in point: an article from CRUX, picked up by CBS News, that claims in its title and its lead that “Pope Francis is urging families to put aside their iPhones and Twitter feeds and learn to talk to one another again.” The pope acknowledges multiple ways in which modern media can be problematic, but nowhere in the message does he make any such recommendation!

What he does offer is a meditative look at the roots of any/all communication in family life. Urging better communications within the family and positive communications about the family, the Holy Father inspires the world by lifting up the biblical Visitation as an icon for all communication.

In their intervention at the presentation of the pope’s message, professors Chiara Giaccardi and Mauro Magatti elaborated on this iconic representation. Two insights from their erudite analysis are worth repeating.

The first concerns the purpose of communications. “To communicate proximity with proximity, that is together the medium and the message.” As the professors explained, Mary’s arising and going in haste to Elizabeth’s town demonstrates that “to go to find, to be near, to offer the simple gift of one’s own presence and one’s own time – these are the first messages of authentic communication.” The pope’s message expands on this: “To ‘visit’ is to open doors, not remaining closed in our little world, but rather going out to others. So too the family comes alive as it reaches beyond itself; families who do so communicate their message of life and communion, giving comfort and hope to more fragile families, and thus build up the Church herself, which is the family of families.”

The second insight emphasizes the means. “The joy of encounter,” said the professors, “is the frame and the premise of every authentic communication.” Having been visited herself at the Annunciation, Mary seeks to share that with Elizabeth, and with dancing in the womb their exultant dialogue takes place. The joy, in and between persons, that emanates from encountering one another leads to these words from Pope Francis about modern media: “By growing daily in our awareness of the vital importance of encountering others, these ‘new possibilities’, we will employ technology wisely, rather than letting ourselves be dominated by it.”

Digital connections certainly do help (or, when isolating, they can hinder). But in the end it’s the personal encounter that matters most.

Throughout 2015 countless words will be spoken, written, and shared about the Family. A great place to start this vitally important conversation is by reading the pope’s words for yourself.

featured image from www.news.va
Hanging Out with the Pope (2-6-15)

Had I ever told my mother that I was going to “hang out with the pope,” the answer no doubt would have been, “don’t you sass me, young man!” My how times have changed!

Yesterday, in the second Google+ Hangout live from the Vatican, young men and women from various parts of the world really did hang out with the pope. According to Vatican Radio, the event was sponsored by Scholas Occurrentes, an independent charity organization that “brings together young people via sports, art, and technology.”

Speaking with disabled children, the Holy Father admitted his own lack of knowledge working a computer! But that didn’t stop him or them from communicating.

In fact, the pope is reported to have said that “When you communicate, you give the best you have inside, and you receive the best from others, and that is very important.” And he added, “When we don’t communicate, we stay alone with our limitations, and that is bad for us.”

So forget about this blog (just for a moment!). Go hang out with the Pope! (click here to see it happening).

Even if you don’t understand all the words being exchanged, the images communicate quite clearly – with an inviting smile across the way, a depth of concern for the one to whom we speak, and a willingness to encounter others wherever they are. That’s what hanging out is all about!

featured image from www.tecnologia.ondeneews.it
A Sunday Valentine (2-13-15)

Tomorrow is the day for those in love. *Happy Valentine’s Day!*

And so is the day after tomorrow. Every Sunday celebrates divine love – the love of God *for* us commemorated in the words and deeds of human salvation, and the love of God *by* us which we express through words of worship.

Of the many Sunday words, those of the homily often take center stage in the congregation’s appreciation of their weekly experience. Recognizing this, the Vatican just presented a new *Homiletic Directory*, in the hope of improving that facet of the liturgy. To be sure, this publication won’t make any bestseller lists. But its *subject* remains paramount to anyone concerned about the dwindling number of regular church-goers.

The *Directory* highlights how the homily is a peculiar genre. This presents a challenge to the preacher. But it also signals the significance of preaching for the entire Church. Situating the homily in its proper liturgical place, the *Directory* makes clear that it is not an academic lecture, a catechism lesson, a political discourse, a cultural commentary, or a financial plea.

In fact, the homily is not even about us! As *John Conley* points out, it’s no place for the preacher’s biography. But it’s also not a call to action for the hearers, except as their response to God’s action. If a homily spends more time speaking about what people are to do than what God has already done for us, it loses its primary focus.

But the *Directory* is limited to information. The instruction is worthwhile and the documentation useful. But information is not lacking when it comes to better preaching. Needed more is conviction. In theory, as Bishop Arthur Roche stated at the presentation, “homiletic preaching is the principal part … of announcing the Gospel of Jesus Christ.” But is it in practice? Unless and until preachers deem what they do from the pulpit to be their primary ministerial task (*Presbyterorum ordinis*, no. 4), congregations will be shortchanged.

That task, said St. Francis de Sales in a sort of Directory he wrote four centuries, is “to bring light to the intellect and warmth to the will.” The former shows people how God can and does make a difference in their daily lives. The latter is where people are moved to act accordingly. Appreciation precedes conversion. Inspiration comes before exhortation.

To the homilist, then as now, the Doctor of the Church offers a timeless reminder: “Say marvelous things, but do not say them well, and they are nothing. Say only a little but say it well, and it is very much.” The art to doing this, he says, is to love those listening. “Our words … must issue from our heart rather than from our mouth. We must speak well, but heart speaks to heart, and the tongue speaks only to (people’s) ears.”

In the end, a homily should elicit a heartfelt smile – because it shares God’s way to eternal life.

*featured image from [www.ctv.va](http://www.ctv.va)*
“Whom Do You Follow?” is the leading question in a recent article on Christian life in the age of social media. Its conclusion rightly asserts that “We must not allow social media to become an object of obsession (with ourselves), but explore how it can help us to authentically share and participate in God’s love.”

LENT is the season for just that. It invites us to look at ourselves, not to advance the selfie-taking pursuit of “micro-celebrity” but to examine our connection with the God alone who provides our ultimate affirmation. It invites us to turn, or re-turn, to God through a 40-day period of spiritual mindfulness.

For that, social media can actually help! Here are just some of the many communications tools that can aid us along the Lenten journey. (Click on the images for more information.)

Here are diverse programs for online prayer, examine, and retreat experiences based on Ignatian spirituality:

You can get daily reflections sent directly to your email:

If you want more of a challenge …

And here are various apps to journey through Lent by way of your phone or tablet:

Feel free to suggest others in the “comments” box … and may you have a blessed Lent this year.
Francis, the adjective (3-13-15)

Today the world (and not just the Church) celebrates the second anniversary of the election of Pope Francis. Expect to see numerous stories, analyses, and commentaries about the septuagenarian sensation. Professional and amateur Vaticanistas will opine about visions and inspirations, as well as priorities and policies, all in the hope of figuring out and/or further advancing the popularity of this pope, which PEW research shows to be near an all-time high in the USA.

But there may be no clearer indication of the pope’s prominence in the world than this linguistic sign: his name has become an adjective! Grammarians may rightly denounce the use of a noun as an adjective, but these days “Francis” comes to describe multiple phenomena.

The Francis Church is envisioned as a metaphorical field hospital, where mercy accompanies a sick and suffering world before any doctrine provides a judgmental diagnosis.

This caring vision plays out as The Francis Factor in numerous ways. It characterizes the novelty of this papacy, as first-year anniversary events in the Church and the academy highlighted. It offers a title to digital ponderings about media and ministry. It even suggests a political influence on economic policy.

The novel factor poses the question of The Francis Effect in the form of news stories and media documentaries. Sociological studies point to a statistical shift in church attendance, at least in Italy if not clearly in the USA. Economic analysis makes of the pope a case study in corporate turnaround.

The effect leads, in turn, to The Francis Challenge, especially in matters related to the public square. British ambassador Nigel Baker recently elaborated on the political, economic, and moral aspects of the papal challenge in terms, respectively, of guaranteeing peace, tackling poverty, and protecting the planet. What challenge the pope will lay before the U.S. Congress this September is still to be seen.

Meeting that challenge may require divine help, and therein lies The Francis Miracle. In his new book by that name, John Allen, Jr, suggests that the pope is out to transform the church and the world, and that this is “a mission with a miracle at its core.” For Allen, the reforming zeal of this papal mission has a threefold thrust: centrism of thought, outward orientation of activity, and goodness of governance.

“Francis” – once a proper noun that evoked remembrance of the saint from Assisi and the call to a poor and humble and simple life for individuals and for the Church. Having been adopted for the first time ever as a papal name, “Francis” now signals so much more in the minds and hearts of people around the world.

Whatever the part of speech, “Francis” is giving our religious lexicon and our faith life a new meaning.

featured image from www.denvercatholic.org
The free-spirited pope (3-20-15)

In last week’s post, I highlighted a new book by John Allen, Jr. called The Francis Miracle. In the 2015 John Cardinal Foley Lecture and in an article about the book, Allen explains that the title refers to a dramatic change of style and personality from Cardinal Bergoglio to Pope Francis.

Allen quotes the Holy Father as saying this came from “an experience of the closeness of God that gave me a great sense of interior freedom and peace … and that sense has never left me.”

The journalist calls this transformation a miracle. St. Paul called it experiencing the “freedom of the children of God” (Rom 8:21).

The pope’s detachment is quite evident in his lifestyle, from the simplicity of his accommodations to the photogenic little black bag with which he travels. It also appears in his actions, as when he freely speaks his mind (without the vetted text) or comes and goes as he pleases (without cautious regard for his own safety). And this free-spirited pope has garnered widespread popular appreciation, as shown by his 90% favorable rating in the U.S.

Appearances aside, the real nature of spiritual freedom is a matter of the heart. St. Francis de Sales describes it as “the detachment of a Christian heart from all things so that it is free to follow the known will of God” (Letters of Spiritual Direction, p. 138). He offers three telling characteristics of “the Francis miracle.”

First, the spiritually free person “is not attached to consolations, but accepts affliction with as much docility as nature can manage.” He may no longer have the chance to wander into town for pizza, as he wishes he could in his most recent interview, but Pope Francis is okay with that. He added, “it has been hard work to change. But you get used to it.”

Second, the free-spirited Christian doesn’t get upset about not fulfilling spiritual exercises when some other call to charity intervenes. Obviously a pope has to keep a schedule (planned by staff), but Francis is known to waver from it for the sake of others. Sometimes he arrives late to an audience, because he was busy chatting with another group. Often he stops in the midst of his travels to embrace a child or an elderly admirer. And once in a while, he just shows up somewhere, unplanned and unexpected, but always to the delight of those with whom he meets.

Third, spiritual freedom “hardly ever loses (its) joy, for no deprivation can sadden a person whose heart is attached to nothing.” The pope’s constant smile, as well as his frequently playful interactions, have become routine. His joy seems boundless.

Pope Francis discloses the characteristic liberty of a child of God, in the biblical sense. His effect on the world has been to put this spiritual joy of heart on display, a joy that he ceaselessly exhorts us all to have and to share. Perhaps our continuing fascination with him suggests that this is the real freedom for which human beings long.
Polls, Pews, and the Catholic Pulse
(3-27-15)

Has Pope Francis quickened the pulse of the Church? His name has been associated with new directions, but has he made any real difference?

The latest PEW research, conducted in February on a national scale, points to high favorability rating (90%) among a broad-based sample. But it did not address whether popularity has led more people to Church.

A comparable survey, conducted in March among Catholics in the Lehigh Valley (PA), reported a similar level of favorability (83%). It also shows approval of the “direction that (he) is trying to take the Church” (84% somewhat or strongly), as well as a 30% increase in “excitement” about the Catholic faith. Still, only 9% of respondents said their attendance at Mass has increased over the past year.

Now the Religion News Service reports a “significant bounce” in the percentage of Catholics who claim the strength of their religious affiliation has increased since the election of Pope Francis. Coupled with a steadying of the retention rate for Catholicism, the news suggests that the Francis Effect could be real.

Having participated in the Lehigh Valley report, and a live web chat about it, I admit the news is not all that staggering! In fact, no one questioned any of the results or their implications. But the lack of hoopla need not suggest indifference or a lack of impact on the Catholic pulse. Rather, it points to a fundamental difference between cultural perspectives coming from poll results and the living faith of people in the pews.

On the one hand, polls are tricky measuring rods precisely because of their language. Vagueness gives wide latitude, but latitude loses preciseness.

What does “welcome” mean when asked if the Church should be more of that in terms of gays and lesbians or those divorced and remarried? If it wishes that these persons not be excluded from the congregation, the Church has always believed that, notwithstanding personal perspectives or errant practices. If, instead, it suggests accepting the lifestyle as not being in conflict with the teaching of the faith, well that’s an entirely different story. And just what does a “favorable rating” mean anyway? Is that akin to being “liked” on Facebook, or does it portend some level of positive engagement or actual agreement with the substance of the faith? And in just what “direction” is Pope Francis trying to take the Church?

Polls point to trends and/or interests. They cannot reveal the truth of things. Polls serve a good purpose in measuring where people are and what they think at a given point in time. But thought demands more. It requires a sufficient clarity about the subject matter (i.e., understanding the question) as well as an adequate foundation for giving an answer (i.e., knowing the faith). [For a live look at this, join us for “Faith & Spirits” at the Allentown Brew Works on April 13.]

The polls DO reveal two things of note. The first is our culture’s influence on people’s perspectives. The desire to be more welcoming is now commonplace; thus, support for more tolerance is to be expected. But what does that really entail? The second is that the Church must do a better job (as is always the case) in teaching what the faith really means – not in superficial surveys but in the splendor of the truth it proclaims.
The Cross of the Lord (4-3-15)

In the Heart of Every Father is a collection of meditations and reflections by Jorge Mario Bergoglio. The editor of the Italian edition (Fr. Antonio Spadaro, S.J.) explains that, at the root of Pope Francis’ spirituality, “spiritual/evangelical discernment sees not only black and white, but processes, progresses, gradualness, shades; it looks to recognize the presence of the Spirit in human and cultural realities, the seed of his presence already planted in events, sensibilities, desires, profound tensions of hearts, and social, cultural and spiritual contexts.”

Below is an excerpt from one of the pope’s meditations on the Spiritual Exercises entitled “The Cross of the Lord.”

The mystery of the cross is rooted here: only those understand it who “are weak,” the “little ones,” those who renounce any other hermeneutic of life and know that it is necessary (as Scripture says) to let “the dead bury their dead.” It is a difficult wisdom, this one of weakness and of littleness, by which to understand the cross! Saint Ignatius (of Loyola) proposes to us to make it ours in an aggressive manner. It would do us well to read slowly his invitation and to grasp that our greatest honor in following Christ is founded on “being deemed and esteemed crazy (without, however, giving any occasion of it).”

(To quote St. Ignatius):

“Similarly, it necessary to underline vigorously to those who come to be examined, by giving evidence of the value and evaluating the importance before God our Lord, of what way it benefits and is profitable in the spiritual life to abhor entirely, and not (just) in part, all that the world loves and embraces, and to accept and desire with all possible strength all that Christ our Lord has loved and embraced. Just as worldly people, who follow the world, love and seek with all diligence the honors, fame and great recognition of their own value on earth, being conformed to the teachings of the world, so they who walk on the way of the spirit and who concretely follow Christ our Lord, love and desire intensely the contrary, that is, to dress themselves in the same divided clothing of their Lord, out of the love and reverence they owe him. In this way, if there were not any offense regarding his divine majesty, if it were not imputed to others as sin, they would desire to undergo injury, false witnesses, affronts, and be deemed and esteemed crazy (without, however, giving any occasion of it), moved by the desire to resemble and to imitate in any measure our Creator and Lord Jesus Christ, by dressing themselves in his divided clothes, precisely because He has clothed himself for our great spiritual profit and with this has given us an example, so that in all things possible to us, with his grace, we seek to imitate him and to follow him, because He is the way that leads people to life.”

The Ignatian invitation to take up the cross in all (our) days stands in this quest for poverty contrary to wealth, of humiliation contrary to vanity, and of humility contrary to haughtiness.

featured image by AP/Gregoria Borgia from www.vnews.com
artistic image by Bro. Mickey McGrath, OSFS
Witnessing to more than oneself (4-24-15)

One part of me doesn’t want to write this – lest the phenomenon receive more undue attention. Another part of me wants to write in loud letters – in the hope of shifting the social media focus.

More and more, it seems, social communications are not so much social as self-centered. By now, the “selfie” is ubiquitous; its cousin, the “usie” is growing in popularity. One could call it artistic biography, not unlike the self-portraits of Rembrandt. But Facebook faces are far from art; they may be well-meaning, but the multiplicity of goofy looks posted in endless streams paints nothing more than a picture of vacuous narcissism.

Now the phenomenon has entered the video realm. The new website called YouNow allows people to set up a live camera feed so others can watch constantly what someone is doing – as if the world really needs to know that someone is #sleepingsoundly or #cruisingaroundtown. The ongoing commentary by watchers merely accentuates the exploitive nature (and danger) of such Internet voyeurism.

There’s a serious side to this, as well. Today’s “quantrepreneurs” give us multiple ways to analyze data from daily life in search of the Quantified Self. What began as a digital quest for self-knowledge through numbers is morphing into “nudging technology” that can tell us when to drink more water, eat more slowly, or sit up straighter. With the increasing demand that “consumers cede their free will to machine algorithms,” personal informatics can now prod us toward a supposedly better life.

How radically different is the notion of Christian witness. The communications that accompanies this Easter season is marked not by self-promotion but by testimony about someone else – the Risen One. What informs the life of faith is not data-driven analysis of one’s own behavior, but the Spirit-driven mystery of what God has done for us in the Resurrection.

The extraordinary experience by which those first disciples were touched has been handed on to us. Our identity as Christians and our mission as Church, as Pope Francis recently explained, is to bear witness to this life-changing event. We do so by the way we see, remember, and tell the story of this sacred event.

“The witness is one who … has seen a reality, but not with an indifferent eye; he has seen and has let himself become involved by the event. For this reason he remembers, not only because he knows how to reconstruct with precision that facts that happened, but also because those facts have spoken to him and have touched him in a profound sense. Then the witness tells, not in a cold and detached way, but as one who has let himself be put in question, and from that day has changed his life.”

Easter invites us to shift our focus from showing ourselves to witnessing to God now, who remains living and present in our midst.  

featured image by Kayana Szymczak, www.nytimes.com
The most influential “tweep” (5-1-15)

He’s at the top once again! As Cindy Wooden of Catholic News Service puts it, “when Pope Francis tweets, the world listens.”

In the annual analysis of “Twiplomacy” undertaken by a Swiss communications firm (Burson Marsteller), Pope Francis emerges as the global personality with the “most influential” Twitter account – “more than eight times higher than (President) Obama’s.” That determination puts the Pope at the top of the world’s list for the third year in a row. His more than 19.5 million followers would be delighted.

But this is far more than a numbers game or a popularity poll. The pope’s growing influence in the Twittersphere points to the ascendancy of this form of social communications as a critically important modality of the Church’s engagement with the world. As Fr. Antonio Spadaro suggests in Twitter Theology, the pope’s daily digital message offers a necessary and beneficial “twitness”!

It’s necessary because that’s where and how people communicate. Twitter may not have the depth of interpersonal contacts, but it makes connections between and provides information about people and groups. As such, tweeting does facilitate intercommunion and sociality. And as Karl Rahner once said, anything that does that is, in some way, an actuation of the Church.

It’s beneficial, because it fosters newfound creativity in communications. Since the messages must be condensed, honing in on what is essential becomes paramount. Effective preaching, whether online or from the pulpit, has to get to the point and touch straight to the heart. And just because tweets are brief, it doesn’t mean the message is superficial. The one sentence transmitted to the pope’s followers each day clearly inspires deeper consideration; that’s precisely why his good and holy thoughts are shared (re-tweeted) with so many others around the world.

Fr. Spadaro is right: “In a world in which information passes by way of sharing, and not only access but also the production and sharing of contents are open doors to all, it is no longer possible to have a merely passive attitude.” Fortunate for many, the pope’s role in all this is quite active … and the world is listening more and more each day.
S.A.D. no more
(5-8-15)

Spring has sprung … finally! Flowers are popping up. Trees are starting to bloom. Grass is getting green … at least in this part of the world.

The emergence of Spring and the anticipation of Summer affect our spirits positively. Out of the doldrums of winter comes new vitality, just as the resurrection brings new life in this Easter time.

But living in a new light is not simply metaphorical. Natural sunlight matters much. As the sunshine grows longer and stronger, it helps us to be SAD no more.

Seasonal Affective Disorder is a mood disorder that affects about 5% of the population and is marked by a lack of energy, depressive feelings, and general unease that comes with winter. It may not reach clinical designation for the majority of people, but there’s no doubt that our moods sway amid the change of seasons.

Springtime activities also help to generate a positive sensibility. The end of an academic year, the beginning of baseball season, even a day of digging in the garden – these no doubt contribute to the realization that the cosmos has returned to its right order.

But this seasonal experience cannot be had online. Our virtual reality has, in many ways, overcome the human limits of space and time. We can communicate with others across the globe via social networks. We can go online anytime or be online all the time. Through the wonders of technology, we can be present even when physically absent (and can be absent even when physically present!).

But in the online world there is no weather. True, we can see the storms and even hear their fury. But we can’t feel it. And without this tactile dimension, we can’t fully experience Mother Nature. Flickering pixels fail to affect the spirit as natural sunlight does.

Being online has become our existential environment. But totally immersing oneself there risks missing out on a profoundly spiritual characteristic of nature. Opening windows on a screen may let the world into our mind, but it can’t let the fresh air into our spirits.

We need to give nature a chance to show its maternal solicitude. While the sun is shining, turn off the computers and put the tablets away for a time. Go outside and play! Or at least take a nice walk. Maybe even go enjoy a ballgame.

The Son has risen, and we say “alleluia.” The sun is also rising … and for that we can add a word of thanks to the God of nature, who has formed us and our world to rejoice.

*featured image from www.desales.edu*
The lede looms large, signaling a grim future for faith: “The Christian share of the U.S. population is declining, while the number of U.S. adults who do not identify with any organized religion is growing, according to an extensive new survey by the Pew Research Center.”

The facts and figures point to distressing trends in the new religious landscape:

- “Catholics appear to be declining both as a percentage of the population and in absolute numbers.”
- Those religiously unaffiliated (the “nones”) are “more numerous than either Catholics or mainline Protestants.”
- And “within Christianity the greatest net losses [through religious switching], by far, have been experienced by Catholics.”

All this confirms Prof. Christian Smith’s research on emerging adults: American Catholicism is faltering.

For we who are clergy, this news should be troubling. The fate of the next generation’s faith must become a higher priority on the Church’s social agenda. Now, between Ascension and Pentecost, would be a good time to seek renewal in the gifts of the Holy Spirit: wisdom to see the truth in the trends; understanding to be able to communicate better; counsel to appreciate the sense of the faithful; fortitude to counteract cultural confusion; knowledge to grasp what really leads people astray; piety that inspires the young by looking forward; and fear of the Lord … to realize that the future of the Church is as stake.

Yes, the institutional church must do more. But the foundation of faith is set at home. Parents, not priests, are Catholicism’s primary teachers. Their work may not guarantee their child’s believing or belonging in later years, but without parental example and instruction and support, the prospects become unfavorable.

The upcoming World Meeting of Families in Philadelphia will showcase this truth. The lineup of speakers, and the schedule of activities, provide ample opportunity to learn and to celebrate. How good it would be if parents (and future parents) participated, and learned more about their essential role in handing on the faith.

World Communications Day, which is celebrated this Sunday (5/17/15), also highlights the importance of home-grown faith. Pope Francis signals it in the theme of his message, which is well worth reading.

The pope’s concluding sentiments could serve well as the rallying cry for revitalizing the religious landscape: “Families at their best actively communicate by their witness the beauty and the richness of the relationship between man and woman, and between parents and children. We are not fighting to defend the past. Rather, with patience and trust, we are working to build a better future for the world in which we live.”

That future depends on the family. So does our faith. As always, the landscape is ours to shape.

*featured image from www.pewforum.org*