“A View from the Chair”

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Resolve to stay plugged in (1-2-16)

The new year offers a fresh start. Taking stock and looking ahead lead to resolutions. Setting goals and striving to meet them is a proven path to success.

And **88% of all New Year’s resolutions end in failure**! Personal progress presupposes vision and willpower. Seeing clearly and choosing wisely matter most. Devices control neither.

Resolutions to “unplug” or, more dramatically, to “demolish social media on Sundays” rightly value the Sabbath rest and appear to be noble goals. But they wrongly assume where and how real rest is to be found. Nobility does not follow necessarily from noiselessness.

Granted, a digital detox may be needed if you really “love” the Internet, rather than simply use it. Something is amiss if your personal “validation comes in the form of emoticons, hearts & thumbs up” – as if these are detachable from the people whose emotions they express. And if, indeed, you believe you just “had to respond” to all those notifications, then your sense of freedom does need rebooting.

The cultivation of silence remains a worthy goal, particularly for growth in the spiritual life. Rest from the dizzying drone of mundane affairs is needed in order for transcendence.

But being connected is not the culprit. The means of social communications are not so almighty as to control or determine me. If they are, our usage borders on the idolatrous and our psyches may need professional help! We don’t recharge our souls by unplugging from the environment in which the world lives. Life’s balance does not come from disuse of data.

Wires, devices, apps, and all forms of media are external to us. The sacred solitude of Sabbath rest is internal, and can be had even while online. The key is to retreat but not abandon.

In his *Introduction to the Devout Life* (II:12), ST. FRANCIS DE SALES calls it one of the most certain means for spiritual progress:

> Remember … always to make several retreats into the solitude of your heart while you are physically involved in discussions and business – and this mental solitude cannot be disrupted by the multitude of those around you, for they do not surround your heart as they surround your body, if your heart dwells on its own in the presence of God alone.

Silent surroundings certainly help. But even there, real quiet is not assured. Solitude that gives solace to the spirit comes from connecting at the level of our souls. There we need to go when the networks get noisy. There we can often go, even with our devices still on.

Resolve instead to stay plugged in during 2016 – not just to the digital world in which we live, but by retreating into the divine world in which we can thrive.
**The Death of Discernment (1-8-16)**

Fear of terror attacks have people around the world scared for their lives. The contagion appears to be a primary cause of the decrease in visitors to Rome and the Vatican as the Year of Mercy begins.

The January 6 edition of Charlie Hebdo, marking the first anniversary of the terrorist attack at the satirical magazine’s headquarters features a Christian image of God-as-man (the focus of the sacred season of Christmas). That it is a Christian image is clear from the triangular hat (symbolic of the Trinity) with a “seeing eye” on it (symbolic of divine omnipotence). This God is pictured carrying a Kalashnikov rifle and wearing clothes stained in blood. The caption: “One year after – the assassin is still on the run.”

Below are my translations of excerpts from two editorials, one in Italy and one in France, denouncing the cover image. Both rightly chastise media (ir)responsibility in provoking and distorting the source of the world’s anxiety.

(from ilsismografo.blogspot.it) – Obviously the unpleasing cartoon can be read in two different ways even if, at the end, the two are quite close. In the first case God himself would be the author of the massacre of a year ago and is still a fugitive criminal, or the cause of this horrible crime would be religion, up to now not charged and still on the run.

We know in advance, and by now it has become an axiom, that anyone who criticizes this irresponsible vulgarity will be accused of acts against freedom of the press or of not being able to understand the freedom of satire. So we will not respond since an axiom is difficult to oppose (with) reasoning. One knows that an axiom, the foundation of deductive thinking, should not be demonstrated; it is always free and arbitrary.

We can underline only one consideration: attributing to God and/or to religious faiths violent intentions and actions, as symbolized with a gun and with blood, places the authors of the vignette on the same level as the terrorists who a year ago "in the name of God" caused the massacre at the headquarters of the French magazine. What a sad and terrible paradox. And this is a victory for the terrorists because it means that they also killed the discernment of those responsible for "Charlie Hebdo".

(from la-croix.com) – It is not God who assassinates, men do. They have no need of God to do so on a grand scale. The most deadly ideologies of the 20th century, Nazism and Stalinism, had nothing to do with religion; they were in fact anti-religious. Certainly, throughout history, religion has been, unfortunately, a factor in violence and this is still the case today in many places. But religion does not explain everything, far from it.

It is not God who assassinates, men do. But God needs men to do good. Many do so. Among the great heroes of non-violence were men and women of faith: Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Dorothy Day, Lech Walesa … Numerous are those men and women who, day after day, find in their faith not the gasoline of hate but the energy of love and the courage of pardon. God knows how much the world needs these.

*featured image from Filippo Monteforte/AFP/Getty Images
cover image from ilsismografo.blogspot.it*
Francis doublespeak (1-22-16)

We await the text of the pope’s annual Message for World Communications Day, which is usually published on January 24, the memorial of St. Francis de Sales (1567-1622), Bishop and Doctor of the Church, and patron saint of journalists.

The theme for the 2016 World Communications Day had previously been announced as Communication and Mercy – A Fruitful Encounter. According to the accompanying press release, “The Theme highlights the capacity of good communication to open up a space for dialogue, mutual understanding and reconciliation, thereby allowing fruitful human encounters to flourish. At a time when our attention is often drawn to the polarized and judgmental nature of much commentary on the social networks, the theme invokes the power of words and gestures to overcome misunderstandings, to heal memories and to build peace and harmony.”

Pope Francis expounds upon this power in his new book-length interview entitled The Name of God Is Mercy. Released earlier this month, the book offers several insights into what is clearly the pope’s central theme. While reports have referenced some key quotes in the book (“God forgives not with a decree but with a caress”) and important clarifications from the pope (e.g., on “who am I to judge?”), two excerpts referring to St. Francis de Sales are worth a closer look. In these are revealed the sentiment and the system of mercy that Pope Francis seeks to capture in this Jubilee Year.

The sentiment (p. 70) he offers in response to a question about the risk of letting oneself be contaminated by adherence to the law. “Saint Francis spoke of ‘our dear imperfections,’ saying, ‘God hates faults because they are faults. On the other hand, however, in a certain sense he loves faults, since they give him an opportunity to show his mercy and us an opportunity to remain humble and to understand and to sympathize with our neighbors’ faults’.”

The system (pp. 13-14) he draws from a homily by Cardinal Albino Luciani (Pope John Paul I) that makes reference to a merciful priest (Fr. Leopold Mandic) who inspires Francis: “as Saint Francis de Sales said, ‘if you have a little donkey and along the road it falls onto the cobblestones, what should you do? You certainly don’t go there with a stick to beat it, poor little thing, it’s already unfortunate enough. You must take it by the halter and say: Up, let’s take to the road again. … Now we will get back on the road, and we will pay more attention next time’.”

Two Francis’s speaking as one … and the message couldn’t be clearer!

featured image courtesy of Herbert Winklehner, OSFS
A New Logic for Mercy (1-29-16)

We may suppose mercy to be soft, giving a veritable “pass” on misdeeds. We may think mercy to be indulgent, forgoing a right regard for justice.

In his Message for the 50th World Day of Communications, Pope Francis acknowledges those assumptions, yet he speaks of something more, a new communications logic that, if we open our minds and hearts to considering, might just change the way we speak and act.

This year’s message highlights the modalities by which we think rather than the means of social communication (limited to just one paragraph). The reason, Antonio Spadaro points out, is that whatever the means we use, “communication is ‘credible’ not only if it corresponds objectively to what is true but if it is ‘trustworthy’.”

Highlighting this interpersonal dimension, Pope Francis underscores the link between communication and mercy and proposes a new logic that can bring about a “fruitful encounter” between the two. Four such changes of mind are summarized below, for each of which the pope paints an image to consider.

(1) Mercy is universal, not intramural. “As sons and daughters of God,” says Pope Francis, “we are called to communicate with everyone, without exception.” Mercy is not a gift receivable only by those who participate in Church life. It is the attitude the Church must bring to the world. “What we say and how we say it, our every word and gesture, ought to express God’s compassion, tenderness, and forgiveness for all” (emphasis added). The image, for Francis, is one of the hearth, where “warmth is what gives substance to the word of faith; by our preaching and witness, it ignites the ‘spark’ which gives them life.”

(2) Mercy is about communion more than exclusion. For Christians, we who know we are sinners redeemed by God, encountering others entails encouragement, where “even in those cases where they must firmly condemn evil, they should never try to rupture relationships and communication.” The image, for Francis, is one of building bridges, an effort to forge relationships that can lead to peace, rather than ensnaring others (and ourselves) in “the vicious circles of condemnation and vengeance.”

(3) Mercy comes from a position of equality rather than superiority. Especially true for ministers of the Church is the need to avoid “harsh and moralistic words” that only “risk alienating those whom we wish to lead to conversion and freedom (by) reinforcing their sense of rejection and defensiveness.” While it’s true, and reaffirmed here, that “We can and must judge situations of sin,” that does not mean that we should judge individual persons “since only God can see into the depths of their hearts.” Putting forth the image of a family home, “where the door is always open and where everyone feels welcome,” the pope calls on us to speak the truth, while imploring us to do so always in love.

(4) Mercy recognizes dignity, even in anonymity. In the digital world, “It is not technology which determines whether or not communication is authentic, but rather the human heart and our capacity to use wisely the means at our disposal.” Those means have revolutionized social communications. But in the realm of social networks, where people are profiles and likes are mere buttons, where interactions are generally one-directional and relationships are a-synchronous, it’s easy to forget that an actual person is on the other end of whatever we post and share. Recalling the image of a digital “public square,” Pope Francis reminds us that “Access to digital networks entails a responsibility for our neighbor whom we do not see but who is nonetheless real and has a dignity which must be respected.”

Real people, equal in dignity, with whom we are interrelated, in a humanity that is universal – this is the realm of our everyday encounters, where mercy can change the world if we learn to think and speak in new ways.
Faithful Trolls? (2-5-16)

The screaming headlines draw attention: “Pope Francis opens a can of whoop a** on hateful internet trolls – and it’s beautiful.” But popes really aren’t prone to such pugnaciousness.

In fact, the image contradicts the very point that Pope Francis is making in his Message for World Communications Day 2016. Yes, he wishes that communications be free from suggesting “a prideful and triumphant superiority” and from “(h)arsh and moralistic words” that demean others. But trolls are not the troublesome ones he has in mind; the paragraph in which we read those words refers to pastors of the Church!

Trolls are typically more overt in their meanness. Identified in Psychology Today as “Narcissists, Psychopaths and Sadists,” trolls “will lie, exaggerate and offend to get a response.” A less blatant, but more insidious problem with online communications comes in the form of personal disagreement disguised as authentic judgment.

This we see on self-proclaimed “Catholic” websites that regularly disrupt the very unity that the C-word denotes. Aghast at the impromptu expressiveness of Pope Francis, or distraught by the challenging vision of Catholicism that he preaches, some think that they, more so than the pope, speak for what we really (should) believe.

We might easily dismiss the ludicrous notion that the faithful “step into the breach” caused by “semi-heretical Church leaders.” But what about less boisterous protestations that nevertheless purport to create Francis-free zones, particularly in seminaries, rectories, or parishes?

In his Cardinal Foley Lecture on Social Communications, Fr. Thomas Rosica spoke of this sad phenomenon. The English-language Assistant in the Holy See Press Office called for a new “field hospital” to bring healing to “the wild, crazy world of the blogosphere.” Why? Because “On the Internet there is no accountability, no code of ethics, and no responsibility for one’s words and actions. It can be an international weapon of mass destruction, crossing time zones, borders and space. In its wake is character assassination, destruction of reputation, calumny, libel, slander and defamation.” He challenged the assembled audience, including many seminarians, by asking: “To what degree are our blogs and websites really the expression of the wealth of the Christian patrimony and successful in transmitting the Good News that the Lord has asked us to spread?”

That patrimony finds new expression in the words and actions of Pope Francis. Much of the world shows interest in what he has to say; many others recoil at his remarks. But acceptance of papal primacy is not a prerequisite to being moved by his message of mercy. Believers don’t have to like a pope, as Randall Smith explains! And to those feeling dismay, he notes, “A Catholic who is disappointed with the pope is a disappointed Catholic.”

The Church has now entered into the Jubilee Year of Mercy proclaimed by Pope Francis. Living as well in the digital realm, we find this a favorable time to ask ourselves how we can communicate that quintessential dimension of the Gospel via social communications. We might start by looking at the logic by which we communicate mercy.

Then, perhaps, when we do go online, we might share more merciful tweets, posts and comments … so that virtue can confound the trolls.
Airborne Works of Mercy (2-19-16)

Once again, Pope Francis has given the media plenty of fodder for the spinning news cycle. From comments on board his flight back to Rome came headlines about his calling-out The Donald on what being Christian entails and opening the door to birth control to combat the Zika virus.

Now that the reports have hit the virtual airwaves, it’s time to look at what the pope actually said. Even more so, how he said what he said shows what it means to speak with mercy. From that in-flight press conference, we hear the spiritual works of mercy in action.

1. To “instruct the ignorant” – The pope did not approve abortion or contraception as legitimate responses to a medical crisis. Understanding morality requires making proper distinctions. See Mary Rezac’s “pointers” for a good clarification.

2. To “counsel the doubtful” – Some still wonder whether the pope will change Church teaching about receiving sacraments. His answer: “Integrating in the Church [couples who have divorced and re-married] does not mean receiving communion … we cannot say ‘from here on they can have communion’.”

3. To “admonish sinners” – The Holy Father has no qualms about helping all of us see when we are blind in our own concerns. To do so isn’t “disgraceful” (as The Donald thinks); it’s didactic. “A person who thinks only of building walls … and not of building bridges is not Christian.” The admonishment concerns having one (“only”) without the other. But Christian concern is not primarily about policies (necessary as they are). It’s about people – fellow human beings to whom the Gospel (think: Good Samaritan) challenges us to offer hope and help along the way.

4. To “bear wrongs patiently” – Unflagging in the face of never-ending questions about the Church’s response to situations of abuse or mismanagement, the pope expressed justifiable ire (at the “monstrous” situations) and reiterated the number of efforts he has undertaken to rectify the wrongs. What more can he say?

5. To “forgive offenses willingly” – Despite the reporter’s confusion of cases (a murderer who repents is not in the same situation as someone divorced and remarried), the Holy Father rightly expressed the merciful desire to “integrate” all members in the life of the Church, including “wounded families” and especially children, who are the “primary victims” of those wounds. Forgiveness is an attitude born of willingness. Integration is a path trod with much diligence.

6. To “comfort the afflicted” – Everyone wants to meet the Pope! The logistics make that impossible. Still, to the reporter who wondered aloud why he didn’t meet with some groups, the pope offered the comfort of his shared anguish, while pointing to the “encounter” that can be had by hearing/reading what he said to all.

7. To “pray for the living and the dead” – Gently reminding the inquisitive reporter of the truth that “things a son says to his mamma are a bit private,” the pope nevertheless revealed something of what he prayed for in his quiet time with the famed Virgin Mary of Guadalupe: for the world, for peace, for pardon, for the health of the Church, for the Mexican people, and for fidelity among religious vocations. And as has become his signature, he asked the journalists to pray for him.

Though they come to us without tone of voice or facial expression, Pope Francis’s words are worth reading on their own. Underlying them is not only his openness to dialogue with purveyors of public opinion, but his deep desire for merciful communications. On board and on the ground, Pope Francis demonstrates how mercy works by way of honesty expressed always in charity.

featured image combined from Reuters and CNN
Cell phone tricks ‘n treats (3-4-16)

The “trick” now comes with a “treat” at Chick-fil-A. A local franchise owner in Suwanee, GA created the “Cell Phone Coop” in which diners are challenged to place their phones in a pre-fab box on the table. If family members can then resist the urge to attend to their phone throughout a meal, the restaurant gives them a free ice cream as a reward.

Brad Williams, creator of the challenge, wants to wean “screenagers” away from their distracting reliance on cell phones, at least for as long as it takes to enjoy a chicken sandwich. He’s aiming to restore meaningful conversation ‘round the table. Of course, that requires more than leaving a silent phone cooped up in a box.

Still, many applaud the restaurant’s value proposition. Other eateries proffer similar rewards, like discounting the cost if restaurant-goers check their phones with the host at the door. Some diners make up their own challenge, by having all those at the meal place their phones on the table and penalizing the first one to reach for it with having to pay the entire bill.

Meaningful conversation is a worthy goal. A cleverly-designed “challenge” invites participation (not to mention it’s a good marketing scheme). Saving money and getting ice cream are enticing offers.

But the problem is not the phone! At issue in the seemingly ubiquitous use of cell phones while eating are matters personal, social, cultural, and even spiritual – which should be of concern to cell phone users of all ages.

The personal matter concerns our penchant for productivity. How often are we doing something else while eating, as if taking nourishment is a waste of time? We rationalize it by praising ourselves for multi-tasking. The fact is we are simply diverting our attention, which is good neither for what we are trying to get done nor for our digestion!

When that split-attention takes place amid company, the problem becomes glaringly obvious (at least to those not looking down at a phone). Attending to whatever is on one’s phone at the moment – a text message, a notification, a call – means not paying attention to the others around the table. It signals, sometimes even with sound, that whatever is on one’s phone is more important, more worthy of attention, than those persons in our immediate presence. At the very least, it’s a lack of common courtesy. Intended or not, it’s disrespectful of others and of the conversation taking place. It could (should?) be construed as an insult.

Transcending the concern for social etiquette, the apparent need to be in constant contact with the world via cell phone technology signals a greater and more worrisome restlessness. We now seem to think that everything is urgent, that any message is so important that it simply cannot wait to be read or responded to. And so, we have been culturally conditioned to reach for the phone as a reflex-response to digital notifications, as if this reveals a newfound efficiency. But what is really discloses is a variation on vanity.

Cell phone technology makes instant communication possible. It doesn’t demand that everything else should stop in the meantime, or that anyone else, especially family, deserves less attention.

Charity toward others remains the spiritual norm. The challenge, then, is bigger than a box.

images from Chick-fil-A on today.com
Cell phone craziness (3-18-16)

It doesn’t quite have the same ring to it (pun intended!), but the blog title alludes to the psychological character on display this time of year.

It’s March – a time of meteorological madness, when a day of joyous sunshine is followed by forecasts of foot-deep snowfall, thereby casting into chaos the cyclical rituals proper to Springtime.

(courtesy Nolan Neiman)

It’s March – a time of devotional madness, when mature adults recall saintly exemplars by donning otherwise infantile costumes, while emerging adults take advantage of the feast to accessorize their fashions and colorize their nutrients.

(abcnews.com)
(eventioggi.net)

It’s March – a time of collegiate madness, when a team of smart kids paying enormous tuition defeats the team that pays the tuition of its players because they are talented athletes, while others young at heart flout their foolhardiness during a “break” from the rigors of academic life.

(wgntv.com)

And what does all this mayhem have to do with cell phones? Everything! For digital technology makes it quick and easy to catch the images and share them with the world.

But it also holds the power to convict us of craziness when the need to click obscures the enjoyment of the moment, when the impulse to post right away detracts us from the live interaction of the event, or when the urgency to respond to instant messages divides our attention from people actually speaking in our midst.

The madness of March will pass (we hope!) when the calendar page turns. The boys of summer will begin the for-real pursuit of a pennant. The Irish (and all those who were for a day) will return to their workaday routines. The tournaments will crown a champion, while colleges will conclude their semester sending graduates to commence their lives in the “real world.”

But what of the cell phone craziness? Will we learn to celebrate the moment without having to photograph it, to interact with others present without having to replicate it for those not there, or to give our attention to people without having to look at a device? Or is our increasing reliance on technology making our society “mad” all year round?

These final days of Lent afford us the opportunity to reflect on the sanity of our spiritual well-being. And it leads to theological madness – when, beyond our human understanding, the Son of Man transforms bread into His body, the innocent Son of God submits to cruel torment and execution out of love for sinful humanity, and the one who was dead and buried rises to new life as our Redeemer.

That’s a madness that leads many to think faith is insane. For Christians it’s the character of our lives … not only in March but for all eternity.

featured image from www.christianitytoday.com
Inspiragram (3-24-16)

There’s no such app – yet! – but the growing trend has taken another leap forward.

Last week, Pope Francis joined Instagram. The papal account -- @Franciscus – shattered records by amassing a million followers within just twelve hours. Add this to the 27 million followers on his Twitter accounts, and this pope is easily the world’s most-recognized social media phenomenon.

Why on earth would a pope bother to immerse himself (and by extension the Catholic Church) in the passing fancies of the “selfie” generation?

Some denounce this move as a yet another sign of this pope’s banality and the attenuation of the Church’s message at risk of loss amid “the clutter of hashtags and modern self-obsession.” But such short-sighted obsession with criticizing Pope Francis’s revolutionary normalcy misses the media mark and fails to grasp the inspirational power of the Gospel proclamation.

In terms of the means, Fr. Antonio Spadaro explains quite cogently the pastoral logic at work in making use of this particular social medium. On Instagram, the pope is able to enter into a communications dynamic that generates a participative encounter with a vast majority of people, young and old. “This does not diminish (the pope’s) authoritativeness at all, but the closeness it creates, on the contrary, increases it.”

In terms of the message, @Francis enters into the unending tradition of using imagery as “epiphany” – a creative expression of the attractive beauty of the Gospel message. As St. John Paul II said of the work of artists, “beauty will save the world.” Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI echoes this by noting how the combination of faith and creativity “leads to a direct encounter with the daily reality of our lives, liberating it from darkness, transfiguring it, making it radiant and beautiful.”

The sacred Triduum celebrates the profound theological depths and ultimate personal impact of the salvation wrought for us by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Now and always it is the Good News for human life.

That Gospel makes its impact in and through the deeds by which God enacts our Redemption. And that impact is experienced in successive generations through the “images” that invade our being and inspire us to appreciate what God has done for us. The revelatory power of beauty – in art, in architecture, in photographs, in the imaginative mind – is what ultimately inspires us to believe.

Pope Francis knows this. He communicates this through social media. Millions of people can now “see” the message on multiple platforms. When they participate in these holy encounters, and “share” that with others, the Gospel is proclaimed to all the world. That inspiring proclamation, facilitated now by the social media through which people regularly communicate, fulfills what the Church has always been called to do.

images from news.va and instagram.com
Holy Hype! (4-8-16)

The day has finally arrived for *Amoris Laetitia*, the apostolic exhortation on “Love in the Family” that wraps up the Synods and world meeting that took place the past two years. But the frenzy that accompanied its publication suggested something earth-shattering was to appear.

As with other publications, the date on which this one was to be released was pre-announced. But the notice of the press conference set off editorial speculations when it listed as one of the presenters, Cardinal Christoph Schönborn. That the purported leader of the “progressive” camp was tapped to speak supposedly signaled the tone or tenor the document.

In the run-up, representatives of the divergent schools of thought at the Synods on the Family were making the rounds, speaking publicly about what the pope would say. Cautious leaders reminded readers that the exhortation, whatever way it leaned, would nonetheless be a papal document. As such, the entirety of it calls for allegiance of the faith, rather than a “pick and choose” approach that takes sides in the still false competition between this one and previous popes.

During the countdown, fears about another “Vatileaks” accompanied the hyped anticipation of the text. A refresher on what an “embargo” means for journalists was offered ahead of the publication date. (For the record, I received the text at 6:00 a.m., six hours ahead of the press conference. It was easy to keep embargoed because I was still asleep!)

In proximate preparation for the grand occasion, bishops around the world received two preparatory “backgrounders.” One was a summary of what “theology of the body” means. To think that they needed to (re)learn this fundamental theology raises its own questions! The other was “reading guide” to the papal text that focuses on explaining/understanding key terms like “discernment” and “dialogue,” recurring ideas in the Francis pontificate should by now be clear.

The press conference itself took place in a packed house. Fittingly, the presenters also included a married couple, though these lacked the entertainment value of a Roberto Benigni presenting the pope’s book on mercy.

The Vatican’s web site is now peppered with a pop-up image (above) calling attention to the new exhortation. And the commentaries have already begun to appear.

Perhaps the hype will help draw attention to this fundamentally important topic. Perhaps it will prejudice positions taken on the subject. Perhaps it won’t make much difference at all “on the ground.” We’ll see.

But enough of the hype … now I’ve got to get to work actually reading the 264-page text!

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+ JHS  
**Invoking the care of the Holy Family of Nazareth, I am happy to send you my exhortation "Amoris laetitia" for the good of all the families and persons, young and old, entrusted to your pastoral ministry. United in the Lord Jesus, with Mary and Joseph, please do not forget to pray for me.**  
*Franciscus*
**Amoris Laetitia – an “ideal” teaching (4-15-16)**

Having finally read the entire document, I think it’s fair to say that Pope Francis’ apostolic exhortation is about the “ideal” of marriage. But the implications of that vary widely, from the lamenting critique that the pope has failed to uphold the ideal, to the giddy supposition that since no one can achieve an ideal the pope has equalized all marital situations.

As usual, extreme views fail to be accurate!

That marriage is an “ideal” expression of human love is clear from the pope’s repeated use of the word, which appears 21 times in the text. But “ideal” does not mean for him that marriage should be “idealized” (no. 36). The ideal of covenantal marriage is also real and, with grace, realizable and realistic. With pedagogical prowess, Pope Francis defines this ideal, posits the elements of it, describes the character of it, and analyzes the process of it – all the while also presenting a contrast so as to bring its meaning into focus.

Referenced throughout the document, “this ideal” is defined in no. 292: “Christian marriage, as a reflection of the union between Christ and his Church, is fully realized in the union between a man and a woman who give themselves to each other in a free, faithful and exclusive love, who belong to each other until death and are open to the transmission of life, and are consecrated by the sacrament, which grants them the grace to become a domestic church and a leaven of new life for society.” Examples of relationships that are “not the ideal which the Gospel proposes” are acknowledged in no. 298.

Building up to the definition, Pope Francis notes that the ideal of marriage involves exclusivity and stability (no. 34), mutual assistance (no. 36), growing old together (no. 39), and “a love that never gives up” (no. 119). It does not include the flaunting or imposing of “something other than what the Church teaches” (no. 297).

The pope describes the character of this ideal love as “demanding” (no. 38), “high” (no. 200), “beautiful” (no. 230), and “evangelical” (no. 308). But he also notes that the ideal is not stereotypical; it is embodied in, and gives shape to, a mosaic of married lives (no. 57).

Pope Francis rightly reminds us that to achieve this ideal takes intentional effort, “integrating (moments of intense enjoyment) with other moments of generous commitment, patient hope, inevitable weariness and struggle” (no. 148). Couples faithful to the ideal know this to be quite true! Those preparing for marriage need to realize this is what awaits them.

That marriage is a lesson learned in the living of it gives pastoral forces to the pope’s teaching. Consenting and committing to the ideal of marriage is the necessary beginning. Realizing that is a dynamic process, one which the couple moves toward, together, in a continuous way “until death do us part.” Recognizing this dynamism, the pope acknowledges that some couples have not fully realized the ideal. But that is not to say that the ideal is impossible or that it need not be sought. Quite to the contrary: “A lukewarm attitude, any kind of relativism, or an undue reticence in proposing that ideal, would be a lack of fidelity to the Gospel and also of love on the part of the Church for young people themselves” (no. 307).

In calling for pastoral mercy for those who have not or are not living the ideal of marriage, Pope Francis actually does uphold the ideal. It’s that which spouses are called to achieve. It’s that which so many couples do live – and in doing so they teach the world the richness of what love can be. It’s that against which the realities of not yet fully realizing it appear so painful. And about those latter situations (those “not yet fully realized” rather than “irregular”), the Holy Father challenges us all to be more merciful … and thereby share that ultimate ideal of love for our neighbor that is our Christian calling.

*featured images from usccb.org and wordonfire.org*
The 50th World Communications Day takes place this year on Sunday, May 8th. This is the only “world day” called for by the Second Vatican Council and is celebrated in most countries on the Sunday before Pentecost.

Each year a theme is announced on the Feast of the Archangels, Michael, Raphael and Gabriel (September 29), the patrons of radio workers. A message from the Holy Father is then published on the Memorial of St. Francis de Sales (January 24), patron of journalists. This year, during the Jubilee, the theme/message is “Communications and Mercy: A Fruitful Encounter.”

The bishops of the USA have never designated World Communications Day for formal celebration. The movable date makes it a challenge to schedule amid ordinations, graduations, First Communions, and all the other happenings at this time of year.

But we plan to change that … at least locally!

To mark this golden jubilee, Saint Charles Borromeo Seminary, in the Archdiocese of Philadelphia, is inaugurating an annual symposium named for its esteemed alumnus and former president of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications – JOHN CARDINAL FOLEY. The Cardinal Foley Symposium takes place at the Seminary on Thursday, May 26.

The symposium begins with a public forum on the day’s theme. The guest panelists who will offer distinctive perspectives on the message include Monsignor J. Brian Bransfield (the General Secretary of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops), Dr. Angela Corbo (Associate Professor of Communications at Widener University), and Mr. Matthew Schiller (President of the Catholic Press Association).

The symposium concludes with a luncheon celebration, during which the Seminary will present the first Cardinal Foley Award in Communications to a media professional who excels in the field. (Contact Cathy Peacock at the Seminary to reserve your tickets for the luncheon.) The inaugural winner of the Cardinal Foley Award is longtime Philly favorite PAT CIARROCCHI, who recently retired from CBS-3 after more than thirty years in television and radio broadcasting. Among the many stories she covered, Pat shared with Philadelphians live reports from the canonization of Philadelphia native St. Katherine Drexel in 2000, the funeral of Pope John Paul II in 2005, the historic resignation of Pope Benedict XVI in 2013, and most recently the World Meeting of Families and visit of Pope Francis last September.

As Pope Francis proclaims in his message this year, “What we say and how we say it, our every word and gesture, ought to express God’s compassion, tenderness and forgiveness for all. … If our hearts and actions are inspired by charity, by divine love, then our communication will be touched by God’s own power.”

In today’s digital world of communications, the hashtag wields a new power. It may not be a divine sign, but our new Cardinal Foley Symposium plans to make the most of it!
Sedition in the Soul (5-13-16)

Something is terribly wrong.

ANXIETY.

Not just worry. Not just concern. But physically and/or mentally sickening anxiety.

Perhaps this week of final examinations at the end of the semester exacerbates normal nervousness. But never before have I encountered so many college students who claim to suffer from anxiety (whether clinically proven or not.)

I know not the source of their troubles. Besides personal problems, some might say it’s symptomatic of the Facebook culture in which they have grown up. A new study from the University of Pittsburgh suggests that “the more time young adults use social media, the more likely they are to be depressed.” One reason: the envy one feels in seeing (or thinking) that others lead happier lives. The more they scroll, the more anxious they become at seeing what they are not. And now, according to a story in the New York Times, Facebook wants even more than the 50 minutes of your day that it already steals away.

Whether or not social media usage is the culprit (I doubt it), I do see the effects of the great evil of anxiety on the young souls this semester. Considering that the subject matter of my course is a study of the Introduction to the Devout Life, it’s rather prescient that that book’s author (ST. FRANCIS DE SALES) so vividly describes just what these students are experiencing: “Just as sedition and internal disorders bring total ruin on a state and leave it helpless to resist a foreign invader, so also if our heart is inwardly troubled and disturbed it loses both the strength necessary to maintain the virtues it had acquired and the means to resist the temptations of the enemy” (III:11).

The saint then analyzes the problem and suggests a remedy:

Anxiety proceeds from an inordinate desire to be freed from a present evil or to acquire a hoped for good. Yet there is nothing that tends more to increase evil and prevent enjoyment of good than to be disturbed and anxious. Birds stay caught in nets and traps because when they find themselves ensnared they flutter about wildly trying to escape and in so doing entangle themselves all the more. Whenever you urgently desire to escape from a certain evil or to obtain a certain good you must be especially careful both to put your mind at rest and in peace and to have a calm judgment and will. Then try gently and meekly to accomplish your desire, taking in regular order the most convenient means. When I say gently I do not mean carelessly but without hurry, trouble, or anxiety. Otherwise, instead of obtaining the effect you desire you will spoil everything and cause yourself all the more trouble.

Sound advice from a wise doctor (of the church) … especially on this Friday the 13th!
Parents beware … and be wary! (5-20-16)

Last week’s blog considered anxiety as an affliction of the young. This week’s looks to desperation as a potential downfall for the old, at least those who are parents.

Screenagers is a new documentary about growing up in the digital age. In this film, a mom who is also a physician “probes into the vulnerable corners of family life, including her own, to explore struggles over social media, video games, academics and internet addiction.” The film “reveals how tech time impacts kids’ development and offers solutions on how adults can empower kids to best navigate the digital world and find balance.”

The foundational fact to the film is that young people spend at least 6½ hours each day looking at screens. Related factors also contribute to the problem of parenting. Psychologically, young people feel like then can do more by multitasking, despite the fact that the outcomes are worse than with single-focused attention. Socially, the young are obsessed with how they look, and social networking is all too easy a place to post photos that are no one else’s business. And educationally, what kid doesn’t prefer gaming to math?!

The medium may be contemporary, but the challenge is not new. It’s called growing up! Maturity is a progressive development of realizing the importance of the choices we make, of learning what we should attend to amid the many options we face, of valuing what is truly important even when it’s not immediately satisfying.

Are parents’ jobs made more difficult because of supposedly “smart” phones? Undoubtedly, yes. But all is not lost. Adolescents share in that resiliency that is characteristic of all human life.

Of course, I have no experiential basis on which to stand when it comes to parenting (except as a recipient of good parental teaching)! Nevertheless, I dare to offer three considerations beyond those made in the documentary – one that’s timeless and two drawn from Pope Francis’s ode “towards a better education of children” that is chapter seven of his exhortation On Love in the Family.

First, and the classic fallback, is the need to teach by example. How often do adults model that mistaken multitasking? How casually do they attend to their own phones while dissembling the company of others in their immediate presence?

Second is to wonder where the teenagers are. Says the pope: “Parents need to consider what they want their children to be exposed to, and this necessarily means being concerned about who is providing their entertainment, who is entering their rooms through television and electronic devices, and with whom they are spending their free time” (no. 260).

Third is to ask what teenagers are learning. According to the Holy Father, the family is the place where the young can “learn to be critical about certain messages sent by the various media” (no. 274).

But someone has to show them, someone has to search for them, someone has to teach them … PARENTS!

We’re praying for you. We (and they) are counting on you.