“A View from the Chair”

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Unsocial Rants (6-13-14)

World Communications Day took place on June 1 with a variety of international activities. Given this year’s theme for the annual celebration – “communications at the service of an authentic culture of encounter” – a news story less than a week later is particularly disturbing.

The June 7 story is about a pending decision in the U.S. Supreme Court regarding cases in which persons were convicted of using threatening language on electronic media. According to the Associated Press ...

In one case, a Pennsylvania man ranted on Facebook in the form of rap lyrics about killing his estranged wife, blowing up an amusement park, slitting the throat of an FBI agent and committing "the most heinous school shooting ever imagined."

The other case involves a Florida woman who emailed a conservative radio talk show host about "second amendment gun rights" and said she was planning "something big" at a Broward County government building or school.

"I'm going to walk in and teach all the government hacks working there what the 2nd Amendment is all about," the email said. Her comments triggered a lockdown affecting more than a quarter-million students.

The court case seeks to decide whether words are “threatening” in a legal sense because of the intent of the speaker (which must be proven) or owing to the viewpoint of a reasonable reader/listener. Is the power of words in the prose or in the perception?

Behind the debate lies a question about social media. Is the new technology at fault because it makes ranting easy to do when communicating at a distance from in-person interaction? Does the text-based anonymity of social networking sites lead to misinterpretation of words that weren’t really “meant” to be harmful?

Whether threats are really intended is a matter of someone’s mind. If that lies in the mind of the “poster,” it’s hard to prove, until (God forbid) something actually happens. If it lies in the mind of the “reader” (the number of whom is exponentially greater on social media), it requires a knowledge of the originator that most, if not all, simply won’t have.

But it doesn’t seem hard to judge words like these from the case in question: “There’s one way to love you but a thousand ways to kill you. I’m not going to rest until your body is a mess, soaked in blood and dying from all the little cuts.” Even if, as the defendant claims, this was simply a lyrical way to vent his frustration, there seems to be something very wrong with this mindset. It’s clearly not moral and could hardly qualify as “social” communications.

Words matter. They have consequences. Supposedly they distinguish us as human beings in comparison to other animals. The new media that make it easier to communicate and to do so immediately and with extensive outreach do not change the nature of the words we use. Let’s not blame the digital messenger!

Communication is, indeed, about encounter because words connect people, real people even in a virtual space. When that connection is founded on fear, the “social” reality of our communications is indeed threatened.
Google vs. God (6-20-14)

In the Wall Street Journal, Christine Rosen recently asked whether Google is replacing God. Someone who holds the position of “Future Tense Fellow” at a foundation is certainly poised to pose such a query! Her essay focused on a recent report in MIT Technology Review that posits a negative correlation between Internet use and religious affiliation.

In the conclusion to her essay she asks: “In relying on the Internet to answer questions that religious institutions used to answer – crowdsourcing faith, in other words – do we risk losing access to some of the answers data can’t provide?” The answer to that one is obvious: YES, it’s a risk if, indeed, our reliance is (singularly) on any technology. The answer to the title question is also obvious: NO, Google will never replace God.

The latter question makes for popular diversions, such as the nine proofs that Google Is God, offered by “the Church of Google” or the series of sermons on Vantage Pointe asking questions of the Google God. Enjoyable as the supposed proofs may be to ponder, Google gives no grace. Google may point a searcher toward answers, but clicks give no conviction.

Still, the popularity of the world’s most powerful search engine leads to interesting speculation. More interesting still is that so many are searching for something quasi-divine, which reveals the never-ending quest of humanity for meaningfulness. That this quest might be fulfilled digitally is an enticing, yet ultimately empty, proposition, for the digital can never substitute for the personal and relational.

If religious affiliation is limited to the profession of a particular set of beliefs or traditions, it may indeed decline with the advent of greater access to diverse information. But faith in God is so much more than propositional. In Christianity, that God is a Trinity of persons eternally and perfectly united in a relationship that issues from and communicates love, grace, and fellowship (cf. 2 Cor 13:13).

Only in a lasting relationship will people find the certainty and security they seek. When what they seek are ultimate answers, only absolute truth will suffice. As St. John Paul II once wrote,

Thanks to the inherent capacities of thought, man is able to encounter and recognize a truth of this kind. Such a truth—vital and necessary as it is for life—is attained not only by way of reason but also through trusting acquiescence to other persons who can guarantee the authenticity and certainty of the truth itself. There is no doubt that the capacity to entrust oneself and one's life to another person and the decision to do so are among the most significant and expressive human acts (Fides et Ratio, no. 33).

The new world of Google and other Internet technologies facilitates the search. Social networking makes possible a wider array of possible encounters, which Pope Francis would have us cultivate. We can and should make the most of these new opportunities. But the choice to entrust myself to another – and ultimately to the Other – should be reserved for the person, fully human and fully divine, who alone “fully reveals man to man himself and makes his supreme calling clear” (Gaudium et Spes, no. 22).
TheoCom14 (6-27-14)

Sunny California was the place to be for some 35 scholars from around the world — including the John Cardinal Foley Chair — who gathered this week to consider the impact of digital technologies on theological reflection. Taking place in the Silicon Valley, the third annual forum featured cutting-edge questions and penetrating discussions:

- Might Facebook be creating a sense of time that reduces the story of life to a myriad of unconnected instants? (Perhaps, if our focus is limited to the present.)
- Can a virtual presence still be a real presence? (Yes, when what is on-screen serves the iconic role of opening us toward the mystery that is beyond the image.)
- Is greater connectivity the ultimate way to transform our lives, as Google executives suggest? (Hardly so for believers.)
- Is online game-playing an escape into the imaginary or a trans social interaction? (Both … Now let’s watch the World Cup!)
- Can we truly encounter one another through screens? (Why not, if it’s truly me being extended via the screen.)
- Might digital technology be addictive, a “narcotic for daily living”? (Certainly, when we’re more interested in capturing or reporting on an experience than actually having the experience!)
- Are social networks Babel-ing talk or Pentecost-al communication? (Check your Facebook feed for the answer!)
- Can the “mechanical” Internet aid “spiritual” development? (Most definitely, but not until we change our perspective. The Internet is not a place or a tool, but a web of relations among real persons who can, through interior discernment, witness to the faith by sharing their lives online. So, too, we can look upon technology not as a cunning distraction but a providential gift, through which we share the stories that lie at the heart of spirituality.)

Actually, the discussions were intellectually deeper and theologically richer than this Twitter-like summary suggests. The gathered minds spoke of teleology and eschatology, of presence and communion, and other theoretical foundations to our faith that could or should play out in the new world of digital communication.

In that world, as Pope Francis said in this year’s message for World Communications Day, “We are challenged to be people of depth, attentive to what is happening around us, and spiritually alert.” Thanks to sponsorship by the Pontifical Council for Social Communications, the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, and Santa Clara University, these annual gatherings seek to take up that very challenge.

Given the rapidly expanding, culture-forming power of the digital realm, there’s no end in sight to the questions. Given the Church’s mission of communicating the Gospel so as to transform the world, formulating a faith-based response is an ongoing and vitally necessary task.
World Cup and World Media (7-11-14)

Neither sentence nor clause nor phrase, two words have recently captured the world’s attention: “Because Fútbol.” After 62 matches over 30 days, the World Cup competition is now down to its final two teams, but its fan base far exceeds the citizens of Argentina and Germany.

Sports, in general, and international competitions, in particular, have long been a feature of human life. As St. John Paul II once said to representatives of UEFA, futbol’s governing body, sport can and should be at the service of people, by fostering “an overall development of the body, a sound spirit of competition, an education in the values of life, joie de vivre, fun and recreation.” Notwithstanding the moral questions that attend this or any human competition, the playing of sports figures prominently into Josef Pieper’s rightful assertion that leisure is the basis of culture.

For the 2014 World Cup, that culture has been communicated at an astounding pace. With a television audience expected to reach 3.6 billion people, animated ads have attracted viewers, and creative commercials – like those from Hyundai and Adidas – have injected new slogans into our collective consciousness.

Even more prominently, social media has feasted on the festival of futbol. In the space of one week alone (June 12-18), 141 million people generated 459 million Facebook interactions. For just one match (Brazil vs. Germany), 35.6 million Tweets were sent, easily surpassing the previous record for any sporting event (the 2014 Super Bowl at a mere 24.9 million). Political cartoonists have had a field day. And even the players themselves have taken to social media – which is the only way they can use their hands for this sport!

More so than other “world” championships, and even more than the individual competitions in the Olympics, the FIFA World Cup is a global human phenomenon. Throughout the qualifying buildup, and especially during the matches, patriotism soars, passion abounds, and enthusiasm runs rampant. But in the end, athleticism wins, and the trophy is awarded to just one team. Soon we will find out whose prayers for this have been heard!
Two recent news items point to interesting links between the digital and the human.

In one, scientists propose that the popularity of Internet stories correlated with their appeal to human emotions. What makes videos go viral? According to the latest research, it’s not the use of clever computer algorithms but the ability to capture high-arousal emotional content (positive or negative) that can be spread like a digital contagion.

The other story points to a different “part” of the human make-up. Just announced is a new app that lets people snap a photo simply by focusing their brain waves. By staring straight and thinking hard, MindRDR does what its name implies, allowing users to take and share photos “without so much as lifting a finger or uttering a word.”

Sometimes heart-warming, sometimes mind-boggling, digital technologies are extending human dimensions of emotion and thought beyond a person’s body. But even without technological assistance, humans can access higher powers through their own imagination.

Four centuries ago, St. Francis de Sales (1567-1622) demonstrated and taught how forming images of the sacred can have a profound effect on one’s heart and soul. Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit these mental pictures have “an inestimable efficacy to enlighten the mind and move the will” (On the Preacher and Preaching, p. 50). Whether in preaching or praying, using the imagination is necessary for producing an awareness of God’s presence in human life. As the saint acknowledges in his classic Introduction to the Devout Life, “Although faith assures us of (God’s) presence, yet because we do not see him with our eyes we often forget about him and behave as if God were far distant from us. We really know that he is present, but because we do not reflect on that fact we act as if we did not know it” (part II, chap. 2 p. 74).

So, if you want to experience God – and more vividly hear his words or feel the effects of his touch or see the wonders of his power – just picture it! Imagine the reality of what you already believe: that God remains always present with us. Then you’ll “see” how divine revelation, more so than digital technology, empowers us to know the truth more fully, to show goodness through mercy, or to praise the beauty of the world around us.
Evangelizing Online
(8-1-14)

August is upon us … one last chance for that Summer vacation!

Taking a virtual vacation from the usual blog posts, this one falls more under the rubric of marketing and promotion as we invite you to … save the date of October 18, 2014. That’s when the John Cardinal Foley Chair of Homiletics & Social Communications at Saint Charles Borromeo Seminary will be hosting a DIGITAL CHURCH CONFERENCE here in Philadelphia.

If you want to learn, or learn more, about using social media in the work of evangelization (in parishes, schools, groups, and organizations), then this conference is for you! If you’d like to see and hear how dynamic leaders in the field work their magic, then this conference is for you! If you’d like to experience a “30-minute media makeover,” then this conference is for you!

Join us – together with Brandon Vogt (editor of The Church and New Media) and Matt Warner (founder of Flocknote) and Josh Simmons (CEO of eCatholic) – to enjoy a walk along the digital streets where the Church is to be found. As POPE FRANCIS says, “Keeping the doors of our churches open also means keeping them open in the digital environment so that people, whatever their situation in life, can enter, and so that the Gospel can go out to reach everyone.” Go to our web site (linked below) for all the details.

featured image from www.digitalchurchconference.com... 251 words
Cellular R-E-S-P-E-C-T (8-8-14)

The Grammy-award winning song remains a hit long after its 1967 debut because it touches a chord in the human spirit. Aretha Franklin sang it so – with vivacious voice and bountiful soul. But she never did so while dining in a restaurant!

Today is has become commonplace. In the midst of a meal, a cell phone rings with a sound that provokes a Pavlovian response. Every head turns to the source of the sound. Then the conversation begins, usually in a voice several decibels higher than necessary. Some even turn the phone to speaker or video mode. Now anyone and everyone is forced to hear the trivial banter that would otherwise be embarrassing in polite company. No consideration of circumstances of time or place comes into play. Because of the ease of cellular communication, every conversation nowadays seems to have an urgency about it that unthinkingly displaces the r-e-s-p-e-c-t that used to govern social situations.

But the phenomenon has gone beyond politeness. There’s evidence now that it negatively impacts business. A New York City restaurant recently discovered that complaints about slow service could be traced to the ubiquitous use of cell phones. The result: meals take up to 45 minutes longer because customers pay more attention to their devices than to their dining!

Conversation is critical to relationships. Keeping in touch fosters familiarity. But absent an emergency, not every phone call is urgent. Forcing strangers to enter into our personal circles is disrespectful – to them, to the person on the other end of the phone, and especially to those at the table to whom we should be paying attention.

Yes, time is a precious commodity. But meals are more than moments of nutrition that interrupt our busy schedules. They are opportunities to nourish our social relations through interpersonal encounters. That interaction, like every other, still calls for a healthy dose of r-e-s-p-e-c-t.
Trending Death  
(8-15-14)

The news hasn’t been good. Social media sites are replete with messages about mortality.

The more recent trend offers wide-ranging commentary on the death of Robin Williams. Even the Vatican newspaper (L’Osservatore Romano) reported on it. The news is both sudden and sad. Tweets and posts recall with appreciate fondness the joy he brought to audiences through his comic genius. (And thanks to digital technology, the happiness can be relived in audio and video.) The talk on social networks about this is raising a loud voice about this mental health issue amid the otherwise pervasive silence. Hopefully, it will also generate support for dealing with it.

A more devastating trend is the outcry about the continuing barbarity in Iraq. None of those being slaughtered “over there” garners the (well-deserved) fame of a Hollywood star. Yet despite the anonymity, these deaths should also move our minds and hearts to respond. The scenes are quite graphic (see this video of an execution), but the reality demands our attention. The actions are abhorrent, including

- the public massacre of people solely because they are Christians
- the forced abductions and expulsions of tens of thousands of people
- the gleeful destruction of worship sites, religious symbols, and priceless cultural artifacts.

Social networks help to spread the message, such as the Holy Father’s appeal to the United Nations, in which he pleads that “The violent attacks that are sweeping across Northern Iraq cannot but awaken the consciences of all men and women of goodwill to concrete acts of solidarity by protecting those affected or threatened by violence and assuring the necessary and urgent assistance for the many displaced people as well as their safe return to their cities and their homes.” Digital media also provides some forums for a broad-based, collective response, such as this attempt at a “rescue” by political intervention.

But the spectre of death, particularly as it results from the organized and systematic evil of religious genocide, calls for a more dramatic response, an appeal to a power that transcends the despicable sinfulness of any human regime. This type of response goes beyond what political powers can do. It can be made by anyone and everyone – or at least by those who value the dignity of human life. All of us can PRAY …

- for those being martyred … to live
- for those wielding weapons … to stop
- for those who live in fear … to be comforted
- for those who remain indifferent … to be converted.

On this solemnity of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, she who brought to life the Redeemer of humanity, #prayforpeace that only God can give.
Walk on campus at your own risk!
(8-29-14)

A new academic year has begun. Residence halls are filled. Courses have commenced. Campus life has once again come alive.

But today's campus has become a dangerous place. Not because of crime -- security is a prevailing concern. Not because of alcohol -- at least not yet. Not because of shootings -- which we pray will not occur anywhere. No, the greater risk these days may be crashing into a student on a campus sidewalk! There, it seems, no one walking is looking up. Seeing others' faces has been replaced by necks craned downward in a steady stare at a mobile screen.

The popularity of cell phones is nothing new for this generation. The preference for communicating via text messages is a given in this age cohort. But these days, college and university students appear more absorbed than ever in their devices. When one cannot even look up to respond to a "good morning" offered by a friendly passer-by, something more sinister than immaturity is at work. And that something -- the ignorance of, or indifference to, another human being -- poses a cultural danger for the long run.

Mobile communication is not the culprit. This technology has opened vistas onto a larger world of information and education than ever before. Social networking is not to blame. These tools have connected people, young and old, at greater distances and in higher numbers than has ever been possible. Neither the medium nor the message is the problem ... we are!

We who use devices with no attention to or concern for others in the same room. We who choose electronic communication over face-to-face encounters. We who think we're so busy with other important matters that there's no time to be offline. We who so desire to be connected or liked that we check repeatedly for messages even without being notified by ping or ring.

Today, human interaction is no longer happenstance. A casual encounter, a customary greeting, a smiling face, a curious look -- these simple yet significant forms of interpersonal interaction run the risk of disappearing if we can't even look up for the few seconds it takes to pass by someone on the sidewalk. Scholarly studies already published have shown a link between frequency of cell phone usage and fatalities while traveling (Rutgers 2009), reduction in happiness (Kent State 2013), or stunted social skills (UCLA 2014).

But a campus culture of closing oneself off in one's own (usually digital) world without acknowledging anyone else there portends a greater harm. If we can't even relate to one another with a direct glance or a directional nod, how will we learn to "love thy neighbor" when a real need comes along?

Young people will one day take over the world and hopefully change it for the better. For now, they should learn to say "hello" to one another!