“A View from the Chair”

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Is the pope a Luddite? Some might think so given recent headlines like “Pope tells parents not to let children use computers in their bedrooms.”

But headlines too often distort the message. To understand what this pope says, context counts and syntax matters. The pope issued no magisterial directive on how to organize households. What he offered was common-sense wisdom.

In more off-the-cuff remarks during the journey to Sarajevo, Pope Francis spoke both to young people and to journalists about computer usage.

Prefacing his remarks to the youth with self-deprecating humility (“Obviously, I am from the Stone Age, I’m ancient!”), his remains sound today: “If you live glued to the computer and become a slave to the computer, you lose your freedom. And if you look for obscene programs on the computer, you lose your dignity.” But he also implored those digital natives to “Watch television, use the computer, but for beautiful reasons, for great things, things which help us to grow.”

To the reporter who inquired about what was meant by wasting time with television and computers, the pope distinguished between the medium and its content. Regarding the former he makes clear that the risk comes not from the digital medium but from one’s attachment to it. Slavery of this, or any kind, is what “damages the soul and takes away freedom.” About the latter the pope was not telling parents how to act as much as he was describing what some concerned parents do, given their legitimate fears about a child’s access to inappropriate (even dangerous) content.

Undoubtedly, computers can have a deleterious effect. Ease of access to personally damaging content like pornography is frightening. So, too, is the strength of social media to affect brain power, with research now showing that digital distractions lead students to be able to concentrate on a task for only 31 seconds!

But computers are not the problem. Fantasies are. Removing the device does not restrict the imagination. Nor does banning the technology eliminate distraction.

With regard to the digital era, parents need to be teachers, properly supervising and forming the young, and students need to learn, as they always have, what to embrace and what to avoid. To do otherwise, by ignoring the risks of technology or by reverting to a less technological learning environment, is to deny the environmental reality of the age in which we live.

Social media can make moral development a challenge, but we cannot abdicate the perennial task of education in human freedom. Hence, the pope’s Stone Age wisdom in this regard is worth emphasizing: “In an age of images we must do what was done in the age of books: choose what is good for me!”
Drawing the line on digital media (6-19-15)

Commentary on Pope Francis’ new encyclical (published yesterday) is currently underway. Appreciation of it will take more time. For now let me add but one thought, on just one paragraph.

First, the context. Chapter one paints a picture of “what is happening to our common home.” Its fourth part delineates the “decline in the quality of human life and the breakdown of society.” In the last paragraph there (no. 47), the pope writes:

Furthermore, when media and the digital world become omnipresent, their influence can stop people from learning how to live wisely, to think deeply and to love generously. In this context, the great sages of the past run the risk of going unheard amid the noise and distractions of an information overload. Efforts need to be made to help these media become sources of new cultural progress for humanity and not a threat to our deepest riches. True wisdom, as the fruit of self-examination, dialogue and generous encounter between persons, is not acquired by a mere accumulation of data which eventually leads to overload and confusion, a sort of mental pollution. Real relationships with others, with all the challenges they entail, now tend to be replaced by a type of internet communication which enables us to choose or eliminate relationships at whim, thus giving rise to a new type of contrived emotion which has more to do with devices and displays than with other people and with nature. Today’s media do enable us to communicate and to share our knowledge and affections. Yet at times they also shield us from direct contact with the pain, the fears and the joys of others and the complexity of their personal experiences. For this reason, we should be concerned that, alongside the exciting possibilities offered by these media, a deep and melancholic dissatisfaction with interpersonal relations, or a harmful sense of isolation, can also arise.

Far from a Luddite-like lament, or some magisterial malediction on the means of social communication, this analysis explains well the “care for our common home” that is the concern of the entire text. In this case, caring offers both caution and hope.

In today’s home, digital technology IS omni-present. Even without using it, digital media affects virtually every aspect of our lives. More than simply a tool, digital technology has become the “connective tissue” of our environment and functions now as the “nervous system of our culture” (Archbishop Claudio Maria Celli).

The critiques leveled by the pope are all true! As with other technologies, this one, too, can generate pollution, and it does so with alarming speed and global reach.

Still, the focus here, as throughout the encyclical, is not on a socio-political issue or techno-scientific debate. The pope’s chief concern is about human harmony – with God, with nature, and with one another – in this “home” that we call the world. In that digital abode, we need to learn (and to teach) the “true wisdom,” the “real relationships,” and the shared “knowledge and affection” of which he writes.

Realizing these timeless and universal values will not come from banning modern technology or seeking sanctuary from it. We don’t appreciate the value of freedom by the absence of temptation. And yearning for the days of pre-digital communications is nothing but nostalgia.

Learning to care for the beauty of our common digital home requires conversion (what good do we seek there?) and commitment (to the truth of the persons who communicate). Then will technology serve its ultimately spiritual purpose of assisting human beings “to live wisely, to think deeply and to love generously.”

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Let’s not denigrate dignity (7-3-15)

One of the chief complaints about social media is the danger of anonymity. It’s easy to fabricate a profile. It’s common to “speak” there in ways that would not occur in face-to-face conversations. It’s a fact that negativity outweighs positivity in online commentary. As a result, polarization may well be “the dominant story of political and media life in this era.”

Regardless of the medium, demeaning others is a choice. Morally, it’s a faulty choice. Respect for others, ALL others, is the cornerstone of social relations, whether on- or off-line.

The basis for that universal respect is found in one’s dignity – something every person shares simply by virtue of being human. It’s the “what sets us apart” from all other realities in this world.

But the notion of human dignity has taken a strange turn with the recent Supreme Court decision legal recognition to same-sex marriage. In an insightful commentary, Matthew Franck traces the recent usage of “dignity” in jurisprudence. The latest ruling, he says, shows that “In (Justice) Kennedy’s mind, the Constitution has been converted into a great Dignity Document. The role of the Supreme Court is to adjudicate whose version of Dignity it embodies, which can be decided by pondering who is made to feel worse by having his strongest convictions ‘demeaned’.”

Dignity, rightly understood, is not something bestowed, either by judicial fiat or by democratic decision. Dignity is not the result of anyone’s free choice. It is not something people accomplish or are owed. If dignity were within the scope of human decision-making, its repeal, retraction, or rejection would likewise be for people to decide – which would make some greater than others and thereby invalidate the very concept.

To retain its full meaning, human dignity cannot come from us, neither individually nor collectively (and especially not by a one-vote majority). In order to unite us, and to do so despite the vagaries of history and the varieties of culture, its source has to be above us, beyond us, higher than us. For it to be shared by all, it must come from somewhere other than us all.

Religious believers ascribe the giving of human dignity to the Creator. At its root is the fact of our having been created by a beneficent God. And fulfillment of that dignity rests in the divine beatitude to which humans, by nature, are called by this same Creator and for which we have been redeemed.

In between now and then, human action conforms (or not) to that dignity that is in us but not from us. At the crux of most polarizing debates these days – from abortion to economic systems to the death penalty – is this very notion of a dignity that transcends particularities.

To be sure, no one’s dignity should ever be demeaned. But neither should we think that dignity is something within our purview to discover or determine, to confer or bestow.

Human dignity is ours to have and to hold. It is a gift, but it’s not ours to give. That, thankfully, has already been done to us and for us by the only One who can, the one who sits not on any bench but on a heavenly throne.

featured image cropped from http://dignity-buzz.blogspot.com
A mountaintop experience in Center City (8-7-15)

When Peter, James, and John accompanied Jesus onto Mt. Tabor to experience the Transfiguration, their reactions were understandable. There we see interesting parallels to what we expect to happen when the pope visits center city Philadelphia next month!

Seeing the vision of the bedazzled Jesus along with Elijah and Moses, Peter exclaimed “it is good we are here!” When Pope Francis appears in Philadelphia, it will certainly be good to be there. Just ask the 13,000+ people from numerous countries who are traveling here from around the world to attend the WMOF Congress, or the 8,000+ volunteers from all 50 U.S. states, or the millions more who will be attending the papal events – they’re all coming to Philadelphia because it will be good to be here for this unprecedented event.

Yes, some may look upon the mammoth logistical and security decisions as signs of a popeapocalypse! The disciples on that mountaintop were also “terrified,” and rightly so as what they were experiencing was unlike anything they had ever known. But what a privilege they had to see what they saw. What excitement in their minds and hearts. What a revelation for their lives. This is the potential that the papal visit holds for all who journey to Philadelphia. It’s not the same thing, of course, but to be in the presence of Pope Francis is a moving experience that no description can adequately portray.

Perhaps that uniqueness is why the Lord instructed the disciples “not to relate what they had seen to anyone” and why “they kept the matter to themselves.” That vision is not aptly described. That experience is too unbelievable. That moment is not easily shared. Not, that is, until and unless one sees with the eyes of faith. After the Resurrection, they knew what that moment on Mt. Tabor meant. And the Gospels continue to tell the story.

Still, it must have been hard to keep that secret! Were there witnesses on the mountaintop today, they would have snapped photos for Facebook and Instagram, Tweeted what the voice from the cloud said, and perhaps captured the whole episode on Periscope with live-streaming video. The world would have known instantly what was going on.

Real-time communications via social media is what will be happening in Philadelphia, with the whole world watching. Not unlike Peter and James and John, many “disciples” have an opportunity to be there in the moment, to experience the maddening yet exciting events, and to communicate the story to friends and strangers alike.

The World Meeting of Families is looking for 400 volunteers to assist with media relations. We need support staff, guides, and escorts for the more than 7,000 journalists who will be on site. We need social media volunteers who will create and monitor content on- and off-site. Sign on with WMOF and who knows … maybe you, too, will have a mountain top experience right in the midst of center city!

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How to hear Pope Francis: A Guide (8-14-15)

With preparations ramping up for the papal visit, much of the attention has centered on concerns about security and transportation. But the real focal point of this apostolic journey are the speeches Pope Francis will make at various sites. It would help, then, to know how to hear what he will say.

Not all do! Some mistake his words in a way that creates a narrative extrinsic to the pope’s mission. Some hear him through the filter of a personal or collective agenda of what they wish he would say. Case in point: the ongoing narrative that appears to pit Pope Francis against Archbishop Chaput. The story repetitiously confuses a pastoral attitude of “welcoming” people with the ecclesial truth of witnessing to the faith. Properly understood, the two work together. Curiously, the story has since been “scrubbed” without being corrected!

To mitigate such misinterpretation, here are three tips to guide listeners and readers in preparation for the pope’s numerous talks:

(1) Consider where he is coming from. Pope Francis comes to the USA as a head of state, where his talks to Congress and the United Nations will certainly garner international attention. He also comes as head of the Roman Catholic Church, and will speak often to bishops, priests, religious, seminarians, and all the faithful. In both cases he speaks primarily as pastor, not as a diplomat or CEO. In this visitation, he speaks as a way of being near and encountering people. Any other implications, applications, or supplications are secondary to his speaking as shepherd to his flock. As Steve Soukup rightly states, “There is no question that some of the things he says and does are likely to influence political matters. But that influence is ancillary to his principal aim, which is to minister to his Church and to ameliorate the suffering caused by man’s surrender to sin.”

(2) Consider what he hopes to achieve. When the pope as pastor communicates, his goal is loftier than secular speeches. He seeks to teach and to inspire humanity to become who we are called to be. No doubt he’ll offer analysis of current culture, but his expertise is neither economic nor scientific.

Pope Francis will speak with the authority of his office. But his is a moral more than political might, whose effectiveness lies in exhorting and uplifting the dignity of human beings. His will certainly be a powerful voice, whether as inspiration to those who agree with him or as a different view to be considered by those who disagree. Either way, his words seek to be helpful and will be if listened to with an open mind and heart.

(3) Consider what he actually says! The pope’s many words will undoubtedly be subject to analysis and critique, especially with thousands of journalists in tow. And while official texts will be available, this pope is well known for going off script, where his quips and quotes generate headlines.

Whether in verbal or written form, his words (not those of others about him) are what matter most. Listening to them or reading them requires attentiveness to what he actually says (not to what others say he said).

Pope Francis is beloved because he speaks to people and with them. His words tend to favor commonly held truisms over accurate comparisons. But that is how he touches us precisely where we live, both where we sin and where we succeed. It’s an encounter worth having … through speeches worth listening to!
The (New) Pilgrim’s Journey (8-21-15)

According to Wikipedia, “In the early 21st century the numbers of people of all faiths making pilgrimages has continued to rise, with 39 of the most popular sites alone receiving an estimated 200 million visitors every year.” This September in Philly may add 1-2 million to that total!

The numbers flocking to the City of Brotherly Love and Sisterly Affection loom large. The World Meeting of Families will host a Congress of record proportions. The visit of Pope Francis will swell the two-day population even more.

Some may think this is reason enough to say away from the heavily-secured city. But no pilgrimage happens without a few bumps along the way. The effort it takes is part of the experience. The energy needed comes more from within. The graces to be received are the benefit.

What will take place in September is not simply an international gathering. It’s more than the appearance of a global celebrity. For one week, and one weekend, a pilgrimage is happening. The journey is a sacred one, for it focuses on the celebration of faith and the quintessentially spiritual and familial dimensions to human life. As Archbishop Chaput presciently puts it, this can be “an irreplaceable moment in history.” Let it be so both for the city, for the archdiocese, and for the pilgrims.

Like most pilgrimages this one will be inundated with young people, whose energy and enthusiasm are rarely thwarted by the prospects of long walks and big crowds. Today, though, these pilgrims will have another staple in the traveling packs – social media. Tweets, posts, photos, streaming video – this is new arsenal for young pilgrims. Thankfully, anyone with access will be able to share in the holy happenings by tapping into the social boards at work during the events. (click on the image below for info)

And for the youth on pilgrimage in Philly, an actual, not just virtual, opportunity awaits. Bands and speakers, along with food and fun, will be available at “Club Francis @ the Philo” from September 22-24 Plans are still being developed to make this a real opportunity to connect in person … and to encounter others who seek to make this pilgrimage a special moment.

Whether with hashtags or with hangouts, the pilgrimage will soon be underway. To echo the Archbishop’s appeal: “we need to own that spirit by welcoming [Pope Francis] with our presence and our personal involvement, not just with our words. And we can do that best by joining him here in the city — on Independence Mall, at the Festival of Families, and on the parkway for his Sunday Mass. It’s worth it. It will be spectacular. So please join us — and tell everyone you meet to do the same.”

featured image from www.sjprep.org/page.cfm?p=927
Social Communications & the Family (8-28-15)

At the inaugural Cardinals’ Forum this week, we enjoyed a lively discussion on the vocation and mission of the family. With reference to communications, I suggested that the family would benefit from a new viewpoint!

Digital technology is much more than newfangled gadgetry. It serves as our culture’s “connective tissue” or “nervous system.” Even if we do not use it extensively, everything around us is filtered through media: our news, sports, politics, even our daily interactions with family and friends. So, just as we are not always aware of the critical role that tissue and nerves play in our physical lives – until something hurts, that is! – so too the workings of this digital environment are such that without it, our lives would, in some real sense, fall apart.

Social communications permeate all aspects of contemporary life. Even the Holy Father recognizes this, when he calls the modern media “essential,” particularly for young people. Getting parents to acknowledge this reality, rather than avoid it or flee from it, is a first step in the family’s mission.

A second step is to embrace fully the Holy Father’s call “to employ technology wisely, rather than letting ourselves by dominated by it” (World Communications Day, 2015). This distinction acknowledges that social media can be “both a help and a hindrance to communication in and between families.” Parents, especially, need to keep both in mind. Yes, significant dangers exist in the realm of social media, just as risks are part of every facet of growing up. Children “cannot be left to their own devices” – either figuratively or literally! But once parents accept that the iWorld is the environment in which they and their children live, then they can take advantage of this as an opportunity to engage more fully with what their children are texting and posting and sharing … they might even learn a thing or two from them!

The third and final step is to affirm the ultimately spiritual purpose of communications. In his latest encyclical, the Holy Father notes that an integrated human ecology requires us “to live wisely, to think deeply, and to love generously” when it comes to media and the digital world (Laudato Si’, n. 47). The family is where this integration is taught and learned.

The family offers a wisdom that comes from inter-personal encounters. For this to flourish, we should learn to put down the gadgets when other people are in the same room. Living beings in our presence should matter much more than whatever draws our attention on a screen.

The family teaches that relationships are stronger than individual differences. For this to develop, we should remember that connections mediated by social networks involve real, not virtual, people. The way we interact online, in what we say and what we post, needs to respect this with familial charity.

And the family is where the sharing of knowledge and affection is cultivated. Technology offers exciting prospects by making possible new ways of interacting with an ever-wider world. But true admiration and affection will always be directed toward persons we love, those we encounter in the human family that is our origin and in the Christian family that is our community.

Acknowledging, embracing, and integrating social communications are critical steps in the mediating mission of the family today. In this realm lies a significant challenge for the entire Church. To quote the Holy Father one last time: “may we respond to that challenge with fresh energy and imagination as we seek to share with others the beauty of God” (World Communications Day, 2014).

images from thechoicedrivenlife.com and esalen.org