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“A View from the Chair”



by **REV. THOMAS DAILEY, O.S.F.S.**

John Cardinal Foley Chair of Homiletics & Social Communications

2013-2014

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A View from the Chair

9-27-13

Each year on the day of the liturgical feast of the Archangels (Sept. 29), the Vatican announces the theme for the annual World Communications Day, which takes place in most countries on the Sunday before Pentecost. World Communications Day is the only worldwide celebration called for by the Second Vatican Council, whose “Decree on the Media of Social Communications” (*Inter Mirifica*) was published 50 years ago this December.

The papal message for the Day is traditionally published on the memorial of St. Francis de Sales, patron of writers (January 24). The theme highlights a particular concern in the interaction between faith and the media, and the compilation of these messages – 47 so far ([archived here](#)) – represents a treasure of theological thinking applied to the ever-changing and ever more influential world of social communications.

Here at Saint Charles Borromeo Seminary, two related announcements are in the works: the launch of the newly-designed website (coming in October) and the inauguration of the John Cardinal Foley Chair of Homiletics and Social Communications.



As the first incumbent of the Cardinal Foley Chair, I'll have the opportunity to write and speak about the new digital world. In his last apostolic letter, Blessed John Paul II described the digital world as “the first Areopagus of modern times” because “Ours is an age of global communication in which countless moments of human existence are either spent with, or at least confronted by, the different processes of the mass media” (“The Rapid Development,” no. 3).

Like St. Paul in the original Areopagus (Acts 17:16-34), and like Cardinal Foley in his more than 20 years at the helm of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications, I look forward to making use of the media of our time to contribute to the Church's mission of sharing the Gospel message. For students here, as well as other groups throughout the country, I hope to engage them, virtually and really, in the new world of CyberTheology! It's a world where people are enthralled by the wonders of ever-improving technology. More importantly, it's a veritable culture that both creates and expresses a new understanding of ourselves, others, and the world in which we live.

On a regular basis, I hope to offer here a weekly view into this digital culture, including a look back 50 years at the prescient teaching at Vatican II. I'll do this from the “casual” perspective of the seminarians' blog, a communications tool that is an increasingly important medium. Consider this statistic from the most recent CARA Report (2012) about [Catholic media use in the United States](#): “Sixty-three percent of respondents who follow Catholic blogs agree ‘somewhat’ or ‘strongly’ that they do so to get a balance from secular news sources” (page 3.) And if you were wondering, 63% equates to roughly 36.7 million adult Catholics!

We're glad you're one of those followers and we hope you visit this blog often.

Featured image from [KofC.org](#)

If necessary, use words (10-4-13)

On October 4 the Church celebrates the saintly legacy of Francis of Assisi. Soon after his election, Pope Francis told journalists at an [audience](#) that this saint came to mind when choosing his unique papal name. While the motivation in that inspiration was primarily the saint's concern for the poor, another Franciscan trait has come to the fore in this papacy. Pope Francis appears to the world as one who lives out the famous quip attributed to the saint (though its actual source is unknown): “preach the Gospel always and if necessary, use words.”

Consider his [inaugural words from the balcony](#) of St. Peter's Basilica. After a simple and rather non-traditional greeting (“Good evening”), the new pope's speech comprised almost entirely words of prayer and blessing. Those words were not, as some surmised, a substitute for his not knowing what else to say upon such a momentous occasion. Nor were the formularies used there merely words of traditional ecclesiastical rites.



No, the pope's words were chosen purposefully. He prayed for his predecessor (an historical first). He called for prayer for one another and for the whole world. He asked for the crowd's prayer for him, and the more than 100,000 strong responded with a deafening silence, creating an atmosphere that transcended the moment and astonished the assembled media hordes.

Novel as this was, it should not surprise us. Prayer is the primary language of Francis – the saint and the new pontiff. Prayerful words have become central to Pope Francis' leadership of the Church on what he called its “journey” of charity, of fraternity, of trust. That is as it should be, for the Church is not merely a social or political or cultural institution. It is, first and foremost, a spiritual reality, for which its operating language is and must be liturgical. That Pope Francis' first act was to pray with the people of his new diocese and ask them to pray for him, was not only appropriate, but telling.

Other words included in that first address “to the city and the world” (“Urbi et Orbe”) were perhaps less noteworthy but no less telling, because they offered an indication of the pope's point of view on what faces the Church operating in the world today. To those who, in the conclave preceding his election, saw an internal-external division of focus between the “operational management” of the Curia and the “evangelical outreach” of the Church, Pope Francis made clear the priority when he noted that his vicar “will assist me ... for the fruitful evangelization of this beautiful city.”

Preaching the Gospel is the pope's primary job; doing will require many more words. Managing the minions who work under his authority represents a monumental challenge; shifting the Curia's [“Vatican-centric”](#) focus to an emphasis on the “community of God's people” is a daunting task. But that outreach remains the Church's mission, and the pope's chief concern. All else is secondary to this spiritual mission and is to be at the service of that evangelical preaching.

An approach that puts the spiritual first, that begins from words of prayer – that is how Pope Francis puts into practice the Franciscan dictum to preach always and use words when necessary. It's a personal method that yields [“A Big Heart Open to God.”](#) as he reveals at the conclusion of his famous interview. It's a mode of outreach that has jump-started this papacy, which continues to enjoy worldwide appeal. And it's a worthy approach for carrying out the New Evangelization, a task for all of us who work in and for the Church.

Making Friends in Social Space

10-11-13

Philosophers once theorized that “nature abhors a vacuum.” People today seem to agree, as they seek to fill the void of social space through online chat rooms, personal blogs, and a variety of networking sites. But the domain of one’s life is no longer just my space; it’s fast becoming the whole world’s. Think of Facebook ... not even a decade old, it now has 1.15 *billion* monthly active users, including [the Pope](#) (with the help of very [active interns](#), that is!).



Responding to this growing phenomenon, some fear its insidious potential; parents, especially, see in this medium a threat to their never-ending quest to exercise vigilance over their children’s social habits. Why do people feel compelled to post information about themselves for all the world to see? What drives the apparent need to share profiles and pictures with anyone and everyone?

In the past, personal space was something to be guarded. To invade another’s space meant getting too close, crossing a boundary that actually curtailed communication; to be that close was considered rude, even disrespectful. But now, through the marvels of digital communications, “friends” can become immediately present to anyone with a user account and password and can “like” each other (or not!) with one simple click.

Personal profiles are posted as a beneficial way to keep in touch with one another; but predators can surf, too, as they troll for victims or search for identities to steal. Photographs can reveal meaningful events in one’s life; but employers view those snapshots, too, and an unflattering image now can lead to unemployment.

Social networking via the Internet is not merely a popular pastime for a new generation; it also offers an instructive metaphor with regard to the cultural shift affecting human relationships today. The thin threads of the “web” that connects people also suggest the superficiality of current interpersonal communication. And the tangled trap a web creates offers an uncannily accurate picture of the unintended or even malicious connections that online sharing can sometimes produce.

Still, people crave human connections. Just ask the seminarians who earlier this semester had to maintain a digital blackout during their six-day retreat! We all want to find a place in the world we can call our own, a place which we can also share with others. The church recognizes that fundamental human need ... and seeks to respond to it. In fact, the [recently announced theme](#) for World Communications Day 2014 is “Communication at the service of an authentic culture of encounter.”

In the meantime, we realize that social networking can never replicate the wonderful mystery of personal identity and the joyful interchange that takes place when actual lives, not just factual information, are shared through a living encounter with another. To quote the insight of Blessed John Paul II, [the rapid development](#) of computer technology increases the facility of communications, but it does “not favor that delicate exchange which takes place between mind and mind, between heart and heart, and which should characterize any communication at the service of solidarity and love” (no. 13).

Facebook is now *the* social meeting place for much of the world. It no doubt helps keep people in touch across time and space. But no number of bytes or pixels will fill the vacuum of interpersonal relationships. For that, only actual, not virtual, friendship will suffice.

Featured image from WallPapHD.com

Lights, camera, action at the Vatican

10-18-13

As birthday celebrations go, this one had no candles ... though there probably were lots of flickering backlights from the bank of television monitors in the control room. *Happy 30th birthday to the Vatican Television Center (CTV)!*



Created in 1983 by Blessed John Paul II, the CTV does it all when it comes to showing images of the Holy Father or of events at the Holy See: from live broadcasts (about 130 each year), to footage of daily services, to production of documentaries and a weekly magazine program. Perhaps most significant is the CTV archives, from which sounds and images of the popes are routinely shared with agencies around the world. And thanks to a new master control room, begun in collaboration with [Sony](#), those images can now be housed as digital files (rather than tapes), thereby facilitating HD distribution and improving archival preservation.



What sets this television center apart, however, is not its technical capabilities but its “sacred” subject, something that requires a wholly different approach to television broadcasting. As the director of the CTV (Msgr. Dario Edoardo Viganò) explains, journalism narrates historical events, but telling the Church’s story presupposes a spiritual hermeneutic. And this priest from Milan has all that. His talent shows not just in his academic training (with a doctoral degree in the history of film) or in his cinematic craft but in his religious sensibility, which he makes vividly evident in what he produces/directs for the world to see.

Consider that just a few weeks after he took over CTV, he had to arrange for the unusual spectacle of two popes at the same time. The incredible images of the events of those days remain vivid in the world’s eyes. Much of it was scripted and some of it even rehearsed for CTV – like the aerial scenes of Pope Benedict XVI leaving the Vatican (filmed with the intent of conveying a sense of the world’s accompaniment on the trip) or the dramatic “extra omnes” shot of Msgr. Guido Marini closing the doors on the conclave (emphasizing not the secretive nature of the election but the mystery of a supernatural process). The views are extraordinary, the message both sublime and substantive. (You can see more about CTV’s distinctive work in the fascinating “Witness” episode with Msgr. Viganò presented by [Salt & Light TV](#). The interview is in Italian but the English subtitles are quite thorough and accurate.)



In an era of instant access to news footage from around the world, CTV will play an increasingly important role in the new evangelization. After all, the “language” of social communications today is dominated by images, and television remains a ubiquitous medium for conveying the Church’s image to the world.

Nowadays that image is the face of the Holy Father and his multiform activities. Blessed John Paul II was known for his dramatic gestures during apostolic voyages, Benedict XVI for his astute lectures from the chair of Peter. And now Pope Francis is acclaimed for his authentically simple and ordinary activities around town. Hopefully, CTV can keep up with him, because thanks to their expanded coverage, the world is (still) watching.

Featured image from [ctv.va](#)

O, Holy Tweet!

10-25-13

Even popes have gotten into the act!

Pope Benedict XVI was the first to tap his electronic tablet to send a Twitter message (on 6/28/11), in which he announced the [Vatican news portal](#) and sent prayers along the electronic way. Of course, that doorway to Church happenings around the world was captured on video for a [YouTube link](#).

And earlier this year, a [global communications report on “Twiplomacy”](#) declared Pope Francis to be “the most influential world leader on Twitter.” Why? Because at the time his messages were re-tweeted on average more than 11,000 times! (The next closest was the U.S. President, with an average of only 2,309 retweets.)



Yes, the global Catholic Church has certainly come a long way in terms of the modern means of communications. But this novel adventure is far from simply catching up with the technological times. Instead, it is an actual (and not just virtual) means by which the Church does what it was founded to do – bring the good news of salvation to the world.

Whereas the Areopagus of St. Paul’s time was the arena in which Christianity encountered the culture of the day, today it’s in cyberspace that religion meets society. As Pope Benedict wrote in his [message for World Communications Day 2011](#):

To proclaim the Gospel through the new media means not only to insert expressly religious content into different media platforms, but also to witness consistently, in one’s own digital profile and in the way one communicates choices, preferences and judgments that are fully consistent with the Gospel, even when it is not spoken of specifically. Furthermore, it is also true in the digital world that a message cannot be proclaimed without a consistent witness on the part of the one who proclaims it. In these new circumstances and with these new forms of expression, Christians are once again called to offer a response to anyone who asks for a reason for the hope that is within them.

But some wonder whether a pope should be using Twitter, as if that rather limited means (with messages of no more than 140 characters) somehow lessens the importance or denigrates the dignity of the sacred message. Can there really be such a thing as “Twitter Theology”?

Fr. Antonio Spadaro, S.J., who literally wrote the (e)book on the subject, explains how, in some respects, the Church is “the ultimate social network” because it fosters the interconnection of the faithful as opposed to the inherent solitude of the human condition. But he admits the metaphor is inadequate; the sense of “belonging” in the Church is neither the result of a consensus nor the product of communication. Nevertheless, he points out that the logic of today’s means of social communications leads to the realization that meaningful messages, including religious ones, cannot simply be transmitted; they must be shared.

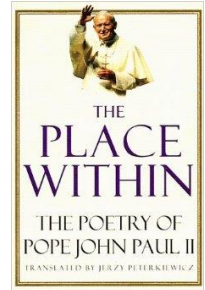
Given our world’s never-ending need for hope, it’s certainly beneficial that the pope evangelizes by sharing the Christian message via Twitter ... especially if we re-tweet it as far and as wide as we can.

The Poetic Pope

11-1-13

As we celebrate All Saints day, we also look ahead to the canonization of two new saints on April 27, 2014: John Paul II and John XXIII. Concerning the former, John Paul II's vast legacy of writings continues to be mined for the profundity of his wisdom and holiness. What is lesser known of his work, though, is the collection of poetic compositions he published, often under a pseudonym.

There, in his lyrical words, we see the true artist at work. As he wrote in *Gift and Mystery* (1996), "The word, before being pronounced on stage, lives in the story of man as a fundamental dimension of his spiritual experience. In the ultimate analysis, it leads back to the inscrutable mystery of God. Rediscovering the word by way of literary and linguistic studies cannot help but draw me near to the mystery of the Word, of that Word to which we refer every day in the prayer of the Angelus: 'And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us'."



But in that poetry we also see the saint (to-be) at work. As Antonio Spadaro points out in his guide to the pope's poetry, *Nella Melodia della Terra* (In the Melody of the Earth): "It has a 'mystagogical' value, that is, it guides the reader to have a real experience."



Karol Wojtyla writes about many real human experiences: creation, work, anguish, prayer, motherhood, and especially his Polish homeland. And he contemplates real religious experiences, too, from that of Mary's Magnificat, to Simeon of Cyrene and Veronica along the way of the cross, to what it's like to sit before Michelangelo's "Last Judgment" in the Sistene Chapel during the election of a pope. Common to all these reference points is their power to disclose fundamental truths about the aspirations of human life. As the poet-pope proclaims, "man bears in himself the secret structure of the world."

For example, John Paul II sees in "the crowd that navigates behind the neon shadow" modern-day examples of the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4). So, too, in commenting on Jacob's wrestling with the angel at the river Jabok (Genesis 32), he writes of how "man suffers above all from the lack of a vision" of what really counts in life.

The former poem, says Fr. Spadaro, points to a secret of the heart, the mystery of our lot in life that only contact with the Christ reveals. The latter, he says, uncovers an anxiety about human existence that only the divine *Someone* (the title of the poem) can penetrate. In both we see that "Human restlessness cannot find any other place of repose than in marvels."

According to Spadaro, the metaphorical architecture of Wojtyla's poetry shows the interconnection between restlessness and peace that operates in our conscience. There, says Wojtyla himself, man "continues to search. But for what? Perhaps I have searched enough. I searched among many truths. However, these things can only mature in this way. Philosophy, art, etc. The truth is what finally floats to the top as oil in water. In this way life reveals itself to us ... little by little, in parts, but continually."

Thankfully, we will soon celebrate again the life of one who revealed so much to the world. His gifted way of contemplating the key truths of human existence shows us that Karol Wojtyla / John Paul II had a penetratingly poetic frame of mind, one from which can still learn, if we but enter into the melody of life.

From a spiritual to a virtual place ... and back

11-8-13

The campus is picturesque, the open space rather serene, the autumnal beauties quite evident. At the crossroads to the metropolitan mainline, Overbrook stands as a 75-acre oasis ... an ideal location in which to undertake significant spiritual formation.

Since 1838, Saint Charles Borromeo Seminary has served as a place to train future priests for the Church. Nearly 175 years later, it's still a peaceful spot, even with the expansion of the city surrounding it. But it's no longer just a holy habitat. With the rapid development and technological advances that mark today's world of new media, the spiritual place is also becoming a virtual place.

That transposition is evident with the launch this week of the seminary's new website (www.scs.edu). This digital domain now welcomes virtual visitors to a place that is both intellectual and spiritual, a space for learning that encompasses the mind and the soul.

There's a practical dimension to developing a website that is indispensable in our world. While redesigning a site entails countless hours of tedious work, and keeping it up-to-date even more staff time, this labor is no longer a luxury since life today is lived more and more online.



As a marketing and communications tool, a website provides for those seeking to know more. Through its creatively-designed layout, its inclusion of images, and its navigability, the website appeals to visitors to “come and see” without needing to move beyond a computer screen. Its content – whether in print or audio-visual format – serves as both a public relations instrument and as a repository of knowledge and information. The website opens the door of what may seem like a place of seclusion to any and all who wish to enter through its portals.

But beyond the practical and, by contemporary standards, necessary aspects of hosting a website, adoption of this digital medium also has a significant cultural dimension. It affects how we communicate. We think in bullet points more than paragraphs. We learn more through links than through speeches. We understand by way of seeing images more so than by reading texts. Nowadays, to click is to connect.

In this way, the digital domain becomes even more so [the place of encounter](#). Obviously different from actually setting foot on the campus, a virtual visit still makes it possible to connect with those who reside there. From photo tours to personal testimonials, the well-constructed cyber-place can make the reality come to life. And though there may not be a transmission of actual grace through the fiber-optic lines (since the sacramental always involves the physical), nevertheless beauty can be revealed and rediscovered online. For the contemporary transmission of the faith, this medium amplifies the Church's evangelizing mission beyond the borders of the property.

As such, the seminary's new website is far more than a technological tool. It creates an ambience that says “welcome to our world.” What you discover there, one hopes, is an environment that responds to the fundamentally human desire for interacting with others, including the human-divine relationship. When it does that, the virtual place, in turn, becomes a spiritual one.

photos by David Anthony

There are no sacraments online. (11-15-13)

At Overbrook we recently celebrated the traditional [Forty Hours](#) and the solemn patronal feast of the seminary – four days of ceremonies replete with bells ‘n smells and even a candlelight procession! I was intrigued, then, when I saw the new edition of *Worship*, which included an [article](#) about “Vatican II’s Liturgical Vision in a Digital World” that ponders the possibility of active participation in cyberspace.



The author admits valid presuppositions with respect to both the divine and the human. On the one hand, “God can mediate God’s saving grace both online and offline,” and on the other, “being ‘online’ has become part of [people’s] daily life and social existence.” She also proffers interesting reflections about liturgy no longer being “place-based” when it is online and how the mediation of sacramental grace might change when it is done digitally. But in-between, the analysis is flawed, and the fault line runs right through the notion of *participatio actuosa* which lures the reader into pondering the possibility of an online sacramental experience.

In terms of participation, it’s true that the physical co-presence of worshippers does not, of itself, guarantee community. It’s likewise evident that the interactivity of social media can build an online community. But between these affirmations one cannot claim that a properly “liturgical” community could result from numerous people interfacing with a computer. A liturgical community is of a specific kind, the kind that evolves in and through active participation in an actual liturgical event.

Here “active” and “actual” are not merely the opposites of “passive.” The participation Vatican II calls for entails more than merely doing something (like the actions one takes to be online). It seeks the engagement of the whole person: one’s intention, one’s attention, and one’s real interaction with the event that is taking place again in and through the liturgical celebration. And that with which one interacts is not simply a computer. Rather, interaction is what happens “between” people; liturgically, in the course of re-enacting a salvific event, it leads to an acting between those people (individually and collectively) and God.

And while it’s true that some materiality is involved even in online worship, that materiality is, by definition, more virtual than actual. Flickering candles on iPads may have been a fitting tribute to the death of Steve Jobs, but those candles are depictions, not reality. The screen shot of a monstrance may evoke prayerful adoration of the Eucharist, but it’s still just an image, not the actual sacrament. And no matter how many times your avatar takes communion at [the church of St. Pixels](#), it’s the computer-generated figure, not you, who “receives” what is imaginatively given.

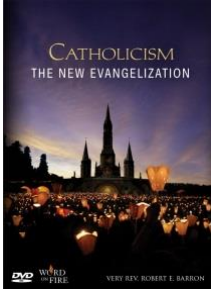


Yes, online worship makes for “spiritual self-expression ... [that] becomes more accessible and visible to the wider culture” (citing Heidi Campbell). But that’s a problem, not a plus. Worship is not, primarily, about the self, but instead about the God whose salvation is re-presented to me and which I can only humbly and graciously accept. Admittedly, not all persons participate as actively as they could in this divine-human drama. But in online worship, that kind of full and active participation is not even possible; as the Catholic Church affirms, in its 2002 [document on the internet](#), “there are no sacraments online.”

Why? Because sacraments are experiential, and for experience to be fully human it needs to engage the whole human person. Technological innovations make possible the viewing and hearing of religious rituals; inasmuch as life online aids those who cannot otherwise be personally present, the ever-improving ways of rendering liturgy in cyberspace can be helpful. But without the presence (not merely interface) of an actual person actively engaged with his/her bodily being (not just with two of the five senses), something significant is missing – the “me” to whom the divine comes, calls, embraces, forgives, and unites.

Catholicism for the masses

11-22-13



Finally I had the chance to view the latest installment of the [Catholicism documentaries](#), this one on the New Evangelization. As with the groundbreaking original series, this segment presents the Catholic faith through strikingly beautiful videography coupled with the insightful analysis and engaging thought of Fr. Robert Barron. He and his multi-media team at [Word on Fire](#) are amazingly gifted, and their talents are and will be a boon for the Church.

In this latest episode, what struck me most was the people. Contrasted with majority of those who subscribe to what Fr. Barron's calls "the 'whatever' culture," the persons shown and heard from in the video display an energy and enthusiasm for the faith that is contagious. As one worker in this virtual vineyard commented about spreading the Gospel via new media, "we're not selling screwdrivers here." His point, of course, was not to demean hardware suppliers! Rather, he recognizes, as we all should, the incredible power and potential of social communications as a means to evangelize the world.

What the new media makes possible is outreach on a global scale. (Consider, for example, that there are now 1.2 billion people using Facebook!) And from that outreach to others, the vast majority of whom rarely, if ever, set foot in a church, a dialogue about faith and its import for human existence can be initiated. Today, the ["courtyard of the Gentiles"](#) has gone from a particular place in the Temple to the virtual space that knows no geographic bounds.



But how many of us take advantage of this medium to spread the message? Church groups, organizations, movements, not to mention every parish in every diocese – all should undertake this media examination of conscience. It is not a question of *whether* to be online; today we must ask *how* we can integrate the faith with the digital culture in which the world now lives and communicates. (For a local example, see this [CatholicPhilly story](#).) No longer is social media simply a mechanism or instrument; it has become the very fabric (a "web") of everyday life. As such, we all have the duty and responsibility to "go out to all the (digital) world and tell the Good News."



Fortunately, several ecclesial efforts are gaining ground in this new realm of evangelization. For example, the Vatican offers a multi-faceted [news aggregator](#) and the [Pope's online app](#). Anyone can watch international Catholic television (like [Salt & Light TV](#)) or join virtual Catholic communities (such as [iCatholic.com](#)). And the number of blogs and vlogs and other Catholic internet sites continues to expand.

But, as the Catholicism documentary vividly shows, the medium is not the message – people are! And this includes, especially, those people who will be the next generation of leaders in the Church. Although it is not currently part of the "Program of Priestly Formation," seminaries nowadays should include education in the technology and the theology of social communications. Given the numerous areas of study already required, this will no doubt prove challenging. But without it, the work of evangelization will be made more difficult because priests and deacons and lay ministers will not be as well-equipped to meet people where they are – in the virtual but ever-present spaces that constitute our contemporary world.

Featured image from www.brandenvogt.com

An historic turning point for Church & Media (11-29-13)

Inter mirifica



In addition to the deaths of John F. Kennedy and C.S. Lewis, another 50th anniversary is now upon us – that of the Decree on the Media of Social Communications ([Inter Mirifica](#)), which was passed in the council assembly on November 25 (with a bit of [voting drama](#)!) and promulgated by Paul VI on December 4, 1963.

Looking back on the text from the vantage point of 2013, it's clearly not in sync with the current state of affairs in digital media. The same could be said of the decree's companion documents: *Communio et Progressio* (1971) and *Aetatis Novae* (1992). It also applies to John Paul II's apostolic letter "The Rapid Development" (2005). Indeed, the development in media communications has been far more rapid than anyone could have imagined; in just two decades Internet usage, social networking, and mobile connectivity have combined to transform the universe of communications into an entirely [new social operating system](#).

Nevertheless, *Inter Mirifica* remains a 50 year-old sign that the Church was reading and willing to enter into this new realm. The decree itself marks the first time an ecumenical council dealt specifically with media. It's also the only document of

Vatican II that led to an annual celebration – World Communications Day, which takes place on the Sunday before Pentecost and is accompanied by a [papal message](#) on some contemporary concern in the field. And its legacy continues through the prolific work of the [Pontifical Council for Social Communications](#).



Inter Mirifica proclaims the “inherent right of the Church ... to employ any of these media” in mission of proclaiming the faith. The decree rightly emphasizes the moral responsibility of all those engaged with the media, including producers and consumers, governments, and even the Church itself. And it strongly encourages the establishment of Catholic press and media offices or organizations, and calls for the proper training of all those involved in communicating via new media inventions.

Owing to its historical provenance, *Inter Mirifica* is limited in its perspective. In addition to its heavy emphasis on “rights,” the decree envisions communications as a unidirectional enterprise (i.e., producers proclaim, consumers receive), in contrast with what is now peer-to-peer and networked communications. The decree also reckons with media only as a means or mechanism, an instrumentalist approach that has now been surpassed by the view that digital media is the environment in which we live.

Still, *Inter Mirifica* marks a significant turning point in the Church's engagement with the modern world. Its insights have borne fruit in the continuity of papal teaching about the importance and influence of social communications in the life of the Church. John Paul II recognized the cultural implications of the media as “first *areopagus* of the modern age.” Benedict XVI insisted on the need for theological reflection on the media's methods and impact. And now Pope Francis' [use of Vatican media](#) has made him the [most influential “voice” in the Twittersphere](#) and as the [most prominent name on the Internet](#)!

It all began 50 years ago with Vatican II's prescient recognition of the “wonderful technological discoveries” in social communications.

Joy to the World (12-6-13)

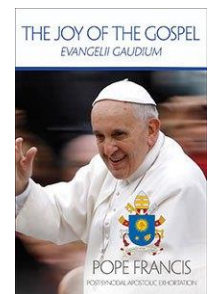
[Kathryn Jean Lopez](#) recently hit upon an essential truth underlying the world's continuing fascination with Pope Francis: "People see a man of joy. And they want something of it, they want to follow." A man of joy ... it's evident in almost every photograph! But his is not merely an optimistic demeanor. Nor is it a calculated display put on for strategic purposes.



No, what the world is witnessing is the real joy of a missionary disciple. His engaging, at times playful, interaction with people expresses a profound faith conviction, namely, that salvation has been wrought for us in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The appropriation of that truth is the source of his joy, and of the peace that characterizes this time of year. As he made clear in one of his (delightful) [daily homilies](#): "this joy is true peace," not something quietly stoic or tranquilly blasé; no, he says, "Christian peace is a joyful peace, because our Lord is joyful."

Real joy, which comes from experiencing the mercy of God, cannot ever be taken away, no matter what happens to us or around us. That's the joy people want and need. That's a contagious joy that draws record numbers of people to look upon and listen to this pope.

Joy is Pope Francis' message, one he shares endearingly in person and now enduringly in words. His first solo document – [Evangelii gaudium](#) – focuses on it, pleads for more of it, and exhorts us all to share it because "The joy of the Gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus" (no 1.). Likened to another ["I Have a Dream" speech](#), the papal text offers inspirational reading in this Christmas season, and [not just for Catholics](#). It discloses the key not only to the pope's personality, but also to the work of evangelization, a task heretofore impeded and still threatened by a lack of joy in the Church and in the world.



Whatever be the ["bold new vision"](#) of this pontificate, or the theological tensions inherent in the text, the core of Pope Francis' message, to the Church and through it to the world, can be encapsulated in one word: SMILE! But how many times, instead, have we encountered a religious educator, deacon, or priest with a "bad face"?! Serious need not mean somber; the latter look is hardly engaging. Formal does not mean dour; the latter sound can be downright depressing.

In his exhortation, the pope describes this all-too-common look and sound with characteristic wit: "There are Christians whose lives seem like Lent without Easter" (no. 6). "An evangelizer must never look like someone who has just come back from a funeral" (no. 10.) From "the gray pragmatism of the daily life of the Church" comes a "tomb psychology" that "slowly transforms Christians into mummies in a museum" (no. 83). The lack of joy leads to a pessimistic attitude, which reveals itself in the look of "sourpusses" (no. 85).

Put simply, Church personnel who don't smile while they work will be hard-pressed to convey "good news." Without showing an appreciation for the beauty of the faith, they cannot "radiate light and communicate life" as they are called to do (no. 83). In the next post, we'll examine the pope's timely instruction on how all of us can have the joy we desire, and why it's essential to the message we believe and proclaim.

A Sermon in a Smile (12-13-13)



Yes, it's another Friday the 13th. The day/date conjures up an ominous image for those who entertain such superstitions. Yet even for realists times can be dark. This includes Christians as they confront the tensions and confess the sins of life in today's world.

Pope Francis is both a realist and a Christian! But his is not an ominous view of things. In fact, his recent exhortation on ["The Joy of the Gospel"](#) emphasizes just the opposite.

The realist in him acknowledges how "the hearts of many people are gripped by fear and desperation" such that their "joy of living frequently fades" (no. 52). He knows that the unhappiness of some who do the Lord's work leads to a stifling of the Church's joyful mission (no. 79). He confesses that even some can be paralyzed by acedia and view "the task of evangelization (as) a dangerous poison rather than a joyful response to God's love which summons us to mission and makes us fulfilled and productive" (no. 81).

Put simply, the temptation for all Christians these days is to look like "sourpusses" (no. 85). Sadly, that [lack of a smile](#) comes with and from preaching. Holding his tongue only slightly in cheek, the pope acknowledges that "both they (the faithful) and their ordained ministers suffer because of homilies: the laity from having to listen to them and the clergy from having to preach them!" (no. 135.)

Fortunately, the Christian in him recognizes the joy of the Gospel despite the tediousness of its proclaimers. Thus, he offers us a different vision. Though not a step-by-step guide, the papal exhortation indicates some key ingredients to a more joyful life ... and thus a more joyous proclamation.



Even when "God's voice is no longer heard, the quiet joy of his love is no longer felt, and the desire to do good fades" (no. 2), the Christian can know joy because of the gift of salvation. It begins on the inside, with an interior life of prayer that transcends personal interests and concerns. It proceeds by way of "grateful remembrance" (no. 13), first and foremost for that "great stream of joy" (no. 5) proclaimed in the Gospels, into which we can always enter. It also remembers and celebrates all those "throughout history who were filled with joy, unflagging courage and zeal in proclaiming the Gospel" (no. 263). In sum, the enduring Word of God – narrated in the biblical texts, lived in saintly lives, and mercifully experienced in the sacraments – remains a constant source of the joy all people want and need.

Perhaps this is why the pope dedicates such an extensive portion of his exhortation specifically to those who preach the Word (nos. 135-159). Without saying so explicitly, he tells them quite frankly and in pointed prose that they should give far greater priority to preparing and delivering their homilies. In terms of content, preachers should link what they say to real-life situations through images that appeal more to people's hearts than to their heads. In terms of form, homilies should be marked by simplicity, positivity, and brevity! Done well, a homily makes abundantly clear that the Lord, not the preacher, is the center of attention and that there is truly *Good News* to share.

If preachers would take to heart the papal exhortation, and lead listeners to realize that "With Christ joy is constantly born anew" (no. 1), perhaps then we will see more people in Church and more smiles on their faces ... no matter what the day and date.

Featured image from [hauntingreview.com](#)

‘Tis the season for song (12-20-13)



Christmas is almost here, time to exchange gifts and glad tidings, all in celebration of a child's birth. What child is this who grabs the world's attention once again? The news of his unexpected birth comes not by way of email or instant messaging, no press conference or television coverage, not even a blog. No, the ethereal event that silent night was harkened by the song of angels heard on high.

Upon that midnight clear, the history of the world changed forever. It happened once in royal David's city, where political conflict still bears witness to the ineptitude with which we humans fail to get along. It happens again with a promise for those who see and believe.

Not everywhere will this Christmas be white with snow, but every one of us shares the wish of being blanketed by that color's climate of peace. To fulfill this global dream, we must wander again to the scene of that first Noël and wonder anew about what it portends for us today. For the joy this day gives to the world will become a lasting reality only when we appreciate the primacy of the person and the fullness of humanity that this birth reveals.

The scene was ordinary, yet stricken by poverty like so much of the world still. There were no red-nosed deer, only sheep and oxen and other animals. There the Creator came to dwell, one with the simplest of creatures. No high-tech medical marvels accompanied this birth. Human triumph would come not through the technological advances but in a babe lain in a manger and wrapped in swaddling clothes.

Yet this is not just any child. His birth is a mystery, one that reaches far beyond that little town of Bethlehem in years past. This is the nativity of God, the very One whom some scientists today consider a far-off fantasy, too distant from humanity to know as real. Yet in the event of that o so holy night, we celebrate the power of the divine Word still speaking to our world.

No wonder, then, that this birthday comes with carols. In contrast to the everydayness of political speeches or scientific formulas or economic strategies, this season is one of angelic song. Now ordinary speech gives way to the idiom of lyric, for "there is something new here that can scarcely be articulated, and the articulation must match the reality of the newness" (WALTER BRUEGGEMANN).

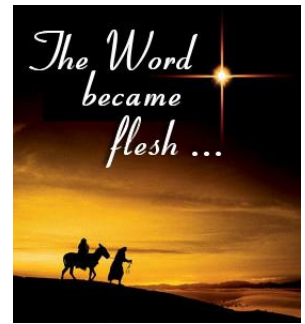
Christmas caroling reflects that newness. These seasonal sounds have a unique musical character that may be attributed to a chord pattern dating back as far as the thirteenth century. Later, in the nineteenth century, church services combined the singing of carols with biblical readings ("lessons") of the Nativity. Today, even outside of church, the lyrics remain so popular that they pass into the lexicon we adopt in this season, as readers might have detected in the fifteen allusions in this piece!



The music comes in many forms: choir voices in melodious union, bells rung in harmonious tones, even drums played by little boys. Whatever be the words we use or the tunes we hum, the sound of the season is first and foremost played in our hearts and souls. There, no matter what else is going on in the world, we can recognize the gift our world has been given. Doing so will make this a Merry Christmas.

And the word became digital (12-27-13)

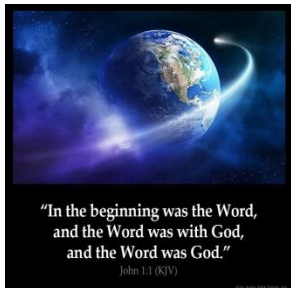
No, you won't find that line in the Gospel of John, whose feast the Church celebrates today. The thought lacks the personal profundity and divine mystery of the original: "And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). And surely the revised verse won't be seen on any big screen, as "John 3:16" used to be flaunted by fans on camera at football games.



We acclaim St. John the Evangelist for having written of the Word in many words, by authoring the fourth Gospel, three New Testament letters, and the Book of Revelation. In his writing, he brought the emerging Christian religion into direct contact with the heritage of Greek philosophy. The result: a new understanding of "logos" that lyrically links faith and reason.

Today, in a world where communication is more digital than philosophical, the Christian task remains the same: to spread the word so as to encounter the Word. The poetic splendor of John's prologue won't fit the character limit of Twitter. And, despite the rich artistic legacy focusing on Mary and the Incarnation, there are no images of the event to pin or links to post.

Still, as Pope Francis recently told the plenary assembly of the Pontifical Council for the Laity, "Among the possibilities offered by digital communications, the most important concerns the announcement of the Gospel." For this pope, whose own words have been tweeted more than 220 times (so far!), we can discover in digital media "precious opportunities to lead people to the luminous face of the Lord."



Just as that heavenly light took on the real flesh and baby face of Jesus, so too are real men and women of today the focus of the Church's use of social communications. As the pope reminds us, in the digital environment in which we now live, "technology is not sufficient." The Gospel announcement – the Good News that John proclaims – "requires authentic and direct human relationships" that will "flow into a personal encounter with the Lord" – as the beloved disciple knew so well.

Encounters today tend to be scheduled on Outlook, or coordinated through a Facebook event, or initiated by checking in on Foursquare. But the eternal Word needs no calendar. The event of divine grace is ever happening. And to encounter God's presence, all we need do is "check in" on the inside, in our heart and soul, to be cognizant of our deepest longings and the enlivening presence of the Word who calls us into being and toward eternal communion.

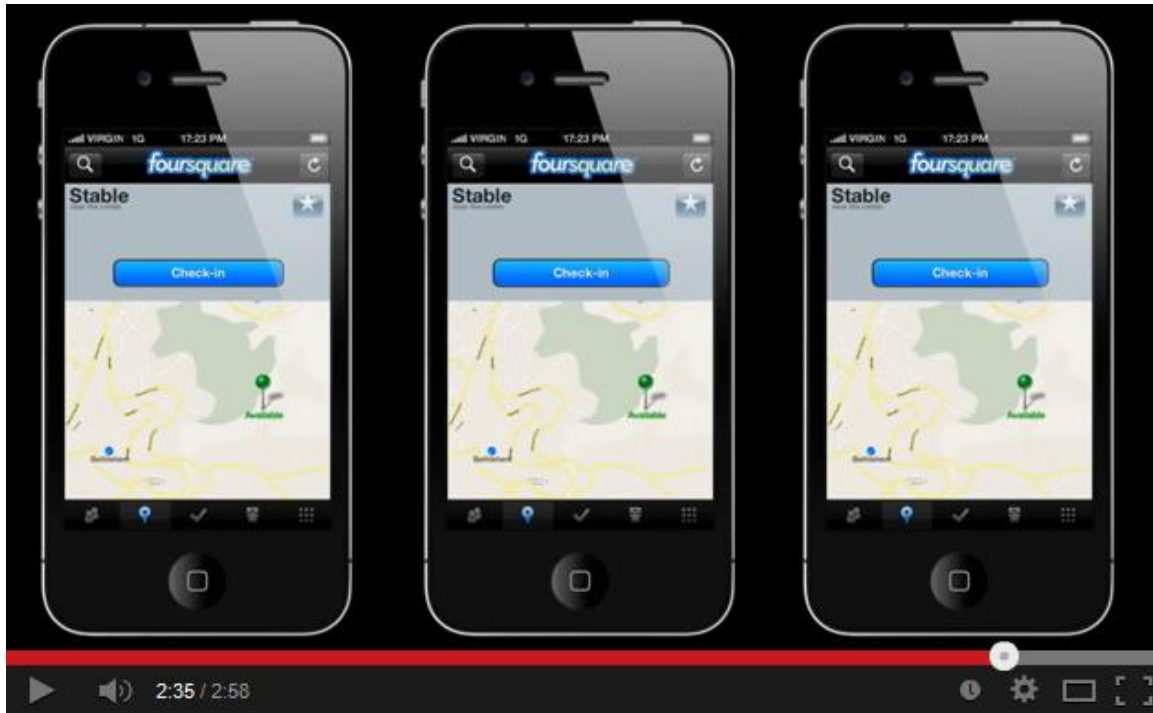
For this divine-humane encounter, the biblical writing of St. John remains a rich literary and theological source. Like it, follow it, post it – by whatever virtual means, the Good News beckons to be heard.

But to keep it real, go back and read John's Gospel from beginning to end. There you will come to know that "in the beginning was the Word" and "through believing you may have life in his name."

Mobile Wisdom (1-3-14)

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

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



THE DIGITAL STORY OF THE NATIVITY

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

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

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

Watch it and enjoy. Share it and rejoice.

Featured image “snipped” from [YouTube.com](#) / 214 words

Am I my brother's keeper online? (1-10-14)

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

Regarding ourselves, authenticity is key. Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI describes this as “witness(ing) consistently, in one's own digital profile and in the way one communicates choices, preferences and judgements that are fully consistent with the Gospel, even when it is not spoken of specifically” ([Message for World Communications Day 2011](#)). The posts and pins and pokes all say something about ourselves!

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

CyberTheology comes to Overbrook (1-17-14)

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



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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Featured image from the Catholic Communications Campaign, www.usccb.com / 557 words

Normal holiness (1-24-14)

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

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



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

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

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

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

But if we learn to direct our intention, in whatever we do, to the fulfillment of God’s will, then our actions can never fail, no matter what the results may be. If our aim is to please God, then we do! And every day we start all over again, knowing that we are one day closer to our eternal salvation.

Peter's stone is not rolling away (1-31-14)

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

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



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

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



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

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

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

Toward a new decade of digital “neighbors”

(2-7-14)

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

Can journalists be “good Samaritans”?

(2-14-14)

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

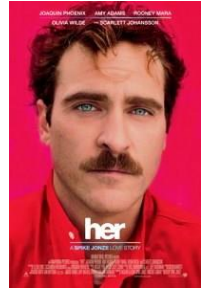
Attentiveness to readers as “neighbors” – now there’s a worthy goal for editors and reporters, for producers and broadcasters. It may be a goal difficult for many to reach, given the biases evidenced by some secular media outlets. Still, it is possible. And given the esteem with which the world speaks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

Featured image from <http://ec.europa.eu/digital-agenda/en/european-journalism-study>

From *HER* with love ... NOT!

(2-21-14)

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



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

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

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



And there’s the rub. When narcissism takes a cultural foothold, and individual desires trump commonly shared reason, society devolves into thinking that whatever one considers to be a humanly fulfilling relationship really is so. But if an operating system replaces a human being as a suitable partner for life – when “it” becomes “her” – our consciousness is confused, not advanced. That so many in society are

unable or unwilling to think this through, and all-too-willing to give it a try, suggests a frightening prospect for our collective future.

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

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

Social media can sully our time in the sun! (2-28-14)

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Francescomania! (3-7-14)



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

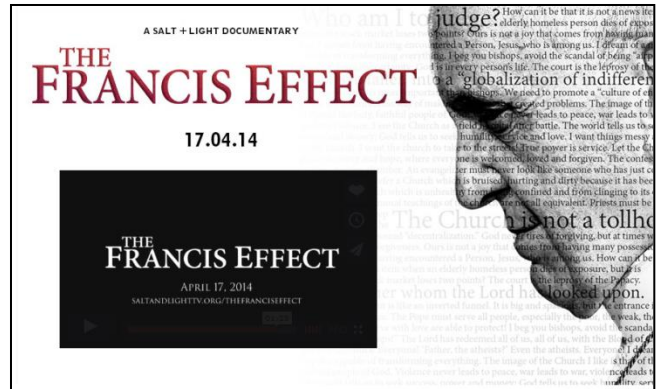
But, beyond the “coverpope” image generated by newspapers and magazines the world over, we would do well to view Pope Francis in light of Marshall McLuhan’s famous dictum: [“the medium is the message.”](#)

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

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

Looking Back, Looking Ahead: The One Year Anniversary of the Election of Pope Francis (3-14-14)

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

Featured image from <http://saltandlighttv.org/thefranciseffect/>

“Time is God’s messenger”

(3-21-14)



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



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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

The image of the Cross says it all.

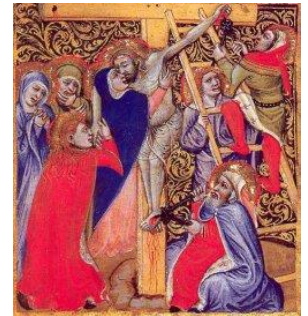
(3-28-14)



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

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

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



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

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

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



Communicating Good News to the ends of the earth (4-4-14)

This week marks fifty years since the foundation of the [Pontifical Council for Social Communications](#).

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

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



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



As with communications itself, the Council's work is never-ending! In addition to proposing themes for World Communications Day, conducting educational congresses about the latest research, and collaborating with professional associations around the world, the Council also operates a Catholic

multimedia online directory (www.intermirifica.net) that provides a platform for networking and communicating among those working on Catholic media projects across the globe. And the Council's current leadership – particularly Archbishop Claudio Maria Celli (President) and Monsignor Paul Tighe (Secretary) – regularly take to the physical and digital highways to assist with Catholic communications around the world.

Hopefully, the Council's personnel will at least get a chance to raise a toast in honor of fifty years of faithful service to the challenging task of bringing the Good News to the ends of the earth. *Auguri!*

A Gospel giveaway (4-11-14)

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

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



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

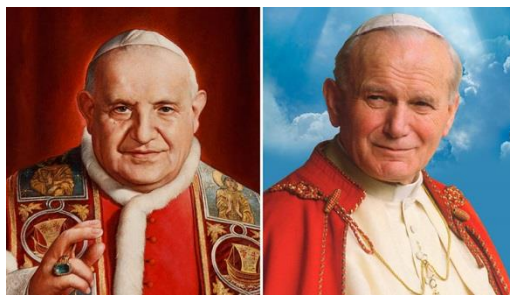


Thanks to Bible apps, no one needs extra pocket space to keep the Word close at hand. And this week, the most popular Bible app underwent its biggest update ever. Already found on more than 130 million devices worldwide, the features of [Bible App 5](#) allow users to connect with the Word, study it,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

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

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

Featured image from the New York Daily News at nydn.us/1k3yLyM



Communicating a festival of holiness (4-25-14)

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

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

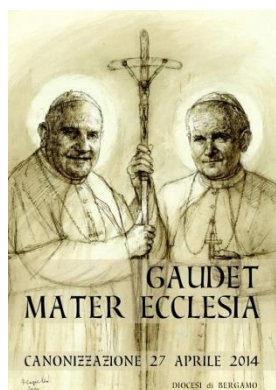
Thanks to the availability of nine satellites, the Vatican Television Center (CTV) will livestream the celebrations in high definition. In addition, the 3D television broadcast will be screened in more than 600 movie theaters worldwide.

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



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

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



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

How fitting that the week-long festival of holiness honoring these two saints will be shared with all the world by the very means of communication they championed.

The Church Alive in the World

(5-2-14)



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

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

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

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

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



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

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

Featured image from [news.va](#)

Look up ... even higher! (5-9-14)



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

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

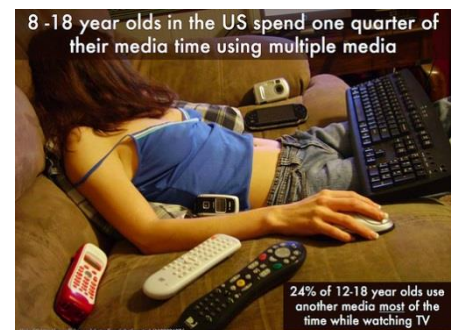
The film rightly bemoans our cultural self-absorption with communications technology when it comes at the expense of fleeting moments of time that call for much more inter-personal attention. The concluding couplet calls for an obvious, though seemingly novel, action:

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

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

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

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



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

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

Featured image snipped from [www.youtube.com](#)... 495 words

Fashionable Cyborgs?

(5-16-14)

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



Who knew?!



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

These and other augmented experiences of daily life are the subject of [Intel's "Make It Wearable" Challenge](#), which seeks new ways to integrate the digital and physical worlds. Creative imagination will, no doubt, lead to fascinating technological projects.



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

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

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

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

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

Into a sacred void (5-30-14)

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

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



If only the Cenacle had wifi!

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

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

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

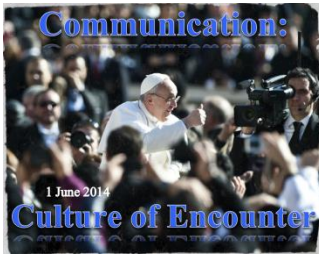


As [Pope Francis recently preached there](#), the Upper Room is the place that opened up new and defining experiences for the nascent Church. These “horizons” are triggered by the meaning of what took place there. In that room can be found many memories that serve as reminders of service and sacrifice,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

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

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

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



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.

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