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## **“A View from the Chair”**



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**2014-2015**

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## World Cup and World Media (7-11-14)

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



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



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

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

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



## The Soul's Eye (7-25-14)

Two recent news items point to interesting links between the digital and the human.

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



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



(click on the image to see MindRDR at work)

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

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

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



## Evangelizing Online (8-1-14)

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

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



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



(click on the image to see a video promotion)

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



(click on the image to go to the web site and register)

featured image from [www.digitalchurchconference.com](http://www.digitalchurchconference.com)... 251 words



# Cellular R-E-S-P-E-C-T (8-8-14)

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



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



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

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

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



*featured image from [jfbelisle.com](#)... 312 words*



## Trending Death (8-15-14)

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

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

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

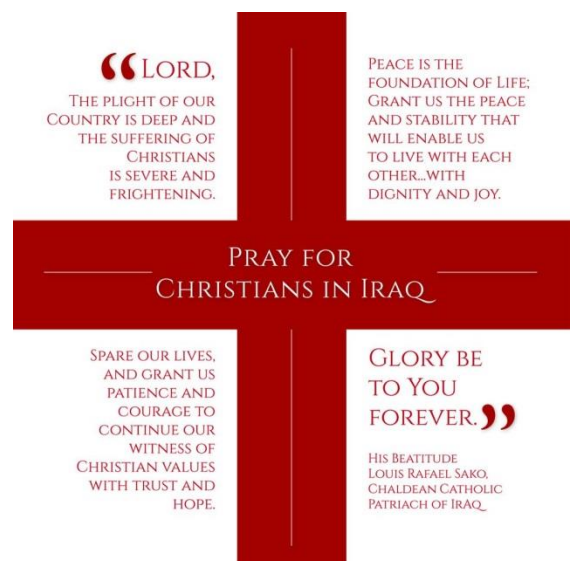
- the public massacre of people solely because they are Christians
- the forced abductions and expulsions of tens of thousands of people
- the gleeful destruction of worship sites, religious symbols, and priceless cultural artifacts.

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

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

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

On this solemnity of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, she who brought to life the Redeemer of humanity, [#prayforpeace](#) that only God can give.



# Walk on campus at your own risk!

## (8-29-14)

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

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

*(image from pba.edu)*



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



*(image from peopleconnectpeople.com)*

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

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

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

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

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





## Sound and Space (9-5-14)

Two things I've noticed since returning to a university campus: the ubiquitous digital technology, and how LOUD students can be! About the first, [see last week's blog](#). Now to the second ...

The onslaught of 18- to 22-year olds that attends the opening of an academic year brings with it a cacophonous clamor. The optimist in me attributes that to the youthful exuberance of an overjoyed throng eager to begin again the shared pursuit of truth. (Here insert tongue in cheek!) The realist in me ponders whether it may have something to do with the spaces they occupy? On the one hand, the vastness of a dining hall in which a thousand voices speak at once quite naturally raises the decibel level. On the other hand, the close-knit quarters of a seminar room, in which students are crammed together at desks, leads to increasing chatter as friends from the previous year re-acquaint and recount their summer exploits.

Perhaps the two phenomena are connected. Does the increasing use of digital technology – either to plug-in to headphones or to text rather than talk – function as a way to avoid grappling with the ever-increasing volume of voices? Digging deeper, might the profusion of Ipods and keypads be a subconscious cry for young people to be heard in a more existential sense? Who knows?!

Beyond campus, there also seems to be an increasing level of sound in sacred spaces. For whatever reasons, churches have become louder ... and not just with the “joyful noise” of saying or singing the divine praises.



*(image from acoustiblok.com)*

The risk, of course, is that human-talk (that of the chatting kind) can get in the way of God-talk (that of the prayer kind). Without any disrespect intended, folks freely talk on cell phones in church, announcements to the contrary before Mass notwithstanding. With all due politeness intended, folks chat with each other after they enter church, perhaps not even realizing that this is what the foyer is for. (Note to ushers: that's why there is a second set of doors inside that should be kept closed, to keep the social conversations from intruding on the silence of the sacred conversations going on inside.) And sometimes, when the festivity of the occasion seems to call for it (like at a wedding), cheers and yelps and other forms of applause spontaneously break out, all but muting the solemnity of the sacrament being celebrated.

The joy of the Gospel is what we are called to share. So, exuberance is a good thing, even in religious contexts. Sociability is also valuable, especially for a worshipping community. But encountering the sacred requires that we cultivate a reverence for the Presence. The time to talk to/with God is increasingly rare in our fast-paced world. Let's give each other a chance to enjoy the silence for which the soul years.

*featured image from [iconfinder.com](#) ... 474 words*

## A Digital Cross (9-12-14)

The “crux” of the matter – play on words intended – is that the relationship between Church and the news media has often been a puzzling or difficult challenge. In an [insightful essay](#) twenty years ago, AVERY DULLES laid out a number of reasons why the contrast is inherent, based on the differing nature of the two enterprises.

The Church’s message concerns an eternal mystery, but the press seeks to investigate and expose daily realities. The Gospel message is traditional in that it exhibits permanent validity, but the press covers “news” or things novel. The Church strives for reconciliation and unity, but news happens via conflict. The Church opens people to spiritual graces, but the press concentrates on material happenings. The Church’s teachings, especially on moral matters, is complex and rife with distinctions, but the press needs to report things briefly and simply.

Despite these differing missions, both serve a mutual purpose: the betterment of human beings. Especially in today’s world of social communications, the “crux” of the Church-Media relationship is an essential feature of evangelization. If we, as Church, want to share the joyful message of the Gospel, the media is central to that task.

Now the “Crux” is a digital mechanism for the Church-Media connection. The Boston Globe has recently launched “Crux” as an [online venture](#):



CHURCH	FAITH	LIFE
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The driving force behind Crux is none other than JOHN ALLEN, JR. – the dean of the Vaticanistas as longtime correspondent for the *National Catholic Reporter* and frequent guest expert for any number of radio and television outlets.

[As Allen explains](#), the pragmatic dimension to this new site is the Globe’s effort to revitalize the newspaper through special-interest targets. But on the evangelical side, he hopes this news will reach various circles of readers (the casual Catholics as well as the professionals, non-Catholics and the “seekers” as well) and serve as a sort of “town square” for all things Catholic.

Of course, as a journalistic venture, the site will carry interest stories more than theological teachings. It will also present, as fairly as possible, both sides to the hot topics ... which both sides on the topic will benefit from hearing (as “dialogue” presupposes). As Allen the journalist rightly states: “we don’t carry water for anyone”!

With the still-engaging personality of Pope Francis, Crux will show, in Allen’s terms, that news about the Church today is no longer merely episodic, reporting on happenings every once in a while. Rather, today’s media recognizes that the Church is an “everyday story” – and keeping that story alive will be good for us all.

*A concluding note:* John Allen, Jr. will offer the second annual [John Cardinal Foley Lecture on Social Communications](#) at Saint Charles Borromeo Seminary on Monday, **January 26, 2015**.

## A mythical selfie (9-18-14)

Some great myths endure ... even in the digital age (or because of it). In what may be the first grand “selfie” in history (though the image came from a pool of water rather than an iPhone), Narcissus encounters his own face. But instead of posting or sharing it (which is hard to do in a social network of just one), Narcissus is doomed by it. Unable to connect with the one whose image he sees, without stirring the water and thus disturbing the view, Narcissus eventually dies, alone and sad.



In a self-deprecating [blog post last week](#), Tod Worner links this recurring truth about focusing on me, myself, and I with our ever-growing reliance on cell phones and social media. Based on his experience when his iPhone ran out of power, he says he has reached greater insight into the mythic claim of Narcissus’ mother, that “If ever he knows himself, he surely dies.” For Worner, this means that “If we know only ourselves, our interests, our priorities and we neglect our greater calling to God, to family, to life, perhaps in some small way, we surely die, too.”

Earlier, in a more extensive [essay on \*The American Reader\*](#), Rosa Inocencio Smith calls upon the great myth of Narcissus to explain the deluge of digital posts on social media. Likening the phenomenon to the same reality narrated in Dostoevsky’s *The Double*, Smith proffers the perspicacious claim that those made anxious by, or even obsessed with social media suffer from “paranoid narcissism.” On the one hand, we fear missing out, and so we have to “like” or post or push or share. On the other hand, we are captivated by things (comments, images, links) that may (or should) be exposed as being utterly insignificant.

These authors are on to something ... but it’s nothing new. Whether mediated by technology or expressed by self (I-) centered words or actions, narcissism is a danger to which we are all prone by the uniqueness of our identity. Today it may take the form of shutting oneself off to environmental sounds by plugging in the ear buds or using the camera-phone shutter to take one’s own picture (whether as a selfie or the now [more popular “usie”](#)). But in every age it reveals a self-centered focus whether consciously or not. The unintended, and quite ironic, consequence is that in our time of greater social media connectedness, we risk increasing our isolation.



The solution is not, as some would claim, to turn off the phones and abandon the social networks. After all, as Fr. Antonio Spadaro rightly pointed out last year to an assembly of the Pontifical Council for the Laity, “If we need to turn off the cellular in order to rediscover relationships, that does not mean that we are balanced but that we do not know how to live the challenges of our time.” (Note: his book on *Cybertheology: Thinking Christianity in the Era of the Internet* is [now available in English translation](#).)

The challenge of our time may well be how to foster face-to-face human interaction in a world of digital distraction. But overcoming the narcissism that today’s communications media inadvertently foster is a challenge as old as the human being.

It’s also the challenge inherent to being Christian – and heeding Jesus’ command, after having washed his disciples’ feet, to “do as I have done to you” (John 13:15) by considering and treating others as more important to me than I am to myself.



## Sharing Faith every minute of the day (9-26-14)

It's billed as a "worldwide event with local presence and global reach across five continents." With 1,000 events, led by 3,000 speakers in 11 cities around the world, the theme of [Social Media Week](#) is readily apparent: we're always on, always connected.

The celebratory week captures the reality that Archbishop Claudio Maria Celli described at a meeting of the Pontifical Council for the Laity last year. "With the advent of digital media, we have a new change of perspective," he said, "and the Magisterium speaks of inhabitants in this reality, for whom the environment is the Internet and the media can be considered today as connective tissue (Siemens, 2004), the nervous system of our culture by means of which we communicate, produce cultural contents, construct and express our identities, transmit values, (and) relate to each another."

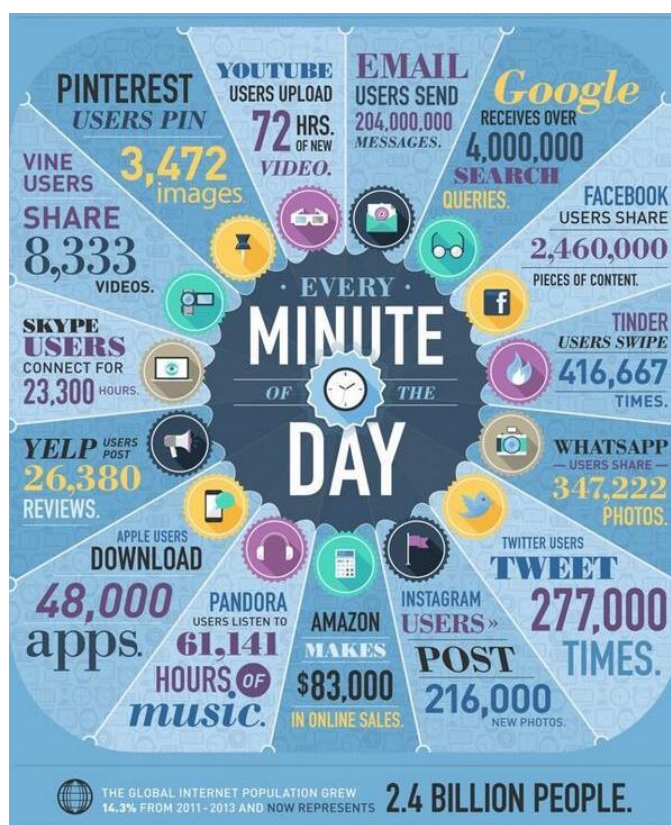
Like the body's nervous system, the data that traverses our various senses is in continual motion *every minute of every day*. Consider the staggering statistics in this recent [infographic](#).

Cyberspace is where the world now lives and moves and has its being, through the same Spirit that, as Pope Paul VI said fifty years ago, mutually interacts with technological progress. How important it is, then, for the Church to be present there, to be active there, to make the Gospel message known there.

The question to ask now is: how much of this minute-by-minute activity is infused with faith? How much of our own use of social media proclaims the Joy of the Gospel?

Being who we are as believers and being that well on social media doesn't mean that we have to flood the digital airwaves with religious images and sayings and references. It does mean that we should be authentic digital disciples in every facet of our social communications. As Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI wrote in his [2011 message for World Communications Day](#), our role in a world where data never sleeps is "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 judgements that are fully consistent with the Gospel, even when it is not spoken of specifically."

*If you want to learn how to do this, join us for a [Digital Church Conference](#) on October 18<sup>th</sup>!*





## Angels to the aid of Family (10-3-14)



As is tradition, the theme for World Communications Day was made known on the feast of the archangels (September 29). With the mighty ministrations of heavenly messengers, the theme appears to have a celestial character while it focuses on a profound human reality.

Today, that theme – “**Communicating the Family: A Privileged Place of Encounter with the Gift of Love**” – stands at the forefront of the Church’s work. Concern for marriage and family life is the subject of the [pontifical message](#) (to be published on January 24, 2015), the focus of a [worldwide meeting](#) (to be celebrated in Philadelphia on September 22-27, 2015), and the pastoral topic of two [Synods of Bishops](#), the first of which begins in Rome this weekend. How might the archangels play a role in these earthly endeavors?



MICHAEL is the warrior, known for his victory in the apocalyptic battle between good and evil. It may not be a sign of the end times, but the status of marriage and the family today certainly has epochal dimensions. In a vocation that calls forth [lifelong commitment](#) and an institution that forms the [foundation of society](#), an angelic power with the name “who is like God” can assist in the current struggles. With [clashing ecclesial positions](#) described as “[gospel](#)” or “[hope](#)” or “[truth](#)” making news, and scholarly arguments being published in [consideration](#) or [assessment](#) of the issues, the dialogue is heating up. It stands in need of divine inspiration that we might get it right – not as a matter of institutional force or public preference, but in terms of a right understanding of *God’s* will.



GABRIEL is the bearer of Good News, known especially for the Annunciation to Mary about the conception and birth of Jesus. Whatever the disputes about it, marriage remains good news for all. Pope Francis signaled this in [remarks to the Cardinals](#): “We are called to acknowledge how beautiful, true, and good it is to start a family, to be a family today; and how indispensable the family is for the life of the world and for the future of humanity.” The [catechesis](#) for the World Meeting 2015 proclaims it: “Love is our mission, and it is by loving God and one another that we will be fully alive” (Archbishop Chaput). Divine inspiration from the angel named “God is my strength” will help to keep the proper perspective on announcing the *good* that marriage is and family does.



RAPHAEL is the guide, known for aiding and accompanying Tobit. On the journey that is marriage, and in our thinking about marriage, the challenges are growing. Poverty and welfare, violence and abuse, lower birth rates, higher divorce rates ... these and other troubles abound. Legislative definitions and judicial decisions raise fundamental questions about the future. Now as always, marriage and family life stand in need of compassionate care and of faithful companionship along the way. From an angel whose name recalls how “God heals,” we move forward in hope. And to accompany this work, we should *pray*, as Pope Francis [bids us](#):

*Jesus, Mary and Joseph, in you we contemplate the splendour of true love, to you we turn with trust.*

*Holy Family of Nazareth, grant that our families too may be places of communion and prayer, authentic schools of the Gospel and small domestic Churches.*

*Holy Family of Nazareth, may families never again experience violence, rejection and division: may all who have been hurt or scandalized find ready comfort and healing.*

*Holy Family of Nazareth, may the approaching Synod of Bishops make us once more mindful of the sacredness and inviolability of the family, and its beauty in God’s plan.*

*Jesus, Mary and Joseph, graciously hear our prayer.*



## Yik Yak Yuck (10-10-14)



Another social media app is making big news (thanks to social media!). The headlines are haunting, but in the often unthinking world of social communications, lots of news means lots of interest.

[Yik Yak](#) – an [outrageously popular](#) messaging app that aims “to create a feed of what people are saying, thinking and doing around you” – purports to be an anonymous means to chat with people in close proximity to a college or university campus. Anonymity baits the hook. Popularity casts the line. Dehumanization becomes the sinker.

The fishing idiom is not far off. College students are easily drawn to the prospect of anonymous postings by way of a “no sign in, no profile” medium. Young people seeking to find their voice become less reticent (and less prudent) when they think they can speak freely – and think that doing so means they can say whatever is on their minds (or, more likely, in their guts). What they don’t know, though they should, is that voice is always linked to a speaker. Anonymity may be desired, but digital forensics uncovers the illusion – as those students facing disciplinary action, and even arrest and prosecution, now know.

Popularity is another enticing prospect. Young people seek to be entertained. They revel in sharing sentiment, which Yik Yak facilitates through its voting messages up or down (making the posts move to the “hot” list or disappear). But popular is rarely purposeful. Too often, in fact, it’s scathingly de-personal. Venting may be vicarious, but vicious and violent voices are no less unacceptable. Free speech is never at liberty to harm.

Every form of discourse, even the digital kind, involves someone saying something to someone about something. When the saying hides or ignores the someones, danger abounds. When the something takes no account of the very real persons to whom or about whom it is said, communication lacks its social sense. As one [sociology professor rightly states the concern](#), “When you strip away that human contact, there is a tendency to stop thinking about the receiver of your message as another person with a life and feelings.”

The app is not at fault. It may facilitate the expression of thoughtlessness and even become a medium for meanness. But [the problem](#) with a “seething slime-pit” like Yik Yak will not be solved by administrative regulation or campus-wide constriction of these means of communication.

What we need, instead, is to expand the value of human encounter, even (or especially) when it takes place digitally. As Pope Francis notes in his [message for World Communications Day 2014](#), this means being more neighborly, being more engaged with others than with ourselves, being more concerned with humanity than with anonymity.

The young will always be restless ... and often reckless. Social communications can also be unsociable, as the Yik Yak phenomenon ably demonstrates. To counter this trend, our mission, and our message, must embody what Pope Francis reiterates, namely, that “communication is ultimately a human rather than technological achievement.”

*featured image from [www.facebook.com/yikyakapp](http://www.facebook.com/yikyakapp)*

## Media Mania about Marriage (10-17-14)



Pope Francis has gotten what he wanted! At the opening of the current Synod of Bishops, [he asked](#) that the participants speak with boldness (biblical *parrhesia*) and listen with humility. Now it seems everyone outside the Synod is speaking boldly, too.

The [summary report](#) (*relatio post disceptationem*) has evoked claims on the progressive left of a “seismic shift” in the Church and cries on the conservative right of a heretical schism in the making. Boldness makes for engaging headlines and generates extremist positions. But, as Archbishop Kurtz, the president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, [recently said](#) (more eloquently than this), everyone should chill out. We need also to heed the call to listen humbly.

Media mania has fueled the furor over the Synod’s report by drawing particular attention to one line in the document (#50) that asks “Are our communities capable of providing [a welcoming home], accepting and valuing [homosexual] orientation, without compromising Catholic doctrine on the family and matrimony?”

It’s a valid translation (contrary to [subsequent reports](#)), but it’s a two-part sentence. The first part is pastoral; the second, doctrinal. The two necessarily go together. Valuing presupposes some standard. The value of people – ALL people – is not bound to sexual orientation; rather, they (we) are children of God, possessing an inherent human dignity worthy of universal respect. The value of marriage is its transcendent vocation to life and love, which can only be integrated and fulfilled in the sacramental matrimony of man and woman.

So, [nothing has changed](#) in the realm of Church teaching. The Church has [not caved in](#) to the wishes of a secularized society. Nor is it suddenly adopting a new, [“gradualistic” moral strategy](#). Why, then, all the hullabaloo?

Some may ascribe it to the numerous protest groups clamoring on the outside. Others bemoan a lack of proper theological and canonical formation of speakers on the inside. But the bigger cause may simply be us – and the way we have come to think and speak (or not) in the age of digital media.

In a world of headlines and images, a world where communication is constricted by Twitter limitations or over-saturated by Facebook posts, meaning often comes without reading. But understanding gets short-circuited if positions depend only on headlines, or perspectives rely only on certain authors. Social communications today favors the rapid release and widespread sharing of information (a good thing). But complex issues require that we put greater intellectual effort into what we think we know.

There, too, lies another rub. We tend, naturally, to begin from our own point of view: right/left, liberal/conservative, subjective/objective, theological, juridical, ecumenical, etc. Sometimes that perspective prejudices the accounts of things, and we hear what we want rather than read what is actually written. Sometimes we also forget that we profess faith in the Holy Spirit to guide the work of the Church. Case in point: anyone who got past the startling sub-titles (e.g., “positive aspects of civil unions and cohabitation” or “welcoming homosexual persons”) and read the report to its very end would see clearly what this document

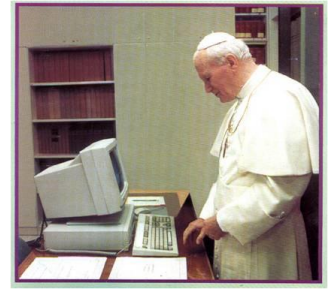
was intended to be. The conclusion (#58) baldly states: “The reflections put forward ... are intended to raise questions and indicate perspectives that will have to be matured and made clearer .... These are not decisions that have been made nor simply points of view.”

Media accounts will not, because they cannot, express or facilitate mature reflection. But they certainly have the world talking about marriage and the family – a conversation we should robustly join because it remains critical to our collective future.

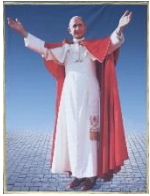
*featured image from **[www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va)***

## “Be not afraid” ... of media (10-24-14)

This week the Church celebrated for the first time the [liturgical memorial of Saint John Paul II](#). His signature saying – “Be not afraid!” – continues to reverberate in a world ever in need of faith and hope. The bold opening to his first cyclical remains the point of departure for that faith that inspires our hope: “The Redeemer of man, Jesus Christ, is the centre of the universe and of history” ([Redemptor hominis](#), no. 1).



This week, too, the Church celebrated the [beatification of Pope Paul VI](#). Despite the backlash at the time, his courageous proclamation about the conception of life in *Humanae Vitae* has proven a display of [farsighted wisdom](#). He championed the work of [evangelization](#) as “bringing the Good News into all the strata of humanity, and through its influence transforming humanity from within and making it new” ([Evangelii nuntiandi](#), no. 18).



What these two celebrations share is not simply the memory of two global church leaders, but their witness to faith. Each in his own pontifical way was convinced of the power of faith to affect the modern world. Each taught that faith through modern means of social communications.

Nevertheless, fear of the media continues to characterize Church communications. Does the secular media [“hijack” publications to serve their own agenda](#)? Unfortunately, yes. But it’s not their job to serve the Church’s mission; that’s the work of the faithful, who need to embrace their responsibility to understand the teaching of the faith from its authoritative sources rather than basing it on the [mania created by headlines](#). Does the secular media sow a [“confusing message”](#) among public ranks? Sadly, many do. It’s regrettable that people of faith have thus become [“strangers in a strange land.”](#) We need to combat devilish deception. We need to work harder (or better) at proclaiming the truth for the renewal of our land.

To do that, however, we need first to “be not afraid” of the media and be willing, instead, to [speak more publicly](#), even as digital disciples.

Catholic voices could avoid the mess the media may create by not publishing things or by not subjecting themselves to interviews. Some even call for a retreat from the use of electronic gadgets altogether, as if the means distracts from understanding or mars the message completely.

Avoidance of modernity, though a natural reaction, runs counter to the incarnational principle. The Word that dwelled among us transformed our existence by entering directly into it with saving grace. The Word that “fully reveals man to man himself and makes his supreme calling clear” (*Gaudium et Spes*, no. 22) did so with a bold message preached from the mountain tops. That message was revolutionary. That message was misunderstood and misrepresented. That message caused a furor that led to the public attempt to silence the Word.

But the Word prevails. The redemptive message – the Word spoken in the Gospels, embodied on the Cross, celebrated in sacraments, and proclaimed by the Church – is ours to share. Distrust of the media may come from a fear that what we believe is jeopardized by public opinion. To the contrary, as Saint John Paul II reminds us, the conviction of our faith provides the antidote to all fear. Modern media now have the world talking more about matters of faith and culture. Emboldened by belief, we need not be afraid to speak there.

## Digital Babies (10-31-14)

*“I see a future in which people will not use sex to reproduce. That’s a very dangerous thing to do.”*



No, this is not a Halloween prank, despite the date of publication. It’s a prophetic affirmation voiced publicly by Lee Silver, a Princeton University professor and molecular biologist, on last week’s edition of [60 Minutes](#).

In a segment entitled “Breeding out disease,” Silver shared his vision in an interview about the work of his new company, [GenePeeks](#). That work involves the creation of what he calls “digital babies.” In a computerized process, he obtains DNA and combines it with genetic information from prospective parents (not necessarily spouses) to make a thousand simulated “babies.” By analyzing their DNA, he can calculate the risk that the prospective real child will have of contracting one of 500 severe recessive pediatric disorders. This virtual testing aims to reduce drastically the possibility of genetic disease much like, in Silver’s comparison, antibiotics and vaccinations reduce the risk of infectious disease.



GenePeeks may have a beneficial aim, but its mission betrays a troubling mind-set. Sexual reproduction is dangerous, unless science clears the way. The conception of children is risky without a peek into their potential. For a reasonable cost (\$2,000 according to the transcript), technology can quell the fears of future progenitors. But at what price to actual persons – parents and children alike, not to mention the citizenry?

For people of faith, this mentality is a glaring, and glamorized, example of how we have become “strangers in a strange land.” In his magisterial [Erasmus Lecture](#) by that title, Archbishop Charles Chaput of Philadelphia lays bare the progression of thought underlying contemporary cultural thought and points out that “These new [technological] tools have changed the nature of our reasoning.” Indeed, with a virtual peek into a person’s molecular make-up, our first thought about children now sees them as potential problems, genetic time-bombs waiting to go off in an unsuspecting womb. To protect our offspring, ourselves, and our society from such an abhorrent risk as a sick child, it’s better to take advantage of scientific know-how to find a safer donor match.

For whatever good it might do in identifying disease so as to treat it early and effectively, GenePeeks does far more. It changes our view of people and does so insidiously if not intentionally. It alters our vision of every living person’s inherent dignity by assigning it a genetic value. It replaces our sense of biological creativity with that of laboratory productivity. In this, it fulfills what the archbishop identified as the goal of modern technology, namely, “to subdue the natural world; to put it at the service of society in general, and individual consumers in particular.”

Preventing disease is laudable. Progress in science and technology aids that quest. But when parental preference dictates the act of human conception down to the genetic details, what we really get is a peek into “progress” unworthy of the name, for it is a movement that will, instead eradicate “common meaning, classic virtue or shared purpose” – as if that triad were also a deadly disease.

What a strange land, indeed. And how haunting a prospect far beyond this Halloween.

*featured image from [www.facebook.com/GenePeeks](http://www.facebook.com/GenePeeks)*



## Digital Challenges for Pastoral Work (11-7-14)

“What will spirituality be for those persons whose *modus cogitandi* is going through a ‘mutation’ because they dwell in the digital environment?”



them.

It’s an intriguing and alarming question, posed by FR. ANTONIO SPADARO, S.J., author of [Cybertheology](#). In a recent [conference](#) to European bishops, he outlined six “challenges” for the Church’s pastoral work that arise from this new way of knowing. They’re worth translating here for all to ponder. In a series of posts, we’ll examine each of them and also offer some tentative thoughts on how we might deal with

The first challenge is this: ***to shift our pastoral approach from answers to questions***. Spadaro notes that the digital world is overloaded with information. Thoughts abound. Posts proliferate. Videos go viral. Everyone has an answer to give! But, to quote Pope Francis, “we should never respond to questions nobody asks” ([Evangelii gaudium](#), no. 155).

With so much information now online, the Church as Teacher risks getting lost in the shuffle, and the “answer” the Church has gets viewed as just one among many possibilities. To counteract this, Spadaro urges a renewed attention to the art of spiritual discernment.

It’s an ancient term for a complex task. In the new digital world discernment means developing an ability to listen, even on social media. Can we hear, among the “trending” topics online, what people are really interested in? Can we figure out, amid the multitude of posts and comments (where ranting prevails over rejoicing), what people are really saying and searching for? To slog through all the “noise” on the ‘Net is tough going, but it’s there that people are engaged, so it’s there that we must reach them.

Digital discernment seeks to identify the fundamental questions in life, those at the root of the various experiences that people share, however disquieting those may be. To put it in Augustinian terms, before giving answers we must first discover what it is that makes the human heart “restless” today.

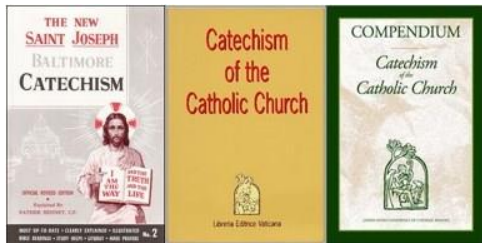
This listening before answering shifts pastoral work from debate to dialogue, from positioning to pondering. Evangelization is spreading the Good News. But before we share the News, we need to establish that it’s Good, that it will fulfill what people need. To discern how the Gospel responds to human life today, we need to help people sort out the fundamental questions in their lives. We can’t begin with the conclusions!

The recent Synod of Bishops offers a fine example. Having married couples from different cultures speak freely about their sorrows and joys, their worries and hopes, gave to those gathered there a needed dose of realism, prior to their discussion of doctrine and practice. The discernment on that subject now continues.

But that mode of communicating is one which can be emulated elsewhere, even online. Listening to those who are affected by our teaching is crucial if we want to bring the Church to them ... and them to the Church.

Up next: the Church cannot be a “container”!

*featured image from [www.ccee.eu](http://www.ccee.eu)*



## Another Digital Challenge (11-14-14)

Continuing our [dialogue with Antonio Spadaro, S.J.](#) about digital challenges to evangelization, let's consider the second shift he proposes: the **need to move from content-centered to person-centered pastoral work.**

In our online world, content is there. In fact, it's everywhere! Stored in a cloud and transmitted wirelessly, digital content is orbital, swirling around us continually. Like a radio or television station playing non-stop in the background, it's always on. But does it really "speak" to anyone anymore?

Church teaching also tends to be broadcasted, and suffers from the same lack of attentiveness. Quoting Archbishop Celli, Spadaro calls us to "learn to surpass the model of pulpit and assembly that listens out of respect for [the preacher's] position." Instead, we need "to express ourselves in a way that engages others and convinces them, in turn, to share our ideas with their friends, 'followers' and partners in dialogue." In other words, says Spadaro, the Church cannot simply be a "container" of faith lest its pastoral work become like that television that is incessantly talking but hardly communicating.



In terms of evangelization, long gone are the days of memorizing and regurgitating the Baltimore Catechism (however effective that may have been). Gone, too, is interest in lengthy magisterial lectures (however profound they may still be). People today communicate and learn selectively, choosing among their own interests (e.g., what to "follow") and contributing their own commentary. In the digital realm, Spadaro rightly notes, "The life of the Church is called to assume a form always more communicative and participative."

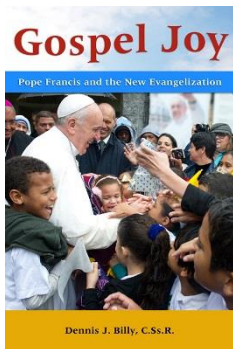
As a result, evangelization today needs to focus less on the information and more on the communication, less on the lecture and more on the audience. Preachers and teachers who communicate with a multiplicity of references and a density better left to footnotes will simply be tuned out. And if it's not heard, the Good News cannot be convincing.

Centering pastoral work on the person before the content means getting people's attention so as to open the proverbial door to a further consideration of what the Church offers to ease restless hearts. We can do that by acting and speaking normally not professorially ... at their level. We should connect the content of what we believe to the ordinariness of life ... which is the real stuff of their existence. We need to touch them where they are rather than where they should be ... in order to bridge the way. In short, we have to give them something to ponder ... that's so wonder-ful it becomes something they will want to share with others.

It's always been true, but now more than ever the Church's message needs to be proposed, not imposed. A person-centered pastoral work will invite consideration rather than require assent. One practical way to make this happen would be to invite feedback on what we teach and enable a digital dialogue to begin ... something I invite you to do right here by posting a comment!

*Up next:* learning how to share.

*image of Archbishop Celli from [www.ccee.org](http://www.ccee.org)*



## The challenge of spreading Joy (11-21-14)

In just three days we mark the first anniversary of the apostolic exhortation by Pope Francis on [“The Joy of the Gospel.”](#) Spreading that Joy of the Good News ([properly understood](#)) is the task of evangelization. To do this today we consider [Fr. Antonio Spadaro’s third challenge](#) to pastoral work in the digital world, namely, to move **from transmission to testimony.**

With content orbiting all around us in the digital environment, learning is now selectively customized and user-generated. As noted in the [previous challenge](#), the appeal of magisterial lecturers or imperious preachers has passed. A one-man, top-down approach to communications is being replaced by “sharing” information via social “networks.” Authority is giving way to authenticity.

People prefer to engage with what they “like.” They “link in” to and “follow” what appeals to them rather than what is conceptually true and good. This digital reality demands that evangelization be concerned with witnessing before teaching, with giving personal testimony to the faith prior to elucidating the thought of it.

Quoting [Pope Benedict XVI](#), Fr. Spadaro reminds us that using any form in the digital realm (texts, posts, likes, videos, etc.) also implicates the character of the person doing the communicating, for “when persons exchange information, they are already sharing themselves, their vision of the world, their hopes, their ideals.”

(image: U.K. Telegraph)



Sadly, research suggests that the vast majority of digital exchanges come from and spread [anger more than happiness](#). A year later, the current pope’s exhortation is still very much needed!

To heed it, we should reconsider our pastoral approach. Evangelization must first take the form of an encounter, in which we share who we are as believers, before delving into the details of what we believe. How do we reach out to others in the digital world? Is it with joy? Is it with faith? Since we don’t get a second chance to make a first impression, the initial encounter is critical.

But communicating joy goes far beyond the display of religious pictures or Bible quotes. These may be personal favorites, but they also may be potentially off-putting. Spiritual texts or images are not nearly as convincing as spiritual people! The challenge of sharing the faith in the digital world comes down to the courage to share “me” – even in a profile, a post, a comment, or a video clip. It means giving witness to what we believe not in a photo-shopped way but through the [living example](#) of actual believers.

As the pope emeritus tells us, there is a Christian way of being present in the digital world and of proclaiming the Gospel there. It 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 judgements that are fully consistent with the Gospel, even when it is not spoken of specifically.”

If we who dwell online, live there joyously, others will notice ... and maybe the News will spread!

*Up next:* the mystique of living together.

*featured image of Fr. Billy’s new book from [www.newcitypress.com](http://www.newcitypress.com)*

# The “mystique” of living together (11-28-14)

Black Friday, the commercial high holy day in the USA, evokes excitement and horror, the promise of good shopping deals and the specter of unbridled materialism. But somewhere in-between, there’s also room to spread the Gospel!



Not unlike a crowded mall, the digital world also gives space to the chaos of daily living. There Fr. Antonio Spadaro identifies a fourth challenge to evangelization, in the need to move **from propaganda to proximity**. In keeping with pastoral work as primarily about [discerning life’s fundamental questions](#), [focusing on persons](#), and [offering a witness to joy](#) (the first three challenges we considered) , this fourth challenge entails a shift in focus from the long-term objective to the immediate need.

Evangelization that is merely propagandizing or proselytizing misses the persons for whom it is intended. There’s a big difference, says Spadaro, between “emitting” religious content and “sharing” the Gospel.

Quoting Pope Francis, Spadaro sees the “gift of God” offered by today’s technology in the power of digital communications to offer a greater opportunity for encounters among people. As the Holy Father says in *Evangelii gaudium* (#87): “Today, when the networks and means of human communication have made unprecedented advances, we sense the challenge of finding and sharing a ‘mystique’ of living together, of mingling and encounter, of embracing and supporting one another, of stepping into this flood tide which, while chaotic, can become a genuine experience of fraternity, a caravan of solidarity, a sacred pilgrimage.”

How do we communicate this nearness, this accompaniment, this living together online? It doesn’t happen if all we do is preach to the choir of the like-minded or if our message only rages against the night of society’s ills. Either extreme – the safe or the sanctimonious – closes us in on ourselves and offers more of what Pope Francis calls “the bitter poison of immanence.”



(image: [www.ibtimes.co.uk](http://www.ibtimes.co.uk))

Today, instead, the reality of the digital world challenges us to wade into the crowds. In the vast network there we can draw near to others by sharing real experiences, celebrating personal milestones, or confronting difficult questions in charitable dialogue with the masses. Whatever the particular format, to be effective pastoral workers, we need to be willing to meet others where they are, not by hiding behind digital media but by using it, as the pope says, to “go out of ourselves and to join others.”

Proximity can be painful, as the madness of Black Friday demonstrates. But in the mission of the Church, we can’t get others to the goal, to join us in belonging and believing, unless we first draw near to them ... even in the crowded digital world.

*Up next:* the power of story-telling.

*featured image* <http://www.pinterest.com/pin/127297126938966610/>



## The power of story-telling (12-5-14)

With this week's change of liturgical seasons, we conclude our series on Fr. Antonio Spadaro's challenges to pastoral work and evangelization in the age of digital communications.

For Spadaro, the fifth challenge for evangelization today is to move **from *ideas* to *story-telling***. He points out that in the digital world, communication happens by way of emotive updates, photo albums, and film fragments. Together these constitute the streaming story of our lives.

Evangelization, at its root, is narration, not conceptualization. It involves the telling of a story – the story of redemption from sin and the offer of eternal life. The protagonist of that story is He for whom we prepare the way in this Advent season, the Lord Jesus Christ.

With so many new opportunities offered by social communications, the challenge today is to tell (and to live) that Gospel story through the enhanced power of digital media (web sites, blogs, podcasts, videos, etc.). Still, the message, not the medium, remains paramount.

That message is God's answer to the [question](#) of human life. It's centered not on religious content but on [persons](#), human and divine. It's not a transmission from on high as much as a [living witness](#) to how God "so loved the world." It's not about historically- or religiously-limited propaganda, but the actual [drawing near](#) of God to humans in the day-to-day reality of our living together.

While the life of Jesus – His birth, ministry, death, and resurrection – lies at the core of the narrative, other people also belong to the story. Today the cast of characters includes all of us: the faithful and the nominal, believers and non-believers, [the nones](#) and [the dones](#), and everyone in-between. The message of salvation is universal. It's a story to be told to all the world.

Nowadays the Gospel as a sacred book to be studied and taught takes a secondary (but still important!) place to the Gospel as an inspired life to be liked and shared. Our task, even in the digital age, is first to interiorize that Good News for ourselves – to live it and be enlivened by it – and then to interact with others in our networks (on- and off-line) so as to walk them and to bring the Gospel to them.

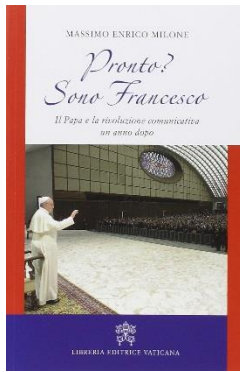
This is a story worth telling – the greatest story of all time! – and it's a story we, as believers, are called to stream through the entirety of our lives ... and with every means of social communication at our disposal.

Pope Francis concluded his first message for World Communications Day (2014) with this exhortation: "The revolution taking place in communications media and in information technologies represents a great and thrilling challenge; may we respond to that challenge with fresh energy and imagination as we seek to share with others the beauty of God."

As this sacred season begins, that divine beauty comes to us again, in the story of the coming-to-birth of Emmanuel, God-with-us. ***Happy Advent!***

*featured image [www.somarsv.org](http://www.somarsv.org)*





## The Pope's Revolution (12-12-14)

“The pope and the communications revolution one year later” is the subtitle of a new book by the director of Vatican Radio. Massimo Enrico Milone has reviewed all of the pope's interactions with journalists. He argues that, while the message is in continuity with previous popes, the modality and style and objectives are revolutionary.

Below are six key claims from the book, extracted and translated from an online article by the [Pontifical Council for Social Communications](http://www.pccs.va).

(1) *The Pope and Social Communication* – Considering social communications a field for mission and a new place people “inhabit,” the pope urges us to be present there in two ways: in search of an authentic encounter with others and in search of truth by way of questions about the meaning of life.

(2) *The Internet and Conscience* – The Pope recognizes “the risk of a distracting use of the media,” which offers people an excess of answers to questions never asked! He affirms that technology “should simplify and improve the quality of life.” But he also notes that “the speed with which information is communicated exceeds our capacity for reflection and judgment.” When our daily routines online create disorientation, he suggests “reminding ourselves of our Creator who allows us to live, who loves us, who accompanies us on our journey.”

(3) *Against Technological Determinism* – A crucial concern for the pope is the media's ability to predetermine personal relationships without necessarily being respectful of the truth of who people are. Calling the media to pursue truth and meaning and unity – which according to Pope Benedict XVI “remain the deepest aspiration of being human” – Pope Francis reminds us that “communication is ultimately a human rather than technological achievement.”



(4) *The Internet as a New “Existential Periphery”* – Because the web relativizes space and time, the meaning of “neighbor” has changed. In a world now of “social networks,” Pope Francis exhorts the Church to go out also to the digital streets, which are “crowded with a humanity that seeks salvation or hope.” It's there that communications requires us to be more neighborly.

(5) *Internet and Mission* – The logic of communications today has passed from one of “transmission” to one of “sharing.” As a result, Christian witness in the new digital environment works best not be bombarding the airwaves with religious messages but by exhibiting a willingness to encounter others there “with respect to their doubts, on the path of searching for truth and the meaning of human existence.”

(6) *The Example of Pope Francis* – In 2013, Pope Francis claimed the greatest visibility of anyone on the Internet (with more than 49 million mentions!). Even more, his popularity in the digital realm reflects his deep awareness of the nature of the new means of social communications. The pope uses new media not simply to transmit messages but to create a participatory way in which to encounter others personally.

Beyond what the author claims, I'd venture to say that the papal “revolution” is not really new! He's actually demonstrating the experience of the season we now celebrate. Through social communications Pope Francis gives flesh to his words; ultimately, though, he shows us how to share *the Word* – the One that comes to encounter and transform all human life.

*featured image from [www.pccs.va](http://www.pccs.va)*

## Awaken ... open ... speak! (12-19-14)



Rudolph, Charlie Brown, Clarence the angel ... these are just some of the beloved characters that come home to us each holiday season via television. And even though we no longer hear his melodic voice, the pioneering work of John Cardinal Foley in television allows us to partake of the liturgical beauty of the Christmas midnight Mass from the Vatican.



Recently, Pope Francis spoke to employees of [TV 2000](http://www.tv2000.it), an Italian broadcasting network that carries Catholic programming. He shared three thoughts he considers central to contemporary communications. We share these three thoughts here because they also go to the heart of what we celebrate in this sacred season.

(image from <http://www.pccs.va/index.php/it/>)

The first duty of the communicator is to awaken words. Beyond the tactical and technical, Christian communication must be bold and courageous. Not subject to propaganda or ideology, we are to speak with the frankness and freedom of faith. “Every word has within itself a scintilla of fire, of life,” says the pope.

That spark of fire shines in a star that marks the birthplace of the Christ-child, the true light that enlightens everyone. His is the glory of the Father’s only Son. His are the words of eternal life. May we resolve in the New Year to awaken ourselves more to that Word ... and to share that Word freely with all to whom we speak.

The second duty of the communicator is to open. This means to avoid the pitfalls of “filling up” (with an excess of slogans) or “closing off” (with brief and easy solutions). Christian communication seeks, instead, to embrace the tiring work of respecting and responding to the complexities of real life, the avoidance of which “is a frequent error within communications that is ever faster and less reflexive.”

The carols and speeches and drama made popular at this time of year reflect simple joys. But the only medium that truly captures the depth of beauty in the Word-made-flesh is prayer. Only in meditative wonder, guided by the action of the Holy Spirit, will we fully appreciate [the perfect gift](#) given to the world. May we resolve in the New Year to give more time to prayer ... and open ourselves to the power of the Spirit present in our lives.

And the third duty of the communicator is to speak to the entire person (mind and heart), “so that they may know to see beyond the immediate, beyond a present that risks to be fearful and forgotten.” Christian communication must avoid the three sins of modern media – disinformation, calumny, and defamation – and instead renders concrete a real culture of encounter.

And that, ultimately, is what Christmas engenders – a real encounter between God and human beings, come to life in the baby Jesus. The eternal enters into our time. The divine assumes our humanity. No matter the troubles we fear or the past we’d prefer to forget, God is with us. May we resolve in the New Year to encounter one another more gracefully ... and ever more cognizant of the image of God that every person is to us.

***Merry Christmas!***

*featured image from [www.facebook.com/Tv2000i](http://www.facebook.com/Tv2000i)*



## How Pope Francis says “Merry Christmas” (12-23-14)

From headline hype to online commentary, many have missed the mark about Pope Francis’ Christmas greetings to the Roman Curia.

The media message (even from pro-Church outlets) is designed to grab attention with the depiction of a pope who supposedly [“chides”](#) or [“blasts”](#) or [“attacks”](#) his own staff with a [“blistering rebuke”](#) directed at [“greedy gossips”](#) or [“power-hungry hypocrites.”](#)

Those headlines are inaccurate on several levels, including the intent, the form, and the theology of the papal address. One reason for this may be the [incomplete English text](#), which hits the 15 high points (or low ones), but fails to include the opening and closing, which provide the necessary context.

That context is the annual event of the pope’s sharing a Christmas message with his Curial staff. Beyond the seasonal niceties which such greetings assume, the pope wishes instead to give a properly *spiritual* talk. He makes clear his intent at the outset: “I would like that our encounter and the reflections I share with you should become, for all of us, a support and stimulus to a true examination of conscience to prepare our heart for Holy Christmas.” That’s not chiding or blasting or attacking or rebuking; it’s leading, as a true spiritual father would.

The type of speech is an *examination of conscience*. It takes the traditional form used by “the Fathers of the desert,” namely a “catalogue” of things to think about in one’s own life. These are possibilities, not statements of fact. These are temptations, not accusations. These are the sorts of things that people in their position are potentially subject to, not a list of wrongs being entered into evidence.

And the pope makes it clear that these “ailments” are not limited to curial clerics but “are naturally a danger for every Christian and for every curia, community, congregation, parish, ecclesial movement, and can strike both at the individual level and the communal level.”

Might some who heard this take offense or feel impugned? Quite possibly, yes – especially if the ailments so pointedly described actually apply! But in that case, it’s actually something good to hear, for self-knowledge can effect change. No examination of conscience is comfortable. Conversion is challenging. But that is our Christian lot in life – to acknowledge humbly our faults and to entrust ourselves to the redeeming love of God, the very God who comes in person to bring salvation to the world.

And that’s the actual conclusion to the talk – not a “so there” excoriation of the papal collaborators, but a call to be who they are and be that well as a model to the entire Church. Before wishing them a Merry Christmas, the pope says: “Let us ask Him (the divine Father) to make us love the Church as Christ, his son and our Lord, loved it, and to have the courage to recognize ourselves as sinners and those in need of his Mercy and to not be afraid to abandon our hands into his maternal hands.”

That abandon, that mercy, that love – that is the real greeting of Christmas, to which the Holy Father courageously calls his own *and all of us*.

*featured image: CNS photo/Paul Haring*



## The Power of the Crèche (12-26-14)

*“Let us draw near the crèche, where ‘a great light’ dawns ...”* With these words Jorge Mario Bergoglio (Pope Francis) begins a meditation on Christmas. With this post, we share some his vision, as enlightened also by Fr. Antonio Spadaro in *Civiltà Cattolica*.

To meditate on this mystery is to place ourselves in the scene, to become witnesses through the grace of imagination. Prayer thus activates a theology of the “as if” – in our own experience of the nocturnal peace of Bethlehem and the silence that dominates the night.

At the crèche we see the “hidden light” of the Lord – a “kindly light” that neither blinds nor dazzles. Rather, the light of Christmas is intimately dynamic: it awakens the numb conscience, shakes the soul, and sets us on our journey as pilgrims. “The way that the crèche promises us is different from that cultivated by our ambition,” says the pope. It “transforms us not only by enveloping us from the outside but by changing (our) heart, desires, and love.”



(flickr.com/photos/32811857@N08/5369763540/)

The ones who receive this light “are the simple, the faithful: the shepherds, the Magi, Elizabeth, Zechariah, Simeon, Anna, Joseph, Mary. They are summoned by the light, in the midst of apparent gloom, in the mediocrity of an ordinary life.” But there they experience glory! In the body of a crying baby takes shape the apocalyptic image of the Lord who comes. Precisely there, in the ordinariness of our lives, the light awakens us: “we should draw near the crèche of Jesus,” says the pope, “in the desire that his grace touch us and help us to continue to grow in his service.” Keeping company with the child, we see who we are, loyal and sinful, knowing that “this baby will be our savior.”



(image: CNS/Art Resource/Album)

To meditate as if we were there is also to act as Mary and Joseph did. They held the newborn child in their arms. So, too, we are to embrace the hope of the Gospel, welcoming it in our arms and handing it away to all people, especially those experiencing difficulties and crises.

The contemplation of Christmas and the “power of the crèche” leads Pope Francis to understand that God, the center of the universe and Lord of history, became a child in silence, illuminated by a “hidden light” in a periphery of the empire and manifest to poor shepherds who live on the periphery of life. The profound meaning of Christmas inspires him to consider that the truly central events in life don’t happen in the “center” but on the peripheries, whether they be geographical or existential.

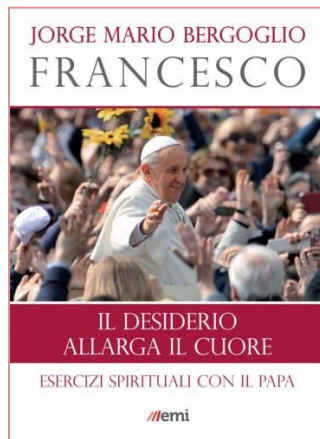
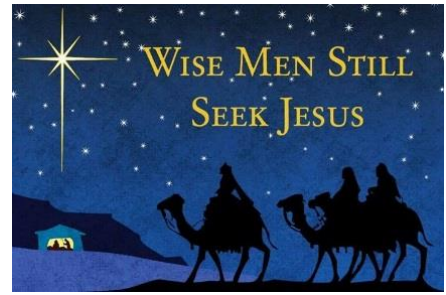
For Pope Francis, Christmas reveals what it means to be divine. In the horizon of the Kingdom of God, the infinitesimal can be infinitely grand, and immensity can be a small hutch. God is hidden in what is small and in what is growing, even if we are not able to see him.

That, ultimately, is the power of the crèche – the strength of a God who humbles Himself to be born human like us, so that we might be enlightened to grow in that divine love and bring God’s light to the world around us.

*featured image from [www.pinterest.com/pin/11259067790264349](http://www.pinterest.com/pin/11259067790264349)*

## The Wisdom of Desire (1-2-15)

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



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

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

That desire is realized in the Incarnation. That desire inspires the Epiphany.

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

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

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

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

Perhaps, then, a most fitting resolution for the New Year would be for each of us to get in touch with this primordial desire of our heart and soul.

*Featured image from [www.pinterest.com/pin/498281146243796710/](http://www.pinterest.com/pin/498281146243796710/)*



## The Faces of Francis (1-16-15)

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*featured image from [www.pacificqa.com/](http://www.pacificqa.com/)*



## The Courage of Simplicity (1-23-15)

*He said what?!*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*featured image by Stefano Rellandin/ Reuters from [www.newsdaily.com](http://www.newsdaily.com)*

# Communication as Visitation (1-30-15)

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



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

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



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

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

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

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

*featured image from [www.news.va](http://www.news.va)*

## Hanging Out with the Pope (2-6-15)

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



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

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



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

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

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

*featured image from [www.tecnologia.ondenews.it](http://www.tecnologia.ondenews.it)*

## A Sunday Valentine (2-13-15)

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

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



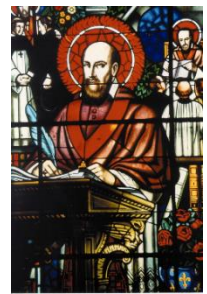
Of the many Sunday words, those of the homily often take center stage in the congregation's appreciation of their weekly experience. Recognizing this, the Vatican just presented a new *Homiletic Directory*, in the hope of improving that facet of the liturgy. To be sure, this publication won't make any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

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

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

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

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



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

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

featured image from [www.ctv.va](http://www.ctv.va)



## LENT online (2-20-15)

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



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

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

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



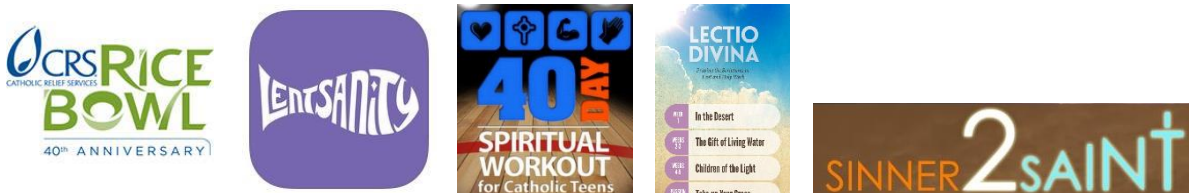
You can get daily reflections sent directly to your email:



If you want more of a challenge ...



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



Feel free to suggest others in the “comments” box ... and may you have a blessed Lent this year.



## Francis, the adjective (3-13-15)

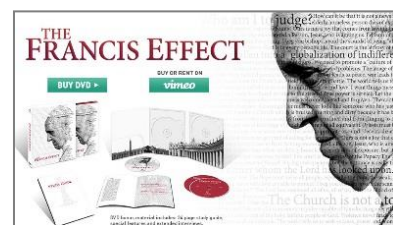
Today the world (and not just the Church) celebrates the second anniversary of the election of Pope Francis. Expect to see numerous stories, analyses, and commentaries about the septuagenarian sensation. Professional and amateur Vaticanistas will opine about visions and inspirations, as well as priorities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

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

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

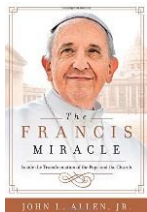
This caring vision plays out as **The Francis Factor** in numerous ways. It characterizes the novelty of this papacy, as first-year anniversary events in the [Church](#) and the [academy](#) highlighted. It offers a title to [digital ponderings](#) about media and ministry. It even suggests a [political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

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



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

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

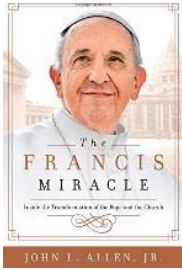


"Francis" – once a proper noun that evoked remembrance of the saint from Assisi and the call to a poor and humble and simple life for individuals and for the Church. Having been adopted for the first time ever as a papal name, "Francis" now signals so much more in the minds and hearts of people around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

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

*featured image from [www.denvercatholic.org](http://www.denvercatholic.org)*

## The free-spirited pope (3-20-15)



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

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

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

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



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

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



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

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



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

*featured image from [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com)*

# Polls, Pews, and the Catholic Pulse

## (3-27-15)



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*featured image from [www.mcall.com](http://www.mcall.com)*





## The Cross of the Lord (4-3-15)

*In the Heart of Every Father* is a collection of meditations and reflections by Jorge Mario Bergoglio. The editor of the Italian edition (Fr. Antonio Spadaro, S.J.) explains that, at the root of Pope Francis' spirituality, "spiritual/evangelical discernment sees not only black and white, but processes, progresses, gradualness, shades; it looks to recognize the presence of

the Spirit in human and cultural realities, the seed of his presence already planted in events, sensibilities, desires, profound tensions of hearts, and social, cultural and spiritual contexts."

*Below is an excerpt from one of the pope's meditations on the Spiritual Exercises entitled "The Cross of the Lord."*

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

(To quote St. Ignatius):

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



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

*featured image by AP/Gregoria Borgia from [www.vnews.com](http://www.vnews.com)  
artistic image by Bro. Mickey McGrath, OSFS*



## Witnessing to more than oneself (4-24-15)

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



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

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

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

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

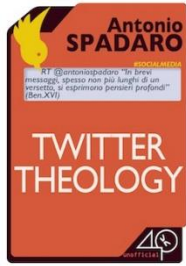
The extraordinary experience by which those first disciples were touched has been handed on to us. Our identity as Christians and our mission as Church, as Pope Francis recently explained, is to bear witness to this life-changing event. We do so by the way we see, remember, and tell the story of this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



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

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

*featured image by Kayana Szymczak, www.nytimes.com*



## The most influential “tweep” (5-1-15)

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

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



(image from [www.cruxnow.com](#))

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

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

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

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

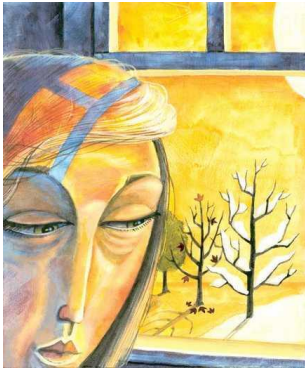
*featured image from [www.amazon.com](#)*

## S.A.D. no more (5-8-15)

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



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



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

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

*image: thosewhowearskirts.blogspot.com*

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

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

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

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

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

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

*featured image from [www.desales.edu](http://www.desales.edu)*



# Faith, Family, and the Future

## (5-15-15)

The lede looms large, signaling a grim future for faith: “The Christian share of the U.S. population is declining, while the number of U.S. adults who do not identify with any organized religion is growing, according to an extensive [new survey by the Pew Research Center](#).”

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

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

All this confirms [Prof. Christian Smith](#)’s research on emerging adults: *American Catholicism is faltering*.

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

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

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

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



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

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

featured image from [www.pewforum.org](http://www.pewforum.org)

# Stone Age Wisdom for the Digital Era

## (6-12-15)

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



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

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



CNS photo by Paul Haring

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

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

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

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

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

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

*featured image cropped from [huffingtonpost.co.uk](http://huffingtonpost.co.uk)*





## Drawing the line on digital media (6-19-15)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

*featured image cropped from [www.news.va](http://www.news.va)*