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“A View from the Chair”



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A mountaintop experience in Center City (8-7-15)

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



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

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

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

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

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



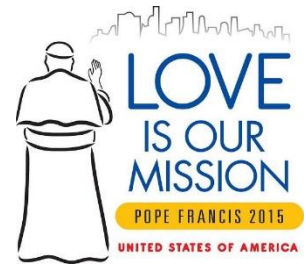
click on the image for more information

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

featured image cropped from hisgloryinourstory.com

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

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



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

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

(1) *Consider where he is coming from.* Pope Francis comes to the USA as a head of state, where his talks to Congress and the United Nations will certainly garner international attention. He also comes as head of the Roman Catholic Church, and will speak often to bishops, priests, religious, seminarians, and all the faithful.

In both cases he speaks primarily as pastor, not as a diplomat or CEO. [In this visitation](#), he speaks as a way of being near and encountering people. Any other implications, applications, or supplications are secondary to his speaking as shepherd to his flock. As [Steve Soukup](#) rightly states, "There is no question that some of the things he says and does are likely to influence political matters. But that influence is ancillary to his principal aim, which is to minister to his Church and to ameliorate the suffering caused by man's surrender to sin."

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

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

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

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



Pope Francis is beloved because he speaks to people and with them. His words tend to [favor commonly held truisms over accurate comparisons](#). But that is how he touches us precisely where we live, both where we sin and where we succeed. It's an encounter worth having ... through speeches worth listening to!

The (New) Pilgrim's Journey (8-21-15)

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



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

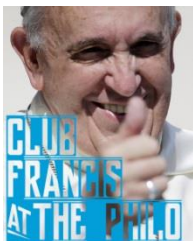
Some may think this is reason enough to say away from the heavily-secured city. But no pilgrimage happens without a few bumps along the way. The effort it takes is part of the experience. The energy needed comes more from within. The graces to be received are the benefit.

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

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



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



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

featured image from www.sjprep.org/page.cfm?p=927



Social Communications & the Family (8-28-15)

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

Inveterate intrigue at the Vatican (10-16-15)

Recently, media mania at the Synod of Bishops focused the world's attention on a private letter secretly delivered to Pope Francis. Supposedly signed by cardinals who [“occupy positions of first rank in the Church's hierarchy.”](#) the letter purportedly railed against the new procedures at the Synod and raised the specter of dire consequences.



Amid [subsequent denials](#) by some of the signatories, loud cries of a [new “Vatileaks” scandal](#), and official complaints about the [disturbing](#) publication of the letter the story lives on ... precisely because it's intriguing. News of intramural Church conflict like this now goes viral. Too bad it's nothing new!

A first thing to note is a “private” letter is just that – private, personal, between individuals. It's not intended for public consumption. Nevertheless, even without knowing its content, [some](#) commentators write an entire piece about what it said ... as if the world just has to know. (One [professional apology](#) for stirring the prelates' pot has already been issued.)

But more to the point, this isn't breaking news. People talk. Leaders lament. Decision-makers debate. It's the nature of discernment and dialogue, [however messy those group efforts may be](#).

And it's happened before! Case in point: the Second Vatican Council's deliberations on *Inter Mirifica* – the decree on social communications. At that time, many thought a discussion of the media was not a matter befitting episcopal attention. Some in their midst were so alarmed by the draft document that, on the day of the final vote, they distributed pamphlets against it in St. Peter's Square and begged the participants to vote against the decree, lest its promulgation “damage the honor of the Council.” The Swiss Guards were called to action. The scuttlebutt poured over into the Basilica.

But the decree was resoundingly approved. And fifty years later, we're coming to recognize and respond to the central importance that social communications play in the Church and in the world.

Today's “lettergate” story may make for appealing headlines, but synods are not gatherings intended to pit sides against each other in competition. Difference of backgrounds, of interests, of opinions, and of propositions necessarily arise in such a large group. So be it. That's what makes for a lively discussion! And that's what makes this recent controversy little more than the proverbial “tempest in a teapot,” [as Cardinal Dolan rightly described it](#).

Intrigue may spark interest. Politiking always takes place. The media needs a message to convey. And all too often readers desire something juicy rather than something substantive.

But the real voice to which all must attend is that of the Holy Spirit. Granted, the Spirit blows where it will, and the theological seas sometimes get choppy. Our hope is that those raising their voices in the aula, or writing their thoughts in a letter, or conversing among themselves over good pasta and wine will ultimately heed [Archbishop Chaput's call to ecclesial unity](#). Only then will they make headway against the cultural currents and lead us safely to the shores of [truth and mercy](#).

featured image from cruxnow.com (AP/Alessandra Tarantino)

Communicating with candor (10-23-15)

In his disarming, yet to some alarming, style of getting straight to the point, ARCHBISHOP CHARLES CHAPUT recently described a key to Church communications. [Responding to a reporter's question](#) about differences of opinion among bishops at the Synod on the Family, he said:



Bringing bishops together makes no sense unless you want them to speak frankly. And candor is something Pope Francis has welcomed — which I find very healthy. The Church could use a lot more of it at every level: honest discussion, always ruled by charity and respect. And those last two words — *charity* and *respect* — need to be more than just pious language that gives us some cover while we destroy people whose ideas we don't like. There's already too much of that in ecclesial life. It was obvious in the media coverage of the synod.

Though obvious, indeed, the point so well put here bespeaks a perennial need, perhaps even more so in today's world of social communications.

The media today compete for attention in an attempt to tell (and to sell) a story. To be successful, this too often means headlining conflict, real or supposed. With no malice necessarily intended, this is simply how the media approaches religion, and has been so for a long time. As AVERY DULLES noted in a [1994 article in America magazine](#):

the essential message of the church is the one and eternal Gospel. Convinced of the permanent validity of God's revelation in Christ, the church seeks to maintain continuity with its own past. It cherishes stability and shuns innovation. The press, by contrast, lives off novelty. It thrives on the ephemeral and panders to the “itching ears” of its readers. In reporting religious news, it accents what is new and different, thus giving the impression that the church is in continual turmoil.

Thanks to the speed and reach of new communications technology, that reporting now happens through instant transmission and viral images. As a result, says MIT psychologist SHERRY TURKLE in her [new book](#), we have learned to flee from real conversation, which in turn profoundly affects the way we relate to one another. The power to talk, it seems, is getting lost via the power to post and share and like (and maybe, someday [dislike](#)).



Communicating with candor is what happens when people care for each other. Communicating the truth with candor is what the Church should do because that is what the Church *is* – in its divinely appointed mission to proclaim the Good News of salvation.

The medium used for communicating doesn't change this simple truth. Nor does the topic under discussion. Argument doesn't mean anarchy. Disagreement doesn't signal disunity. Opposing views don't have to create interpersonal conflict.

If we speak only with those with whom we agree, what can we learn? If we dismiss outright those with whom disagree, how can we thrive together (and not merely co-exist)? Preaching only to the choir is useless for real evangelization. If we can't be honest with one another, and say what we think for the common good without exasperation and without being disparaged by interlocutors, then we will lose much more than an argument.

Philadelphia's archbishop exemplifies what would be good for all: “The key lesson we need to learn is very local and personal. We need to behave like the Christians we claim to be — people who belong to Jesus Christ; people of love and truth; not tomorrow, but right here and right now.” We might add ... even, or especially, via social media.

featured image from cruxnow.com (CNS/Paul Haring)

Putting preachers in prison (10-30-15)

"We should lock them into their pulpits until they display the world of the Scriptures!"

On this eve of Halloween, that admonition sounds rather scary, especially coming from a bishop! But [Robert Barron](#) uses it to highlight the difference between homilies heard today and the great preaching of the past.



It's not just an observation about history. It addresses a significant shift in the liturgical medium.

The great poets and preachers, Barron says, "took their listeners/readers on a careful tour of the densely textured world of the Bible," a world where God is to be found. Today, though, preachers prefer to be "relevant."

Stories, jokes, personal experiences – these may serve as effective attention-getters. But when more attention is given to our world than to the Bible's, we misplace the message. When a preacher preaches without even mentioning God (yes, I've heard some of these!), where's the inspiration?

Thankfully, the good people who put up with our words are kind. They listen dutifully (more or less). They routinely thank the preacher, perhaps even offering a compliment. But they long for so much more. They deserve better. If they remember the punch line but not the message, then what's the point?

Bishop Barron makes a good point about reversing this trend: "a good preacher unfolds the patterns of meaning within the biblical universe – precisely so as to draw our world into *that* world." That world, the biblical one, is where divine revelation happens. That's the world we're invited to inhabit. It's a new world – with revolutionary ideas, transformational challenges, miraculous possibilities, and above all, the divine drama of human redemption. What a delight it would be to make *that* world our own.



One of those great preachers of the past – St. Francis de Sales (1567-1622) – offers a similar viewpoint in his letter ["On the Preacher and Preaching."](#) There he told a new bishop, who had asked him for advice, that "We must preach the word of God ... nothing further is needed." With that focus, the homilist can and should "bring light to the intellect and warmth to the will."

Preachers preach well, and congregations live well, when they are moved to act in new ways. They will only be moved if they are persuaded to do so. They will only be persuaded to do so if they are actually inspired by God. That's the point of divine revelation ... and [the point of a good homily](#) in any age.

With the celebration of All Saints Day, we recall those who embodied this transformation and who now dwell eternally in that new world of God. About them St. Francis de Sales writes, "what else is the life of a saint except the gospel put into practice? There is no more difference between the written gospel and the lives of the saints than between music set down in notes and music that is sung."

The Bible may sound strange, with stories that are dense, complex, and downright weird, according to Bishop Barron. Yet, the Gospel remains Good News for our world today. And saints show us the way to live there. Our task – our real joy – is to speak boldly about, and listen intently to, this life-giving Word.

featured image of Saint Suplice (Paris) from Wikimedia



It's time for a conversation (11-06-15)

It sounds so simple: Let's chat. Let's talk. Let's have a conversation.

Unfortunately, we don't quite know how.

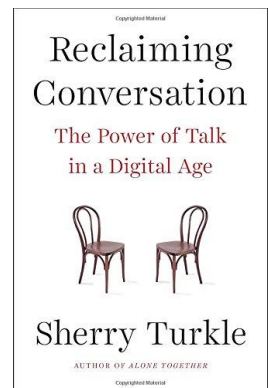
Those who now spend most of their time in the throes of social media appear less and less capable of actually speaking to one another.

So says Sherry Turkle in her new book, [*Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age*](#). This follows upon her ground-breaking [*Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*](#), the rudiments of which she explores in a popular [TED Talk](#).

But it doesn't take an M.I.T. psychologist to see this. Any university teacher could probably tell you something similar from his/her experience of trying to generate discussion among students.

Based on research studies and common observations, Turkle reasons that the denizens of the digital world are failing to learn what it takes to have a meaningful conversation. The ability to focus is difficult in a world of constant notifications. The ability to reflect intelligently is stymied in a world where thoughts are limited to 140 characters of text. The ability to appreciate where someone else is coming from is shunted in a world where real emotions are reduced to emoji.

Even more simply – young people struggle nowadays to with questions about anything other than factual information. Those accustomed to getting an answer from Google in 0.7 seconds, or a voiced explanation from Siri, fall silent when queried about God, the meaning of life, or other profound ponderings. (One [new search engine](#) admits this wisely!)



Asking and answering questions is how a discussion progresses. Inquiring or probing is how a dialogue runs more deeply. Pondering the meaning of things is how people search for truth.

To be sure, many, if not most, conversations aren't philosophical in nature. Nor do they need to be. But truly communicating with another person means more than texting tidbits or sharing photos.

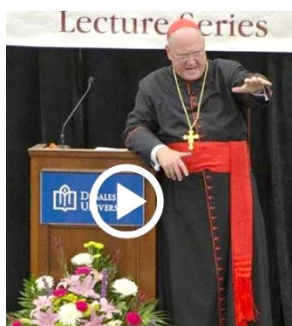


We learn to "encounter" one another when we move beyond simply exchanging information. To do this well requires attentiveness, listening, and thinking. It presupposes interest, wonder, and curiosity. It entails asking questions to learn more, and offering responses to explore further.

Yes, chats can be facilitated via social media. And social networks connect real, not virtual, people. But devices alone won't work (not even a ["No Phone"](#)!) if we want to reclaim conversations. To fulfill that natural human aspiration to enter into relationships with others, we need to remember (and to teach) that communication always involves the sharing of oneself in the process.

I suppose I'll have to issue a [trigger warning](#), but perhaps my next assignment will be to have each of my students speak directly with one other student for the entire class period!

"No Phone" image from [washingtonpost.com](#) (Ingmar Larsen)
college image from [theatlantic.com](#)



Bigger-than-life Preaching (11-13-15)

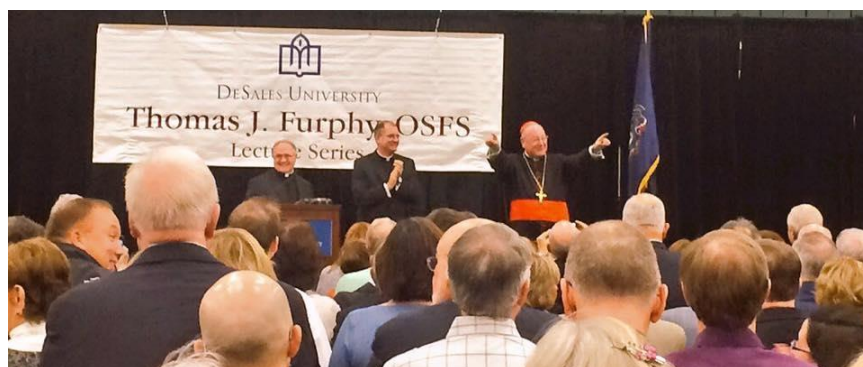
The lede [from the local newspaper](#) said it best:

“Cardinal Timothy Dolan arrived at DeSales University on Wednesday just as advertised – a jovial, often hilarious man of the cloth who held a crowd of 2,000 spellbound by sketching the pontificates of Pope Francis and his two immediate predecessors as a sort of anatomical model of the Catholic Church.”

The largeness of the man was matched by the largesse of the preacher. Whether he was greeting guests, dining with donors, or speaking to the masses, this Church leader put the Gospel into vibrant color by modeling how to preach today. [As Pope Francis recently reminded a newly-ordained bishop](#), ““Sermons should just be the communication of God’s grace and should be simple so that everyone understands and everyone leaves with the desire to be a better person.”

The Cardinal needed no coaxing from the boss he helped to elect. Though it was a university lecture and not a homily, the 40-minute speech achieved what Pope Francis said is the purpose of preaching. How Dolan did so provides a good lesson in communications of any kind.

He manner spoke volumes. His words conveyed meaning. His style made it memorable.



The Cardinal understands and exemplifies Gospel communication as fostering a relationship with Jesus. Like the divine preacher from Nazareth, this one from New York *encountered* people, with a point, a wave, or an arm wrapped around their shoulders. He *engaged* them, with questions about their lives and works. He *evangelized* them by sharing Good News in ways both serious and self-deprecating.

The Cardinal’s words were organized around three points: soul and mind and heart. His speech conveyed plenty of information, in a summary review of recent papal history, but without being pedantic. The content wasn’t meant to impress an audience, but to inspire a flock. The focus remained spiritual, as preaching should.

The Cardinal’s style brought the message home. His simple approach enabled understanding and assured remembrance of the message. he spoke directly to, not at, people. He spoke of meaningful matters, about which people do care. He spoke with the passion of one who believes wholeheartedly in what he was saying. His soul, his mind, his heart was on display for others to see and hear. In turn, he lifted up theirs.

Cardinal Dolan came as a bigger-than-life figure on the stage of the Church and of this lecture series. He preached about bigger-than-life topics, for one’s soul and mind and heart transcend the mundane concerns of earthly existence. In person and in words, he is a new evangelizer ... as we all should learn to be.

featured image cropped from video at www.mcall.com / lecture image from Mary Colleen Romendio



“And with your (virtual) spirit” (11-20-15)

In Catholic churches, the congregational response to “The Lord be with you ...” does not make room for a digital community. As made clear in a [2002 document](#) from the Pontifical Council for Social Communications,

“Virtual reality is no substitute for the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist, the sacramental reality of the other sacraments, and shared worship in a flesh-and-blood human community. There are no sacraments on the Internet” (“The Church and Internet,” no. 9). But could there be?

After more than a decade since that pronouncement, the digital revolution has changed the way we act and interact. In an insightful article recently published in *Worship*, Daniella Zsupan-Jerome explores the interface between sacramental theology and the digital culture. She acknowledges, rightly, that “the face-to-face, communal encounter remains the standard for understanding presence as church.” But she likewise admits that nowadays, “we know that digital information can carry the presence of a person to us” through a variety of communication techniques and elements.

The complexity of the matter arises from the fact that “in the liturgy, the sacramental encounter with the Lord is *not* face-to-face; in fact, it is his *absence* that allows for the condition of faith to emerge and grow.” What the church does in worship is to mediate that absent presence so that the “living memory” of Jesus prevails and His redemption is made present. Hence the question: can human presence be mediated for the sake of participating in the liturgy?

Today I asked that question of my class ... all of whom are digital natives (or at least digital consumers). They rebuffed the idea of someone “going to Mass” in his/her pajamas before a computer screen in the comfort of home. But each objection they voiced gave rise to other questions.

“It would just be a convenient excuse not to go to church.” But how do we include/accompany those who, for various reasons, are impeded from going? What if a church is not readily accessible, as in war-torn areas? What if there aren’t enough clergy to go around?

“It would turn worship into something available on Netflix.” What if it had to be a “live” event? What if it incorporated, somehow, the dialogic and interactive elements of active participation?

“It would be individualistic, not communal.” What about massive papal Masses that people view on jumbotrons? Don’t we already livestream Mass for “overflow” crowds in a church basement on the big feast days? What if the broadcast had to happen (at both ends) with a group of persons?



“It would remove the sacredness of the event.” What if it took place in a sacred space, like a closed church? Wouldn’t it make possible celebration with a bishop, who otherwise only visits a parish rarely?

“It would not be possible to receive Communion.” If a blessing, [even an indulgence](#), can be given and received via social communications, why can’t the Eucharist be consecrated in a similar way? Or why can’t the people in remote places receive what is already consecrated (something which happens at most Masses already). If this is the only way for the People of God to receive the sacraments, don’t they have a right to do so?

Fortunately, the time for class to end came along and next week I have to start a new topic!

featured image from www.scs.edu / papal image from www.mfldiobr.org



Going on the offensive with mercy (12-4-15)

TRIGGER WARNING: Reading this post may offend your sensitivities ... just as writing it partially offends mine! *The time has come to take offense at taking offense at things.*

This isn't circular reasoning. It's an observation based on a slew of recent headlines. Anything and everything now seems to offend someone.

It's rampant on university campuses, where [safe spaces have been weaponized](#) and trigger warnings loaded as ammo against thought-provoking ideas. With alarming speed, we are witnessing a new epidemic – [the rise of college crybullies](#). Raised by a generation of [entitling parents](#) and [coddling institutions](#), today's [thin-skinned students](#) bemoan anything that might in the slightest way aggrieve them. [The list is growing](#): some ordinary words are to be banned as biased (e.g., “elderly” and “American”), and some commonplace activities curtailed as contentious (clapping applause, eating burritos, even engaging in small-talk). And don't dare offer a [yoga class](#) on campus, unless you can defend it from accusations of colonial oppression and cultural genocide. So widespread is the dis-ease that [comedians are steering clear of campus gigs](#).

But it's not just on campus that micro-aggression occurs. It reaches back to kindergarten, where [playing with Legos](#) risks fomenting gender inequality. It reaches forward, where the prospect of [marriage taught in a Christian way](#) warrants civil injunction or prosecution. It reaches outward, when [recitation of the Lord's Prayer on film](#) is banned as potentially harmful to movie-goers. It reaches inward, when [pledging allegiance to the flag](#) is forbidden because it could offend citizens of others countries.

You can't make this stuff up! The [list of lowlights](#) could go on and on. And in the warp speed of our digital culture, the [“ideological junkspace” of modern media](#) tends to incite people more and more to [complain about things smaller and smaller](#).

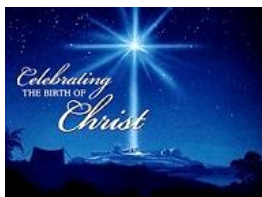
So, it's time to go on the offensive ... with mercy. Not pity – which does nothing but augment the self-esteem culture. Not pacification – which mistakes loudly-voiced wants for legitimate demands. Not permissiveness – which relativizes truth and turns sensibilities into self-justified movements. [What we need is real mercy](#) which, instead of condoning or condemning, looks first to the dignity of persons before it thoughtfully engages the difference of ideas.



That's the distinctive mark of this year's holiday season in the Catholic Church. Next week (on December 8) the **Jubilee Year of Mercy** begins. [As Antonio Spadaro explains it](#), “mercy” is more than just a favorite word of this popular pope; mercy is the key to understanding Francis's entire pontificate. His words and deeds demonstrate that mercy generates a pastoral attitude, expresses a doctrinal truth, and reveals the substance of the Gospel message.

In the midst of real aggression, discrimination, and oppression, showing mercy is our way, as followers of Christ, to go on the offensive. Coming to see the face of God embracing us, we will be better able to go out and recognize that same divine face in others who need our welcoming.

Then, perhaps, the proliferation of giving and taking offense will end. Then, hopefully, the Church will be seen as the “oasis of mercy” that it is meant to be ([Bull of Indiction](#), no. 12). Then, finally, we shall all have a truly safe space in which to live.



There's a reason for the season (12-11-15)

It never ceases to amaze me how Christmas can cause such consternation.

There's the annual clamoring over what greeting to offer – because apparently wishes for merriment and happiness improperly worded can be taken as microaggressions. Why reference to what angels announced and shepherds sang about is offensive to anyone may be an even greater mystery than the glorious event itself.

There's the Knights of Columbus campaign to [“Keep Christ in Christmas”](#) featuring television and radio ads, poster contests, and magnetic decals for your car. It's a worthy goal, dutifully upheld by faithful gentlemen, though one may wonder why their banners are unfurled outside places of worship. Are church-goers the real cause for concern?



And there's the savvy [evangomercial](#) from [Catholics Come Home](#), which seeks to remind viewers of the real priority at this time of year, despite the visually odd juxtaposition of Santa Claus and the newborn child.

This year, thanks to social media, there's even more to gripe about in this sacred season.

[Starbucks](#) caused a different kind of stirring in their cups because of their cups. The classic “Charlie Brown Christmas” led [the first couple](#) to proclaim that Christmas is all about the environment since the cartoon characters “teach us that tiny trees just need a little love.” And the [American Atheists](#) are now proclaiming to drivers that “The things that are most important during the holidays ... have nothing to do with religion.”



Whether championing the Christmas cause, or enduring the seasonal calumny, the trends reveal a deeper truth. Christmas – the Incarnation of the Son of God as a baby born in a manger – touches people deeply, in every age and place. Whether affirmed or denied, the holiday is a holy day, for it speaks to that natural inclination shared by all human beings to reach beyond themselves and be united with a transcendent source of all goodness.

By now, [Virginia knows there is a Santa Claus](#). For thousands of years, Christians (and people of good will) have known that there's another reason for the season ... “The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us.”

And this truth endures, no matter what madness the world experiences. It's up to us to make it known. Whether in greetings or ads, but most of all in our daily outlook and personal bearing, this is once again the real reason for our joy.

*featured image cropped from [www.forbes.com](#)
other images as linked*



O ... it's time to sing (12-18-15)

The time is nigh. The day draws near. We have entered the Octave before Christmas.

It's not to be confused with the Octave of Christmas (Dec 25-Jan 1), nor those twelve days of Christmas about which [children](#), and now [minions](#), gleefully sing.

No, the Octave before Christmas brings the Advent season to its culmination. For seven days (the Christmas vigil being the eighth day), we are invited to join in prayerful anticipation of the blessed event, as was done in monasteries of old. Each evening they would sing the "O" Antiphons – a series of exclamations that find their origin in biblical prophecies. [Some even think](#) that the clever monks used the antiphons to spell out (in Latin) what we believe and what we hope: "Tomorrow, I will come."

The haunting verses invite meditation on the cosmic meaning of the Incarnation. They also offer a concise Scriptural treatise on the identity of the Messiah and on what our waiting world hopes from Him. ([Click here to listen and learn.](#))

O WISDOM, O holy Word of God ...
come and show your people the way to salvation.

O SACRED LORD of ancient Israel ...
come, stretch out your mighty hand to set us free.

O FLOWER OF JESSE'S STEM ...
come, let nothing keep you from coming to our aid.

O KEY OF DAVID ...
come, break down the walls of death ... and lead your captive people into freedom.

O RADIANT DAWN ...
come, shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death.

O KING OF ALL THE NATIONS ...
come and save the creature you fashioned from the dust.

O EMMANUEL ...
come and set us free, Lord our God.



Each offers a good thought in our minds to say ... and a hope for which our world needs to pray ... so that next week we will have, a truly Happy Christmas day.

featured image cropped from www.usccb.org



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

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

And [88% of all New Year's resolutions end in failure!](#) Personal progress presupposes vision and willpower. Seeing clearly and choosing wisely matter most. Devices control neither.

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

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

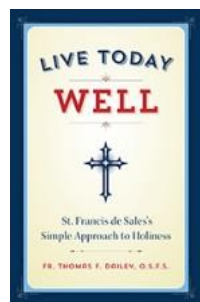
The cultivation of silence remains a worthy goal, particularly for growth in the spiritual life. Rest from the dizzying drone of mundane affairs is needed in order for transcendence.

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

(medium.com)



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



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

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

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

Resolve instead to stay plugged in during 2016 – not just to the digital world in which we live, but by retreating into the divine world in which we can thrive.

featured image from www.kswebplan.com



The Death of Discernment (1-8-16)

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

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

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

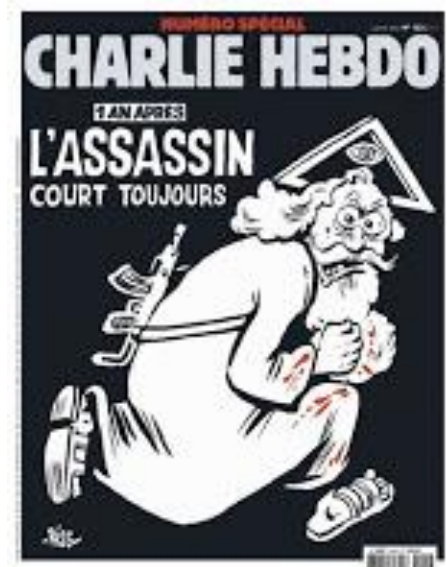
(from ilsismografo.blogspot.it) – Obviously the unpleasing cartoon can be read in two different ways even if, at the end, the two are quite close. In the first case God himself would be the author of the massacre of a year ago and is still a fugitive criminal, or the cause of this horrible crime would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

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

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

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

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



*featured image from Filippo Monteforte/AFP/Getty Images
cover image from ilsismografo.blogspot.it*

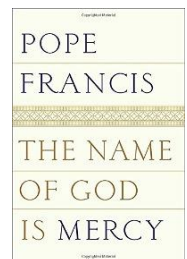


Francis doublespeak (1-22-16)

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

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

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



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

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

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

featured image courtesy of Herbert Winklehner, OSFS



A New Logic for Mercy (1-29-16)

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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



Faithful Trolls? (2-5-16)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Church has now entered into the Jubilee Year of Mercy proclaimed by Pope Francis. Living as well in the digital realm, we find this a favorable time to ask ourselves how we can communicate that quintessential dimension of the Gospel via social communications. We might start by looking at [the logic by which we communicate mercy](#). Then, perhaps, when we do go online, we might share [more merciful tweets, posts and comments](#) ... so that virtue can confound the trolls.



Airborne Works of Mercy (2-19-16)

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

featured image combined from Reuters and CNN



Cell phone tricks ‘n treats (3-4-16)

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

Cell phone craziness (3-18-16)

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



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

(courtesy Nolan Neiman)



(abcnews.com)

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



(eventioggi.net)



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

(wgntv.com)

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

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

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

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

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

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

featured image from www.christianitytoday.com



Inspiragram (3-24-16)

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

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

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

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

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



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



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

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

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



Holy Hype! (4-8-16)

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

+ JHS

Invoking the care of the Holy Family of Nazareth, I am happy to send you my exhortation “Amoris laetitia” for the good of all the families and persons, young and old, entrusted to your pastoral ministry. United in the Lord Jesus, with Mary and Joseph, please do not forget to pray for me.

Franciscus

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

But enough of the hype ... now I’ve got to get to work actually reading the [264-page text](#)!

featured images from www.vatican.va

Amoris Laetitia – an “ideal” teaching (4-15-16)

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

As usual, extreme views fail to be accurate!

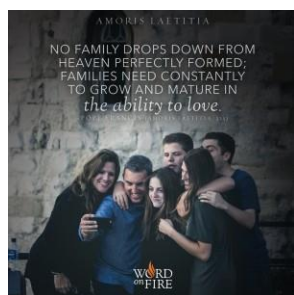
That marriage is an “ideal” expression of human love is clear from the pope’s repeated use of the word, which appears 21 times in the text. But “ideal” does not mean for him that marriage should be “idealized” (no. 36). The ideal of covenantal marriage is also real and, with grace, realizable and realistic.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

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

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

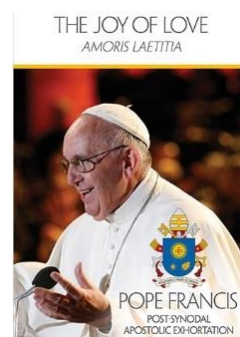
The pope describes the character of this ideal love as “demanding” (no. 38), “high” (no. 200), “beautiful” (no. 230), and “evangelical” (no. 308). But he also notes that the ideal is not stereotypical; it is embodied in, and gives shape to, a mosaic of married lives (no. 57).

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



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

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



featured images from usccb.org and wordonfire.org



#ComMisericordia50

(4-29-16)

It must be big – it has its own hashtag!

The 50th World Communications Day takes place this year on Sunday, May 8th. This is the only “[world day](#)” called for by the Second Vatican Council and is celebrated in most countries on the Sunday before Pentecost.

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



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

But we plan to change that ... at least locally!

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

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

The symposium concludes with a luncheon celebration, during which the Seminary will present the first Cardinal Foley Award in Communications to a media professional who excels in the field. (Contact [Cathy Peacock](#) at the Seminary to reserve your tickets for the luncheon.) The inaugural winner of the Cardinal Foley



Award is longtime Philly favorite **PAT CIARROCCHI**, who recently retired from CBS-3 after more than thirty years in television and radio broadcasting. Among the many stories she covered, Pat shared with Philadelphians live reports from the canonization of Philadelphia native St. Katherine Drexel in 2000, the funeral of Pope John Paul II in 2005, the historic resignation of Pope Benedict XVI in 2013, and most recently the World Meeting of Families and visit of Pope Francis last September.

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

In today’s digital world of communications, the hashtag wields a new power. It may not be a divine sign, but our new Cardinal Foley Symposium plans to make the most of it!

featured images from <http://www.chiesacattolica.it/GMCS2016>



Parents beware ... and be wary! (5-20-16)

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

And the Word was made graphic (6-3-16)

“The Bible Translated into Emoticons” is an attempt – full-hearted but fool-hardy – to rewrite the Sacred Scriptures in a new language prevalent in digital media.



The author, Kamran Kastle, created a [Kickstarter campaign](#) to fund this funky initiative which he hopes will get more people to read the Bible, “particularly teenagers and children.” To-date, though, it hasn’t gotten much kick, with only 17 backers and \$105 raised (out of a goal of \$25,000).

It’s not really offensive, just odd, perhaps off-putting. Much as imagery may be more appealing to a younger generation, it’s difficult to decipher the “text” without the words. Can you figure out this bit of Good News from St. Paul’s Letter to the Romans?



Whether it’s with emoticons or emojis – yes, [there is a difference!](#) – digital denotation in graphics just doesn’t do it for communicating the divine Word. Without the text itself, one can hardly make sense of the images. (Romans 10:13: “For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.”)

The problem, though, is not merely transliteration. A scriptural conversion from words to images has its inherent challenges, including the need to invent new images for biblical narratives (e.g., parting the Red Sea!). But the bigger issue – and the one that makes the text of the Bible so significant – is the conveyance of divine meaning for human flourishing.

Imaging has always been a key element of inspiration. [The aesthetic of spiritual theology](#) is built on the creative imagination at work in contemplating the sense and significance of God’s interactions with the created world and human beings in that world. Case in point: [the Sacred Heart of Jesus](#), whose solemnity is celebrated this day.



We have words to narrate the story of love that runs through and flows from the heart of Jesus on the Cross. Based on those biblical tales, artists use their talents to express this saving truth. But whether in the words of the Gospels that we read/hear, or in the images that adorn our churches and homes, the reality is something that we must picture. In our minds and in our hearts, that image exercises its power by communicating so much more than the meaning of words. As Pope Francis said in the first of yesterday’s [meditations for the Jubilee of Priests](#):

That blood is the blood of Christ, the blood of the new and eternal covenant of mercy, poured out for us and for all, for the forgiveness of sins. We contemplate that blood by going in and out of his heart and the heart of the Father. That is our sole treasure, the only thing we have to give to the world: the blood that purifies and brings peace to every reality and all people. The blood of the Lord that forgives sins. The blood that is true drink, for it reawakens and revives what was dead from sin.

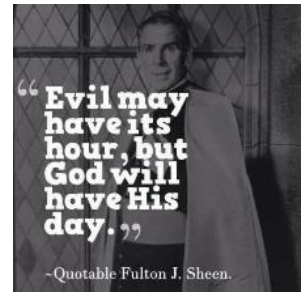
New apps to share the Bible can make for a good [project](#). But the inspiring images conveyed by the actual words of Sacred Scripture have stood the test of time ... and will do so even in the digital age.

images from www.play.google.com and www.kickstarter.com/projects/1973395269/the-bible-translated-into-emoticons

Judgmental Religion (6-17-16)

Fueled by the ease of social media use – where posts become pronouncements and images incite sympathy – the religion “wars” rage on.

It didn't take very long for the tragedy in Orlando to turn to rants about religion. Pundits of every kind, and many with no expertise, have opined about the connection between faith and those fatalities.



[Religious leaders have responded in a variety of ways](#), some even at the extremes of [scornful sermons](#) or [institutional recriminations](#). Closer to the heart of all, [Pope Francis](#) expressed his horror at the “terrible and absurd violence” of this historic U.S. tragedy. Sadly, the disregard for the sanctity of life remains an all-too-common characteristic of today's world.

Whether hatred and violence have religious roots is a perennial topic of discussion. Tragedies like the one in Orlando turn up the dial on this debate, along with the vehemence of opposing opinions. Oddly, though, talk about religion in social settings is waning.

A [recent survey on religion in everyday life](#) from the PEW Research Center shows that “Many Americans don't argue about religion – or even talk about it.” Whether because of aversion to it, or simple avoidance of it, “About half of U.S. adults tell us they seldom (33%) or never (16%) talk about religion with people outside their family. And roughly four-in-ten say they seldom (26%) or never (13%) discuss religion even with members of their immediate family.”

But no one says why. Even fewer dare to ask whether we should argue about such things. What is that majority of silent believers thinking?

Perhaps they simply don't know how to argue about anything anymore, without the dialogue devolving into mass recrimination (pun intended). Perhaps they are not convinced of what they believe, and fear that they might actually be wrong about what they hold to be true. Perhaps they are afraid in the other direction ... that the truth of what they believe has implications they would rather not admit. Perhaps they simply think religion is not all that important or worth the trouble to debate.

Whatever the motivation for the religious reticence, it would seem that this silent majority suffers from a common delusion – namely, the supposition that religion imposes more than it proposes, that talk about religion puts freedom of conscience at risk, that arguing about adherence to spiritually-held truths necessarily denigrates reason and instigates acrimony.

Sadly, believers themselves can approach the faith in this way and use it to run roughshod over others. But vitriolic fundamentalism is not the fault of faith.

Ironically, Archbishop Charles Chaput stunned listeners at a seminary gala with [the call for people of faith to be “a lot more judgmental” in public discourse](#). His logic is unassailable: mercy requires justice, justice requires truth, and truth demands the ability to think clearly and judge rightly between good and evil.

In this Jubilee Year, a valuable way to respond to tragedy is to find (again) the courage to talk about faith ... not by way of bellicose blogs or digital tirades, but in the interpersonal context of a mercy that seeks what is true and good for all people.

featured image from <https://www.pinterest.com/vickd715/venerable-fulton-sheen/>

Millennials, come home! (6-24-16)

Just in time for the summer holidays, new evangomercials™ are calling out to today's prodigal young.

It's not that they've squandered all they have on dissolute living – as the character in the biblical parable had done. Nor are they so desperate for food that they feed themselves with the husks of what the animals have eaten.

Still, the biblical tale continues, albeit in a new way. Not unlike generations before it, the “millennials” seem to be losing their way, as they feed on the lure of secular definitions of success. According to PEW studies, some 80% of Catholics in this generation (young adults ages 18-34) abandon their faith in their early twenties.

It's every Catholic parent's fear. It's every Catholic's challenge to invite them to come to their senses.

One new way to do so, [according to the ZENIT news agency](#), is through modern media. As part of its renowned television campaigns, which have drawn more than half a million people back to the Church, Catholics Come Home® is launching four new ads aimed at this younger generation and has created a companion website dedicated to this demographic.

In the ZENIT article, the founder of the campaign (Tom Peterson) explains why. “We took to heart numerous studies showing that American millennials are struggling with addictions, suicide, out-of-wedlock births, joblessness, and other significant life challenges at catastrophic rates,” he says. “Our hope is to reduce these disheartening statistics and guide young adults toward healthier, joy-filled lifestyles by introducing them to—or reminding them of—the importance of faith.”

For [screenagers](#) who have entered into young adulthood, the visual environment is their natural and common home. Appealing to that sense, and to the search for meaning that lies at the core of every emerging adult's life, the high-quality ads demonstrate the positive power of today's digital media.

The ads engage this cohort's particular interests: the romantic look of young love, a clarion call to a better world, a popular celebrity (Eduardo Verastegui), and, of course, the requisite screenshot of the guy in white.



The ads also respond to the attention span typical of social media, with each being no longer than 30 seconds in length! [Watch them all at this link.](#)

The rest of us – especially those who have long since passed the realm of “young adult” – probably know a few millennials, so let's use our own social media to pass along this good message about the Good News. Just post or tag or tweet or share – or if you don't know how, just ask a millennial to do it for you!

images cropped from www.catholicscomehome.com

