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## **“A View from the Chair”**



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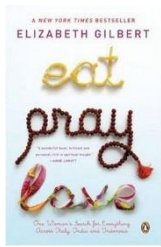
**2016-2017**

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## Eat, Pray, Love revisited (8-5-16)

The 2006 memoir by [Elizabeth Gilbert](#), which remained on the *New York Times* best seller list for more than three-and-a-half years is hardly a devotional classic, even with Oprah's endorsement. It garnered additional popularity in [movie form](#), starring Julia Roberts. But the tale and its telling were also beset with stinging [criticism](#).

Still, the title holds a certain spiritual appeal. The simplification it suggests parallels the saintliness of [John Vianney](#), patron of priests and a model for seminarians, whose feast we celebrate on August 4. As the Curé d'Ars himself writes: "This is the glorious duty of man: to pray and to love. If you pray and love, that is where a man's happiness lies." (That one also has to eat may be assumed!)



Recently, Vianney's locus of happiness was on vibrant display. And the size of the one-site audience far exceeded any TV studio or movie theater. [World Youth Day 2016 in Krakow](#) gave living witness to the directions for joy intimated by the book's title and incarnated in the saint's life.

*The youth did eat!* I'm told that pierogis and soplica were especially popular local treats.

*The youth did pray!* They quietly reflected during Eucharistic Adoration and humbly confessed in sacramental reconciliation. They participated in an unprecedented and animated [Way of the Cross](#). And they worshiped with an estimated three million-member congregation for the final Mass with Pope Francis.



(Jesus Huerta / krakow2016.com)



(en.radiovaticana.va)



(ctv.va)

*And the youth did love!* As pilgrims gathered in faith and hope, they shared the joy of the gospel with one and all, fellows and foreigners alike. And in doing that, [as John Allen points out](#), this global conglomeration of young people gave a boisterous and definitive response to some of the more contentious challenges the world now faces:

In effect, this was a vast throng of loving, caring, positive young people saying to the Islamic State and the other wreckers of havoc in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, "We refuse to be terrorized." ... (T)hese young people exuded a different vision for the future of humanity, one based on a global solidarity, respecting differences of class, race and culture without viewing them as divisive, and embracing religion not as the problem but as the wellspring of the solution.

Elizabeth Gilbert's book was just "One Woman's Search for Everything Across Italy, India and Indonesia." St. John Vianney knew where to search for real meaning – in the tender heart of God's mercy. And now our youth – who have eaten, prayed, and loved *en masse* in Krakow – are returning to their homes and to the search for meaning in their own lives. Hopefully, they found the way in Poland ... and will evangelize in new ways to show the rest of us where real happiness is to be found.



## An online shush! (8-19-16)

It's not just a library thing anymore. "Shushing" is going digital.

Beginning next week, NPR joins the ranks of other major digital news outlets in no longer permitting online comments about their stories. [According to the managing editor's announcement](#), the reason for discontinuing the practice is "to prioritize and strengthen other ways of building community and engagement with our audience."

Anyone who has ever read the slew (and sludge) of online comments following a story knows better. Readers are being shushed ... because most of them should be.

Online commentary has become an open door for self-expression, regardless of content. The ease with which to say something online invites all manner of opining, much of which is nothing more than virtual screaming or vitriolic venting. (Montgomery's post, itself, drew 1,242 comments ... some of which prove the point.)



*Hugo Rojo/NPR*

There's the rub. Interactivity is the key feature of digital communications. It's what makes a medium "social." It's the reason networking sites have far more traffic than web sites.

But "social" means more than many at once. Sociability, even in the anonymous world of the web, is supposed to be about people being together in some way, whether for work or leisure. Being me with others calls forth my own responsibility.

In the non-digital world there are ways to enforce this basic principle. One who speaks out of line, insults, demeans, or just says nonsensical things would not last long in a group conversation. A guilty party will quickly be ignored or excluded or even punched in the nose. The point is that when people are actually together, and not just virtually connected, social norms are more readily applied. Not so online. Hence, the only recourse is to make speaking out no longer possible.

And that's a shame. For the great feature of online media is the potential for fostering dialogue. The reach and range of potential interaction give to modern media its "social" character and promise. Even more so, interacting with others reflects a fundamental characteristic of being human, our relationality. And virtuous relations are the foundation to society. As Pope Benedict XVI explained for the [43rd World Communications Day](#) in 2009, "Human hearts are yearning for a world where love endures, where gifts are shared, where unity is built, where freedom finds meaning in truth, and where identity is found in communion."

Alas, that yearning goes unfulfilled in most online chat sections. The decision to prevent digital discussion reflects the sad reality that most online comments lack a basic respect for others and their viewpoints (however faulty one thinks they may be). Dialogue, whether actual or virtual, presupposes decency.

It also demands real listening. That skill is a hard enough habit to build; [as Stephen Covey famously quipped](#), "most people listen with the intent to reply, not to understand." In the virtual world, where there's no voice behind the words or face to encounter, learning to listen is harder still. But without it, we cannot understand one another, nor, in turn, can we thrive together.

So the next time you type that wicked comment that all the world just has to know, pause before you post ... otherwise we might all end up getting shushed.

*featured image from "Lynette the Librarian" on Pinterest*



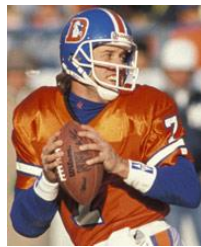
## Digital Mindset (8-26-16)

Another academic year has begun at colleges and [universities](#) and [seminaries](#), too. With it comes the annual publication, thanks to Beloit College, of the [“mindset list”](#) for the incoming freshmen.

First created in 1998, the annual list reveals those things that members of the Class of 2020 (born in 1998) have always known and/or never experienced. It reminds the rest of us who have first-hand knowledge of those things that we’re getting old!

This “generation” of new students has yet to be definitively classified. Generation Z, iGen, Centennials, and Re-Gen have been proposed as monikers to distinguish this age-group from the Millennial cohort. Tammy Erickson, who works in generational research, [describes the main difference](#). The Millennials were formed “by (their) experience with 9/11 and the increasing ubiquity of technology.” This new group “is substantially formed by the great recession, accelerating climate change, and completely native use of technology.”

Whatever they will be called, the Class of 2020 has some serious athletic deficiencies in their mindset, among which are that “John Elway and Wayne Gretzky have always been retired” (#49) and “The Ali/Frazier boxing match ... was between the daughters of Muhammad and Joe” (#14).



Theologically, the freshman probably see no need to take a course on Ecumenism, since for them “Catholics and Lutherans have always been in agreement on how to get to heaven” (#24).

But most telling is the cultural shift in digital technology, which covers 7 of the 60 items in the list. For them, entertainment is free of limited schedules (#15) thanks to TiVo, yet filled with the animation of DreamWorks (#47). Their shopping is hassle-free thanks to eBay (#1), and they never need to stand in line at airline counters (#52). Digital is the realm of their healthcare, with real-time x-rays (#35), and of their workspace, where iMacs have always been (#53).

But digital communications also has its drawbacks for this generation. First, they prefer to interact with text messages and often ignore email (#26). What they don’t know, and need to be taught, is the difference between informal, friendly interaction and the world of formal, professional communications. The latter requires real words ([not just graphics](#)), proper grammar (yes, it matters!), and actual sentences (which express complete thoughts)!

Second, the music they listen to may come via the randomness of “shuffle mode” or the specificity of playlists, but one thing is sadly lacking: “They never heard Harry Caray try to sing during the seventh inning at Wrigley Field” (#3)! They know not the joy that they miss. Oh well ... they’ll have to settle for a [YouTube mix](#).



*feature image from [www.pbs.org/newshour](http://www.pbs.org/newshour)*





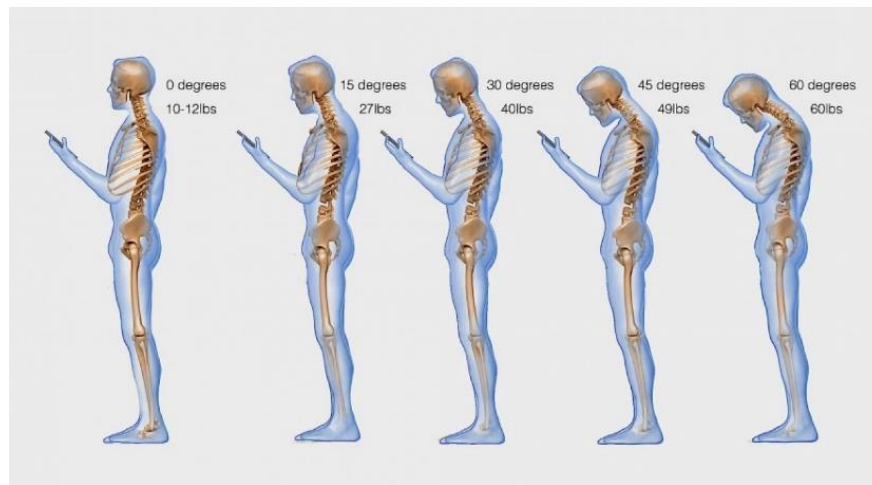
## Digital labor pains (9-2-16)

[Labor Day](#) marks our centuries-old celebration of the social and economic achievements of all those who by sweat of brow and brawn of hands have contributed to the strength, prosperity, and well-being of the nation.

Whatever the type, whatever the accomplishments, labor entails work and work can be painful. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, in 2014 (the most recent year for which data is available), there were more than three cases of injury or illness reported by private industry employers for every 100 workers in the U.S.

Now there's a new danger to face, in labor as well as in leisure. It comes with that device in everyone's hands.

Research first published in 2014 looks at the physical health deficits of staring for so long at smartphones. As the head-tilt increases to view the screen, so does the weight the neck has to bear. Speaking of this "text neck" phenomenon, [Dr. Kenneth Hansraj](#) puts the math at "700 to 1,400 hours per year" that people are putting stress on their spines by looking down as they do at their devices. Here's his image of the added stress:



Beyond the pain arising from "text neck," studies are pointing to other [digital disabilities](#). These range from impaired hand functions, to thumbs that tingle with pain, and even "[cellphone elbow](#)" (cubital tunnel syndrome). It's not yet an ergonomic epidemic, but overuse of digital devices compromises our health. Beyond the physical complications, researchers also point to the [psychotic effects](#) of spending too much time with devices, with dire descriptions of what "electronic cocaine" or "digital heroin" is doing to children as it turns the youngest generation into "[Glow Kids](#)."

On Labor Day, we give thanks for all those whose efforts have contributed to building our nation. Nowadays we recognize also the technological geniuses whose work has revolutionized the world of our communications.

At picnics and parties this holiday weekend, our devices will no doubt be in full use. But, as Pope Benedict XVI reminds us in his [2009 message for World Communications Day](#), our "desire for communication and friendship is rooted in our very nature as human beings and cannot be adequately understood as a response to technical innovations." And now we know that those innovations might cause our bodies and minds more pain.

With a simple suggestion, Dr. Hansraj reminds us of the truth about using digital devices: "just make sure your head is up." Whether you're on your smartphone or not, that's good advice in many ways!



## Unable to disconnect (9-9-16)

*Feeling exhausted? Maybe you're just too popular!*

That's not really the answer, but it may correlate to new research that finds deleterious consequences to checking email at all hours of the day or night. That so many people want to chat is causing deep unrest.

But the problem isn't with 24/7 accessibility, nor with the seemingly endless stream of e-conversations. [The study](#) suggests that expectation is the culprit, not time spent on email. It's an expectation rife in organizations whose policies or people create an "always on" culture. This, in turn, generates "anticipatory stress" at the thought of having to deal with so much SMS. The result: "modern workplace technologies may be hurting the very employees that those technologies were designed to help."

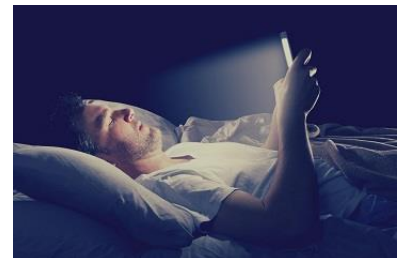
But banning email on weekends ([as France has tried to do](#)) or instituting "email free days" can't fix what is a fundamentally anthropological fault. That fault lies in the assumption that "always on" means greater production. It's a perennial problem that turns desire into drive, and makes of "more" a motivation for achievement. This is the Pelagian sensibility with which our economic outlook is saddled in thinking that if I do more I'll have more, and if I have more I'll be happier.

That is a fallacy.

Nevertheless some businesses continue to perpetuate the idea and stress the values of time management. As former Google guru and now Yahoo CEO [Marissa Mayer](#) recently said: "Could you work 130 hours in a week? ... The answer is yes, if you're strategic about when you sleep, when you shower, and how often you go to the bathroom."

But the notion that sleep is something strategic, or hygiene an interruption to be managed better, reveals a deeper dysfunction. It is to be found not in the [blue-light background](#) of digital devices, nor in the overflow of waiting-to-be-answered email. The deeper problem concerns what we value most. Simply put, even if by some reckoning four o'clock in the morning is [the most productive hour of the day](#), is the work we produce at that dark hour ultimately worth the exhaustion?

*Rommel Canlas / Shutterstock*



Communications technology does come to our aid in many ways. It has spawned ever-increasing efficiencies and enables us to do so much more in the limited time we have.

But time is not our enemy. As the one thing in the universe over which we have no control, time is an existential limitation. It governs our lives (cf. Genesis 1:14-19). But, as that which forces us to gain perspective in life, time is even more so a gift from the Creator. Consequently, accepting this limitation (humility) rather than futilely seeking to overcome it (hubris) is the first step to human flourishing.

An important part of that flourishing is keeping in contact with others. Nevertheless, [unplugging may lead to finding even more \(or better\) connections](#).

Disconnecting is a decision, something we are always able to do if we so choose. Getting a good night's sleep will help, too!

*featured image from [m.channel3000.com/madison-magazine/home-lifestyle/disconnect-finding-connections-by-unplugging/40208438](http://m.channel3000.com/madison-magazine/home-lifestyle/disconnect-finding-connections-by-unplugging/40208438)*



## The pope and cell phones (9-16-16)

*If one didn't know any better, it would be easy to think Pope Francis has a thing against cell phones.*

Last November, at a [general audience on the subject of conviviality](#), he spoke of the “barely familial” family in which “children are engrossed with a computer at the table, or a mobile phone, and do not talk to each other.” For Pope Francis there’s something wrong with that picture: “this is not a family, it is like a boarding house.”

Then just this week, in his [meditation at daily Mass](#), the pope proffered this example of those in need of care: “how many times while eating, do people watch the TV or write messages on their cell phones. ... Even within the heart of society, which is the family, there is no encounter.” Even the *Wall Street Journal* concurs, as in this comical take on the papal message.

Let’s not be unsettled by this. There’s no need for opinionated decrees hailing this a magisterial moment in which the church’s supreme teaching authority denounces the sins of the digital revolution.

After all, the pope knows better! He who is the subject of record-breaking Twitter feeds knows full well the changed environment of the world in which we live. All he has to do is recall the [“starry sear of cameras”](#) that captured his greeting as POPE Francis, and compare it to the moment when Pope Benedict XVI was introduced, as these Associated Press photos do.

Recall, too, Pope Francis’s very [first message for the World Day of Communications](#), in which he glowingly praises the new technology as “something truly good, a gift from God.” “In a world like this,” he writes, “media can help us to feel closer to one another, creating a sense of the unity of the human family which can in turn inspire solidarity and serious efforts to ensure a more dignified life for all. Good communication helps us to grow closer, to know one another better, and ultimately, to grow in unity.”



What is true is the experience of which the pope speaks! We’ve probably all seen it, whether at our own tables or when out on the town. And, as [a recent Brookings survey reports](#), it’s not just [a fault of young people](#); the data shows a clear trend of American adults “spending more of their non-work/education time on a screen.” Looking up is, for all of us, an increasingly [physical](#) and [social](#) need.

But the pope doesn’t fault the screens or the phones. The thrust of his critique is not about mechanisms (media) but about mentalities. The homiletic contrast he depicts with his home-spun example is the difference between sensibly encountering another person (stopping, looking, touching, speaking) and merely crossing paths in the same space. What he calls forth in his little congregation at Mass – and, by digital extension, in all those who read and hear his words – is the never-ending need to be compassionate rather than indifferent to the very real person(s) with whom we interact, whether in person or via social media.

Concerning the instruments of social communication, there’s nothing radical in this pope’s pronouncements. Then again, maybe there is. For at the root of his message, just as at the heart of the Gospel, is the exhortation to encounter in one another the very image of God.

*featured image from brandonvogt.com*





## News about the news (9-23-16)

*When the news is about the news, it's probably a slow news day!* Except at the Vatican, where there were two such stories this week. Neither one is a real “flash” but both have something worth considering.

The first is that Pope Francis gave another talk. That's not exactly news! But this talk was [to Italian journalists](#), about three key aspects of their profession. One can read between the papal lines to see that each aspect applies to all of us.

(1) Love the truth. Because “relationship is at the heart of every communication,” the pope upholds honesty as a journalist's guiding principle. After all, a story may be “bad news” in its subject matter, but if it's “wrong” news in terms of its content, then it ends up being both worthless (having no foundation) and dangerous (for it will be assumed to be true). Considering how much the rest of us talk about the news, share it, and critique it socially, it's critical that truth be told -- by writers as well as readers.

(2) Live with professionalism. For the pope, journalism goes beyond advancing particular interests (economic or political); it engages in the very construction of society. Stories not only report, they also create something: a sense of things, a mood, an awareness, a value, etc. That's why “social” so well describes new media, not just its popularity but its tremendous potential to shape a world, if only we would use words and images to build up instead of tear down.

(3) Respect human dignity. It's hardly news that “behind the simple recounting of events are sentiments, emotions and, for sure, the life of persons.” But when journalists forget this, the news can become an “arm of destruction.” Headlines and posts and pictures that foment fear or increase confrontation may be attention-getting, but at what price? “If it bleeds, it leads” says the old journalistic dictum. The pope's words are more sobering: “an article that comes to be published today will be substituted tomorrow with another, but the life of a person unjustly defamed can be destroyed forever.” In telling the news or sharing a story, we all seek to say or write about *something*. We end up, always, communicating about *someone*.

The second story is about HOW news works, especially in the Vatican. A set of statutes guiding the Secretariat for Communication was just released. “So what?” is a legitimate question to ask! Here are two answers:

For one thing, [as John Allen points out](#), structuring the new entity puts some meat on the bones of the papal reform. It also signals the strategic importance of communication in the Church's administrative makeup. The content may be little more than legislative language, but the story here is that real progress is underway.

Of greater interest to those outside the curial box is the enormity of what is happening there. Listed in the statutes are the multiple “organisms” whose confluence the Secretariat is undertaking: a pontifical council, an international press office, radio broadcasts, television programming, daily and weekly newspapers, a printing press, a publishing house, a photographic service, multiple social media platforms, and a massive web site -- all of which work to inform the world in multiple languages!



The Church's mission is to proclaim Good News. From the Babel of modern media will come, we hope, a dynamic and coordinated transmission of that message. When it is honest, socially constructive and humanly respectful -- that, indeed, will be big news!



## Trust and hope for history (9-30-16)

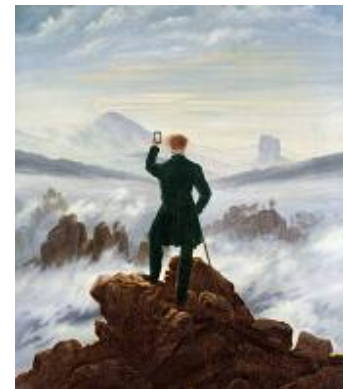
As is customary on the feast of the archangels, yesterday the Vatican's Secretariat for Communication announced the theme of the next World Day of Social Communications, to be celebrated on May 28, 2017. With reference to a prophetic utterance of a core biblical belief – “Fear not, for I am with you” (Isa 43:5) – the next annual celebration will focus on “Communicating Hope and Trust in Our Time.” (The actual papal message will be published on January 24, 2017.)

Interestingly, [the notification from the Secretariat](#) introduces a subtle change to the name of this annual celebration. Apparently, it is now the World Day of *Social* Communications, which rightly acknowledges the powerful impact of the world's prevailing digital environment.

That impact, according to the announcement, can nevertheless be negative. The not-so-subtle opening line discloses the sad reality: “Numbness of conscience or letting desperation get the better of us are two possible ‘diseases’ that our current communication system can cause.”

The Secretariat goes on to explain that our consciences can be “cauterised” by the distance between media connections and actual contact when it comes to the reality of human need, a gap that hides “the complexity of the dramas faced by men and women.” Beyond ignorance, today's media might also facilitate a sense of hopelessness, particularly when the real dangers and fears of life are communicated primarily as some sort of “spectacle.”

The timing of this theme couldn't be better. Trending now is the link between social communications and personal or social dis-ease. [Recent research](#) points to overuse of the Internet as leaving young people “more at risk of mental health problems.” In his recently published book entitled *The End of Absence*, Michael Harris worries that in [a world of constant connection](#) we “lose the ability to decide for ourselves what we think about who we are.” And who we are may be someone who “used to be a human being” – as Andrew Sullivan suggests in his [autobiographical essay](#) recently in *New York Magazine*. Sullivan posits that social communications have created an “epidemic of distraction” that threatens our very souls, and he concludes that “if the noise does not relent, we might even forget we have any.”



Hence the need for worldwide awareness of the promise and peril of social communications. The Vatican's engagement with this contemporary environment brings [the Church's presence](#) into this vital realm ... in the hope of preserving our souls. As the 2017 theme suggests, a divine presence does remain amid the tumultuous din of the digital world. An emphasis on the vertical or transcendent dimension is not to be ignored. It's becomes (again) Good News for our lives, when we recognize “how (God) too, through the dramatic scenario of this world, is writing the history of salvation.”



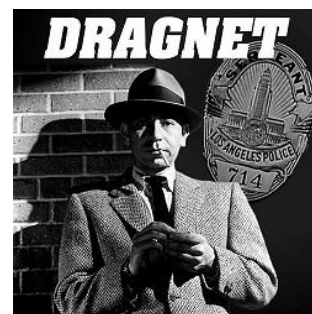
Ultimately, that's our message to tell, in stories and images that make the most of today's means of social communications. Clearly, a message of “trust and hope for history” is one that our world still needs to hear. Plan ahead to join us on May 24, 2017 at Saint Charles Borromeo Seminary for the annual [John Cardinal Foley Symposium](#) when we share perspectives on this timely theme.

*illustrations by Kim Dong-kyu from nymag.com*

## A Communications Dragnet (10-21-16)

*We could use old Joe Friday again.*

He was the iconic police detective in [the Dragnet entertainment franchise](#). Each show in the series used to open with a promise: the story you are about to hear (or see) is true. Joe Friday would always get to the truth. Along the way his mantra was not-at-all elegant but totally relevant. He insisted on “Just the facts, ma’am.”



In the current election cycle, wouldn't it be nice if we could just get the facts! But it's not that black 'n white.

We call for transparency. But that depends first on what one is looking at. Sources can be fictionalized, images can be photoshopped, and narratives can be manipulated. Add pointed words to a cropped image (a meme) and accuracy can be fudged even more.

We wish for objectivity. But is that possible? It's quite clear that journalists and media are biased; in some way, we all are. Bias can color one's perspective. It can motivate certain questions. It can exclude alternatives. There's great danger when believing one's bias is true morphs into trying to prove it is, subtly or overtly.

We want the truth. But what we get is information. They're not the same thing. The difference gets dramatic when its conveyance is digital. As [Sam Wang](#), professor of neuroscience at Princeton and co-founder of the Princeton Election Consortium, points out: “we have all kinds of sources of information available to us now, Facebook, Twitter, news feeds, talk radio, e-mail. We have all these channels of information, and it's really super hard for any individual to really cut through all that clutter and get accurate information, even if some of those channels of information are high quality. I think that actually these cognitive biases make it super tough for citizens to really get by in what should be a golden age of information.”

In the realm of social media, especially, it's hard to get by when truth is hard to come by. We get more chatter than conversation. We read more personal rants than topical analyses. We remain in a filter bubble or [echo chamber](#) created by our preferred sites and exchanged sights. We end up being even less informed.

We need “just the facts, ma’am” -- but they're hard to find.

One fact is clear. Pope Benedict XVI described it accurately in his [2008 message for World Communications Day](#): “Truly, there is no area of human experience ... in which the media have not become an integral part of interpersonal relations and of social, economic, political and religious development.”

Today that integral role lies at a crossroad. Which way will the media go, whether the professionals or the masses? Will they represent reality or determine it? Will their concern be self-promotion or service to society?

The current presidential election puts us at another crossroad. We will continue to read, hear, and see all kinds of stories. Most of them will contribute to the uncomfortability of the choice we face. Some of them may even be true.

He's no Joe Friday, but another popular figure tells us about the task we face come November 8. Interrogated by a news reporter, Pope Francis offered this terse advice to voters: “study the proposals well, pray, and choose in conscience!”

Those are just the facts.

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

## Digital works of mercy (11-4-16)

The Jubilee Year presses on toward its finale. In the meantime, Pope Francis urges us, by word and [example](#), to put mercy into practice. He speaks about it at general and special [audiences](#). He practices it in his “[Fridays of Mercy](#)” visits to folks on the peripheries. He quotes it on [Twitter](#) and shows it on [Instagram](#).



These expressions give life to what the pope said in his very [first Angelus address](#): “A bit of mercy makes the world less cold and more just.” Tried and true are the works of mercy, both corporal and spiritual.

But in a world where more encounters take place online than in physical space, what might the works of mercy look like? Papal thoughts have been edited into a list of [spiritual works of mercy in the digital world](#). What about the corporal works? I asked my class of digital natives, and here’s what they came up with:

CORPORAL	DIGITAL
FEED THE HUNGRY 	 Post the positive
GIVE DRINK TO THE THIRSTY 	 Like the like-less
SHELTER THE HOMELESS 	 Hashtag the homeless
CLOTHE THE NAKED 	 Buy one, give one
VISIT THE SICK 	 Send some care
VISIT THE IMPRISONED 	 Text to connect
BURY THE DEAD 	 Bury the hatchet

**Post the positive.** Humans hunger for connection. But online social networks tend to be filled with negativity, from nasty comments to devilish trolls. Be merciful by posting only positive thoughts and/or images.

**Like the like-less.** Everyone wants to be liked. Those on social media, especially, thirst for affirmation. Be merciful by giving a “like” to profiles or pages that could use one.

**Hashtag the homeless.** Many online sites allow donations based on the number of likes or shares. Be merciful by pledging a dime (or more!) to a charity for the homeless for each like of a photo you posted or each use of a hashtag you created.

**Buy one, give one.** This one already exists. Be merciful by buying yourself a pair of popular shoes through the “one for one” program that sends a free pair to children whose feet are naked. ([Click on the image to learn more.](#))



**Send some care.** Life online allows people to connect across space and time. Be merciful by “visiting” those in need with an [online care package](#).

**Text to connect.** Similarly, you can visit those in prison through mobile technology. Be merciful with “[text behind](#)” services that can have a personal and communal impact on the imprisoned. Or “[be an angel](#)” to children with a parent in prison.

**Bury the hatchet.** Even in a connected world, people lose contact. Sometimes the silence is intentional, perhaps mutual, in a relationship that’s virtually “dead.” Be merciful by reaching out to someone you haven’t heard from or talked to in a long time.

The works of mercy, both corporal and spiritual, have existed for millennia. Putting mercy into motion in today’s digital world might appear in new ways. Whatever the means or the medium, the works can bear great fruit. As Pope Francis recently said at a [general audience](#) on the subject, “I am convinced that, through these simple, daily actions, we can achieve a true cultural revolution, like there was in the past. **If every one of us, every day, does one of these, this will be a revolution in the world!** Everyone, each and every one of us.”





## Theology in the News (11-18-16)

Literally. This week saw a spate of newspaper stories in which, it seems, theological dialogue is now taking place in published interviews rather than in academic journals or church documents. Varying voices express continuing concern about *Amoris Laetitia*, the [apostolic exhortation](#) from Pope Francis on love in the family.

First came the “*dubia*” – [a series of questions](#) (“doubts”) put forth by four cardinals seeking formal clarification on questions raised by the papal text. Surprisingly the inquisitive churchmen went public with their queries. Why? Because, as they say, “The Holy Father has decided not to respond. We have interpreted his sovereign decision as an invitation to continue the reflection and the discussion, calmly and with respect. And so we are informing the entire people of God about our initiative, offering all of the documentation.”

Then came [a cardinal-to-be’s comments](#) about pastoral guidelines for implementing the papal teaching. Archbishop Kevin Farrell, the prefect of the new Vatican Dicastery for Laity, the Family and Life who will be created a cardinal in tomorrow’s [consistory](#), opines that such guidelines would be “wiser” if they resulted from the collective work of a bishops’ conference. Specifically, Farrell said that he doesn’t “share the view of what Archbishop Chaput did” in issuing guidelines for the Archdiocese of Philadelphia in July.

The Philadelphia prelate quickly [replied to the criticism](#): “I wonder if Cardinal-designate Farrell actually read and understood the Philadelphia guidelines he seems to be questioning. The guidelines have a clear emphasis on mercy and compassion.” Countering with Rocky-like responsiveness, tempered by his characteristic clarity, Chaput validates both the content and the authority of his work for the good of the local church.

Then came word from the top. In an [interview](#) published today in the Italian newspaper *Avvenire*, Pope Francis exclaimed that he doesn’t lose sleep over those who think he might be “selling out” Catholic doctrine. Still, the pope seemed to [fire back](#) at some critics who “continue not to understand” his exhortation. He reminds readers that “to give a lived experience of the forgiveness that embraces the entire human family is the grace that the apostolic ministry announces. The Church exists solely as (an) instrument to communicate to people the merciful plan of God.”

What are we to make of this hierarchical debate? Should bishops, archbishops, cardinals, and popes be so free and public with their words when there is such obvious discrepancy to their views? Is modern media the place to be having this discussion?

Dialogue, by definition, comprises diversity of thought. Its goal is understanding. It does not, of necessity, create discord leading to division. On the contrary, the back-and-forth commentary by these, and other, churchmen reveals an ongoing debate that is no doubt also taking place in the pews, the hallways, and the households of lay faithful in the Church.

Carrying out this ecclesial debate in the media is certainly a novel undertaking. It may risk being framed in imprecise ways by the media. But in today’s environment of social communications, where interactivity is a predominant feature, the news media make it possible for the world to be more engaged in the discussion.

In religious matters that have such a direct impact on people’s lives, thoughtful engagement is a good thing. Of course, interpersonal charity must reign and official teaching must be respected. Hopefully this new dynamic in theological thinking will lead to the rest of us becoming more like participants than spectators in the search for truth as the lived expression of our faith.

*featured image from L’Osservatore Romano*



## The misery of technology (12-2-16)

Black Friday is now behind us. So, too, is the Year of Mercy. Not that they have anything in common! Or do they?

For the former, special savings seem to produce a shopper's high strong enough to counteract the tryptophan-induced drowsiness that comes from eating too much turkey on Thanksgiving ([myth though that may be](#)). For the latter, a different kind of misery is characteristic; says [Pope Francis](#), quoting Augustine, the jubilee showed how "The misery of sin was clothed with the mercy of love."

With Cyber Monday following soon upon Black Friday, shoppers enjoyed all kinds of deals, many of which focused on technology. For the Year of Mercy, the Pope also focused on technology, but with far less giddiness. In that same letter, he writes:



In a culture often dominated by technology, sadness and loneliness appear to be on the rise, not least among young people. The future seems prey to an uncertainty that does not make for stability. This often gives rise to depression, sadness and boredom, which can gradually lead to despair. We need witnesses to hope and true joy if we are to dispel the illusions that promise quick and easy happiness through artificial paradises. The profound sense of emptiness felt by so many people can be overcome by the hope we bear in our hearts and by the joy that it gives. We need to acknowledge the joy that rises up in a heart touched by mercy.

When one's world is reduced to the size of a screen, the future does become rather small. When sound is siphoned through buds blocking one's ears, attention atrophies. When social perspectives are formed only, or primarily, by reactionary tweets and posts, few safe spaces can exist.

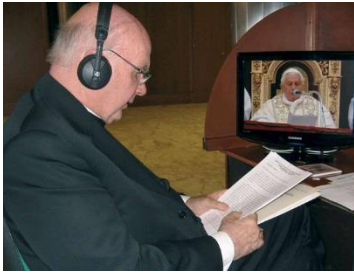
Still, the technology of contemporary social communications can also offer [trust and hope](#), as the pope suggests in his selection of the theme for the 2017 World Day of Social Communications. As the communique states, "Those who live united with Christ discover that even darkness and death become, for those who so wish, a place for communion with Light and Life."

In this season leading up to the birth of Him whose Life is the Light of the world, "We Christians have 'good news' to tell, because we contemplate trustfully the prospect of the Kingdom." If, indeed, technology can cause misery, then our challenge is to use that same technology to communicate the experience of mercy.

As Pope Francis reminds us, repeatedly, in his [final audience talk on the subject](#), the catechesis may have concluded, but mercy needs to continue. To this end he counsels the practice of the traditional 14 corporal and spiritual works, to which we might add the [digital works](#), too!

And now there's another way to counteract the doldrums caused by digital technology. Consider entering our [video competition](#) for the World Day of Social Communications ... as one easy thing you can do to carry on the work of mercy in a consumeristic world that knows too much misery.





## The gift of new media (12-9-16)

“The voice of Christmas” went silent five years ago this Sunday, when John Cardinal Foley went home to the Lord. Known to the English-speaking world from the sacred sounds of Christmas Mass at the Vatican, for which he served as the translator, “His Foleyness” played an instrumental role in bringing new media into the Church ... and the Church into the world of new media.

In this 2016 season of gift-giving, that connection between Church and media comes again in a new present. Just released this week from the Congregation for the Clergy, [“The Gift of the Priestly Vocation”](#) explores the core dimensions (“ratio”) of priestly formation. But it’s not just for clerics!

Signaling what is essential for future pastors, this “gift” impacts the life every parish where priests will one day serve, and thus shapes the Church as a whole. What it says about homiletics and social communication would, no doubt, please the former president of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications. But he would probably cajole priest-educators, as only he could, that there’s more to it than is mentioned in the document.

As Cardinal Foley himself knew, “Modern day reality obliges us to think about these words of Jesus [Acts 1:8] in a new way, because ‘*the ends of the earth*’ have expanded through the mass media and social networks” (no. 97). In his own life and work, the cardinal directed the Church’s media to realize “the possibility of an authentic culture of encounter in the name of Jesus” (no. 98).



In terms of educating future priests, the document acknowledges the need to attend to social communications as a “promising area of evangelization” for which seminarians need a specific awareness of the instruments and their proper use (no. 182). It also encourages, for those engaged in the field of mass media (no. 185), a more specific formation for pastoral ministry (which is the subject of [the upcoming Cardinal Foley Lecture](#) at Saint Charles Borromeo Seminary).

But is that really enough? The view of new media that prevails in the formation document seems, already, to be outdated! An educational paradigm that conceives of new media as simply a technological tool or specialized means of communication no longer suffices. Social media’s prominence, indeed predominance in contemporary life, is such that it now forms the “connective tissue” and “nervous system” of our culture.

Consequently, those being formed in a priestly vocation -- all of them! -- need, specifically, to learn the theology of social communications. [As now Bishop Paul Tighe noted](#) on the fiftieth anniversary of the Vatican document on this subject, “What seems like a minor argument in a curriculum filled with numerous elements, should instead be seen in the broader light of the very finality of formation, in as much as communication touches every dimension of the activity of a priest.”

What is human, spiritual, intellectual, and pastoral constitute the four pillars of priestly formation, all built on the foundation of “discipleship and “configuration” to Jesus Christ (no. 3). But in today’s world these pillars stand in a distinctly digital space, where the People of God, as of all the world, live and breathe in a new atmosphere. Ministering to them means encountering them where they are -- in, on, and through new media.



John Cardinal Foley knew this. He pioneered it in his work. His legacy embodies what Pope Francis says of the potential of today’s media, which “*can help us to feel closer to one another, creating a sense of the unity of the human family which can in turn inspire solidarity and serious efforts to ensure a more dignified life for all*” (no. 98).

As we remember prayerfully the anniversary of Cardinal Foley’s death, we hope that his priestly vocation will inspire this same gift in future generations.

*featured image from insidethevatican.com*

## Immersed in Christmas (12-16-16)

It may not fit easily on Santa's sleigh, but the Emperor 1510 Workstation promises "maximum productivity and complete techno-immersion." It's just one of a number of [ridiculously expensive digital toys](#) that are high on every tech geek's wish list.



If only the [Foley Chair in Social Communications](#) looked so cool and had such power! Actually it does ... but without the techno-entrapment. Named for him who brought [a gift of joy to the world](#) through the technology of television, the cardinal's chair provides a different kind of immersion -- one focusing not on the means but on the message.

In today's device-driven world, it's easy to become immersed in the tangle of technology. [The digital era](#) spawned fifty years ago has brought with it amazing transformations in all walks of life. As Foley once [remarked](#), "it takes no great stretch of the imagination to envisage the earth as an interconnected globe humming with electronic transmissions — a chattering planet nestled in the provident silence of space. The ethical question is whether this is contributing to authentic human development and helping individuals and peoples to be true to their transcendent destiny."

What Christmas celebrates is that transcendent destiny becoming immanent, when the God-above comes to dwell in and transform our human existence. Focusing on the mystery of the Word-made-flesh, we are able to see with greater clarity the mystery of what it means to be human. There, in the Incarnation, God "fully reveals man to man himself and makes his supreme calling clear" (*Gaudium et Spes*, no. 22).

Immersing ourselves in that truth requires no high-tech workstation. But it does require paying attention. Ironically, our digital devices can make that a more difficult task these days, as [Joseph Clair](#) opines:

Attention is the mind's desire. We attend to what we want, what we need, what we find interesting, attractive, and so on. Thus the problem is less about distraction than about desire. Our dwindling capacity for attention reveals our fractured worlds of desire—hyper-temporary, dazzled by light and color, summoned by restlessness rather than meaning. We have lost our ability to give our attention to the right things, in the right amount, at the right time.

Now is the right time! As Advent draws to a close and the Christmas season comes upon us once again, attending to the right things means focusing not on presents but on a presence. It happens not by gazing on gadgets but by contemplating a manger.



For there, if we immerse ourselves in the provident silence of a poor space in Bethlehem, we will hear again the angelic announcement that has forever changed the world.



## Then, now, always (12-23-16)

*Some may purchase it, but most won't "buy" it!*

This year's seasonal novelty is the [Hipster Nativity set](#). It's being peddled as "making perfect sense for today's millennials." The new scene presents a holy family who went to Whole Foods, magi bearing gifts from Amazon, animals feeding from a gluten-free trough, and a solar-heated stable. This contemporizing supposedly "gives the first Christmas (an) Instagram-worthy makeover that is guaranteed to rake in all the likes."



Maybe. But probably not. It obviously depends on one's perspective.

But that is true even of how classical artists captured the Nativity scene. As [Elizabeth Lev notes](#), in reference to the artwork on this year's papal Christmas card, "Giotto was not only one of the first artists to use optical perspective to make scenes appear three-dimensional, but he also used numerous observations from everyday life ... to represent sacred stories in a more familiar context."

Lev also tells us that Giotto introduced "the idea of figure standing with its back to the viewer, a way to remind those enjoying the art that they were also witnesses, a little further removed, to the story of salvation." But another perspective to behold is greater still.



What if we ponder the scene from the inside out? In truth, that's the powerful look that draws us in each year. That's the eternal look that transcends all time and foregoes every fad. That's the look of salvation.

Then, as now and always, God gazes upon us in the person of a newborn child. The almighty becomes dependent on others. The One who is glorious gets swaddled and rests in a dingy den of animals. In this [humbly graphic and colorfully tactile way](#), the divine becomes human.

Whether in still-life or in Segway-motion, the image we can never fully grasp nor depict is the enormity of God's love for humanity – which comes to life in that tiny Babe lain in a manger. Still today, [as Pope Francis reminds us](#), the artistic renderings of the Nativity invite us "to make room in our lives and society for God, hidden in the face of so many people who are in conditions of hardship, poverty and tribulation."

Perhaps this year we will become more "hip" to that face looking out at us ... and respond not with the materialistic trappings of a consumer culture but with a deepened sacramental conviction that God continues to dwell among us, revealing grace and joy to the world so as ["to give new hope to humanity."](#)



## Building Bridges Online (1-6-17)

Remember the Alamo! ... because it's being overrun by college students!

Well, not really. But in San Antonio, Texas young adults are currently taking their own stand. With a squad of inspiring guest speakers, and fortified by worship, [SEEK 2017](#) is banding together in fellowship Catholic university students from across the nation.



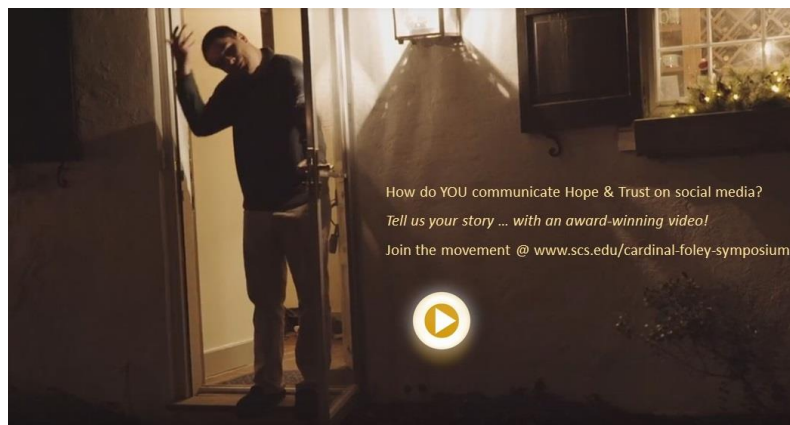
To that spiritually hungry crowd, Archbishop Charles Chaput spoke about [building a bridge to others](#). Quoting Cardinal Robert Sarah's claim that "to be a child of God is to be a child of silence," the Archbishop explained the implications for that generation:

It means that we need to cut out the noise from our lives. We need to listen to less music, browse fewer internet websites and cut back on Facebook. We need to remember that God created us to rest with him, not the way people lounge on a couch, but the way an elderly married couple can sit together on a bench and share a love deeper than words. We need to have that kind of leisurely love with God. We need to cultivate that silence with him, for it's in that silence that he reveals himself and his plan to us.

Silence is, indeed, golden ... especially when it creates the environment in which God manifests the message of salvation. It was in silence that the Magi contemplated [the significance of a star](#) and in adoration that they came before the newborn Savior of the world, as we celebrate on this day of the Epiphany.

But silence is in short shrift in our world, especially among this generation. Exhorting young adults to contemplative rest has its value, to be sure. But when they return to the frenetic activity of their daily lives, there's another way that they can build bridges to others. Inspired by their silent discernment, they can share the Good News in a way that they know best ... **online!**

Relational bridges in today's world are built more and more through social networking. Their posts and pics, their videos and live feeds, all seek to connect with people across a digital divide. It's there, in that online space, that their activity can communicate the hope and trust that so many people desperately need. Through the means of social communication that young people are so adept at, all the world can learn the message at the heart of this year's [World Day of Social Communications](#): *In His Son, God expresses his solidarity with every human situation and revealed that we are not alone, because we have a Father Who does not forget His children.*



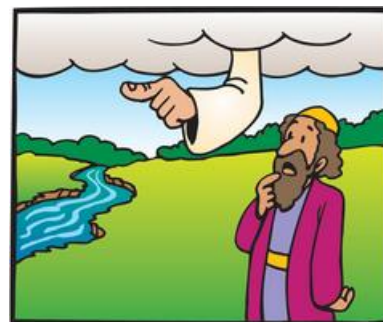
*featured image created from usadude331-wordpress-com*



## A hyper-connected journey (1-20-17)

“Go from our country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you.” So said the LORD in words spoken to Abraham (Genesis 12:1).

And so begins Pope Francis’s [letter written to young people](#) last week to initiate preparations for the next general assembly of the Synod of Bishops, in October of 2018, which will focus on the topic of “Young People, the Faith and Vocational Discernment.”



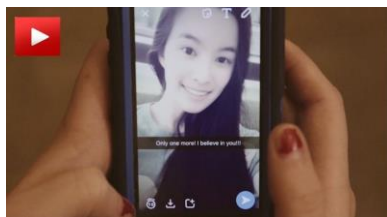
The Holy Father has in mind the “journey” to be undertaken by today’s youth (i.e., 18-25 year-olds) in discernment of God’s plan for their lives. For Pope Francis, “Go” now means “to set out towards a future which is unknown but one which will surely lead to fulfillment.”

For young people, though, “going” happens today without actually moving! This hyper-connected generation travels anywhere and everywhere by way of the virtual spaces throughout a digital world. There, as the future synod’s [preparatory document](#) affirms, young people’s conception of the world and their relationships in it is technologically mediated. It’s not just “a major place in their lives,” as the document later points out; in some respects, it is *the* place, *every* place, an all-encompassing environment of the whole of their lives.

In the press conference announcing the synod’s preparations, Cardinal Baldisseri noted the Holy Father’s multiple references to young people in his apostolic exhortation on “Love in the Family” (*Amoris Laetitia*). In particular, he cited the text in which Pope Francis states that “We need to find the right language, arguments, and forms of witness that can help us reach the hearts of young people” (no. 40). The Italian text puts it in a more relevant image, for it refers to seeking “to touch the most intimate fibers of young people.”

In today’s world, the connecting fibers are those of social networks. The Vatican, too, recognizes this in the announcement that the Synod’s office will set up an Internet site specific to the 2018 event so that they can consult directly with young people.

Granted, today’s youth are not actually Googling their way to God. It’s not like a divinely-willed vocation can be discerned via search engines. Even one that is all-powerful, in a digital sense, admits as much. Ask Wolfram Alpha whether God exists, and the response will be: “I’m sorry, but a poor computational knowledge engine, no matter how powerful, is not capable of providing a simple answer to that question.”



Still, the “search” for faith and vocation is very much qualified by the logic of our digital age. As [Antonio Spadaro points out](#), the journey of discernment is always “semantic” in as much as its meaning is born in and depends on a particular context. In this way, he says, “the Web ‘challenges’ faith in its comprehension thanks to a ‘logic’ that more and more signals (our) way of thinking.”

For today’s digital natives, that context and that logic are shaped by their experience of social communications. It behooves the rest of us in the Church to acknowledge, learn from, and respond to their new world.

*featured image from Siggiblog.com*

## A new lens for life (1-27-17)

Instead of the proverbial “honeymoon” often accorded a prominent figure at the start of his being in the public eye, President Trump and the nation’s media seem rather to be in the eye of a tempest. The headlines, tweets, and press conferences are already creating quite a storm.



What will come of the daily diatribes on both sides? We’ll have to wait and see. Ross Douthat of the [New York Times](#) points out the polar opposites that may be in play for the media. Will it become “an age of maximal danger” in which “truly independent journalism will be marginalized”? Or could it be “a golden age” in which serious investigative journalism might find a national audience? Douthat, himself, settles upon another view and warns against the temptation to “alarmism” and “hysterical oppositionalism.”

With less hysteria but some alarm, Pope Francis offered his take on the cultural clash in his [Message for the 2017 World Day of Social Communications](#). The key image he sets forth for consideration is the need for all of us, professional or not, to use a new view-finder in our communications: “Everything depends on the way we look at things, on the lens we use to view them. If we change that lens, reality itself appears different.”

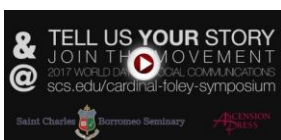
Many in today’s world of social networking actually live in greater isolation, where their thinking is fashioned by trends received and shared on their digital feeds. A recent [report from the National Academy of Sciences](#) points to this growing phenomenon: “Selective exposure to content is the primary driver of content diffusion and generates the formation of homogeneous clusters, i.e., ‘echo chambers.’ Indeed, homogeneity appears to be the primary driver for the diffusion of contents and each echo chamber has its own cascade dynamics.”

Beyond the science of homogeneity, common sense and experience confirm this phenomenon. The more “bad” news we see, hear, and surround ourselves with, the worse we feel and the more negatively we think. The pope calls it a “vicious circle of anxiety” and a “spiral of fear” that generate a “feeling of growing discontent and resignation.” A metaphorical lens that looks only or always at bad news turns into a cognitive and emotional filter that suggests there is little or no “good news” out there.

But – and here’s why the Church even talks about social communications – the Holy Father reminds us that we have, and should use, a different lens with which to read the realities of life. “For us Christians,” he writes, “that lens can only be the good news” – not just good news about things, but *the* Good News that is the message of salvation in the person of Jesus Christ.

So, whatever medium or platform you use, take a look at your news feeds and photos and do a simple comparison: is there more bad or good? Then consider the posts and pics you create: are they more positive or negative? Which would you prefer to see? Which would you want to share?

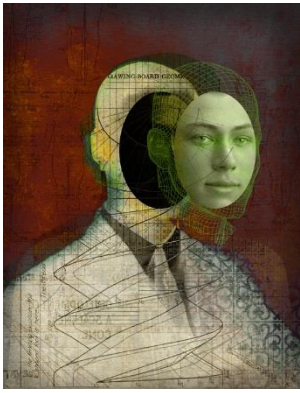
Professional journalists don’t have such an easy choice. Perhaps they could profit from greater objectivity, but they remain constrained by the stories they must cover. Not so for us who take and make the news via social media. What we communicate is our choice. Perhaps now more than ever, that choice needs to be “communicating hope and trust in our time” – as this 51<sup>st</sup> World Day of Social Communications will highlight.



One way to do just that is to [join the World Day movement](#) by adopting a lens (literally) to show us how you communicate good news. Our hope with this video competition is to advance the papal goal of “helping us all to view the world around us with realism and trust.”

*Take a look through our lens in this promotional video to learn more!*

*featured image from [mediamaxatl.com](#)*



## A time and place for social media (2-10-17)

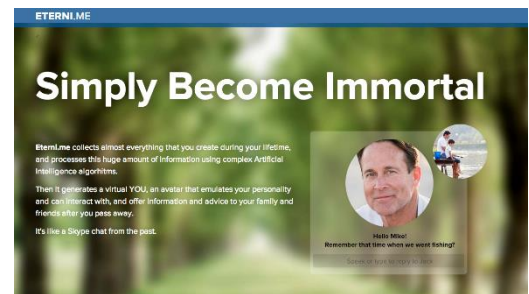
No, this is not another plea to put away your cell phone! It goes much farther than that, at least metaphorically speaking.

Of being human, philosophers once acknowledged our existential groundedness in space and time. While in this earthly life, we are limited by these dual realities. Even in our memories and our dreams, everything is somewhere, sometime.

No more! Or so it seems with digital media.

Online networks connect people across geographical borders without anyone being physically transported. And they do so with “instant” messaging. The proverbial cloud of digital computing draws us above and beyond the here and now.

Not even death impedes the pursuit of always and everywhere. [Digital immortality](#) now seems possible and means more than simply storing all the data left by your digital footprints. [According to Debra Bassett](#), numerous platforms offer “services ranging from the delivery of posthumous messages, to creating avatars that allow you to become ‘virtually immortal’ which they say will enable you to give advice to your descendants after you are dead.” Whether creating isolation or providing solace, “(s)ocial network sites ensure the dead remain part of our everyday lives because they are accessible on our everyday devices.”



(eterni.me)

Let not reality intrude on accessibility!

But there’s more to connecting than accidental or intentional messaging platforms. In our limited human reality, space and time still matter if you want relationships to be “for real.”

With a likely bit of literary license, [Teresa Messineo describes](#) the perplexities of place in the world of communications. The scenario: someone she knew died and news of the passing was posted online. Thousands of likes and emoji faces quickly followed, along with an array of condolences and messages on the online guest book. But she was the only one actually to show up at the funeral.



(Jiva Akbor / metro.co.uk)

Messineo pushes the idea that being there for someone in the digital age requires an intentional choice. The effort expended pays an invaluable human dividend: “We miss out on so much of life when we don’t actually live it. The experience of place, of actually being there, physically, for those we care about changes them. It changes us. It changes everything.”

Actually being there ... this is the “encounter” of which Pope Francis so often speaks. Going beyond the sharing of information, it expresses and fosters that [“neighborliness” that lies at the basis of social communications](#). It’s also the best way to [communicate hope and trust in our time](#) ... even if [you also can, and should, do so online!](#)



*featured image from Dung Hoang Illustrations at <http://shaolinfury.com/project/digital-immortality/>*



## ... and everything but the truth (2-24-17)

Well, that's not exactly how the familiar judicial oath ends ("to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth"). But it does seem to be characteristic of too many of our interactions nowadays.

The question of truth-telling certainly lies at the heart of the discord between our nation's leaders and the media. [At a recent press conference](#), President Trump highlighted the issue from his vantage point with the hyperbole that has become his trademark: "I'm making this presentation directly to the American people with the media present ... because many of our nation's reporters and folks will not tell you the truth and will not treat the wonderful people of our country with the respect that they deserve. ... The press has become so dishonest that if we don't talk about it, we are doing a tremendous disservice to the American people -- tremendous disservice. We have to talk about it to find out what's going on, because the press honestly is out of control. The level of dishonesty is out of control."

But the issue extends far beyond the ongoing spats in the presidential pressroom. Veracity touches on every subject and misrepresenting truth can happen in a variety of ways, as a recent [comparison of news headlines](#) suggests. In just one example cited - from philly.com - the fact stated in January of 2017 (left headline) is betrayed by the story reported in September of 2016 (right headline):

**Trump said Philly's murder rate is 'terribly increasing.' It's not.**

Updated: JANUARY 26, 2017 -- 2:41 PM EST

**Why is Philly's homicide rate going up?**

Updated: SEPTEMBER 16, 2016 -- 7:57 PM EDT

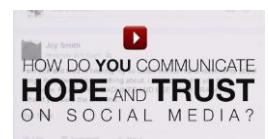
But it's not just the media. In his new book, [Out of the Ashes: Rebuilding American Culture](#), ANTHONY ESOLEN begins his critical analysis with a chapter entitled "Giving Things Their Proper Names." He argues for the restoration of truth-telling in the midst of powerful cultural institutions, including but not limited to the government, that produce deceit on a mass scale. As he puts it, "We have to recognize the lies and clear our minds of cant."



Truth is foundational to humanism. Telling it, or not, is critical for all of us, as individuals and as a society. As GEORGE WEIGEL [once explained](#), "Freedom untethered from truth is freedom's worst enemy. For if there is only your truth and my truth, and neither one of us recognizes a transcendent moral standard (call it "*the truth*") by which to adjudicate our differences, then the only way to settle the argument is for you to impose your power on me, or for me to impose my power on you. Freedom untethered from truth leads to chaos; chaos leads to anarchy; and since human beings cannot tolerate anarchy, tyranny as the answer to the human imperative of order is just around the corner. The false humanism of the freedom of indifference leads first to freedom's decay, and then to freedom's demise."

Some think [the tyranny is already upon us](#)! It need not be. In fact, this year POPE FRANCIS encourages us to find ways, particularly via social communications, [to communicate hope and trust in our time](#), thereby "helping all of us to view the world around us with realism and trust." To do that, we need to tell the truth, the whole truth, and *nothing but* the truth. Only by keeping that oath as it is can we overcome what he describes as a "feeling of growing discontent and resignation that can at times generate apathy, fear or the idea that evil has no limits."

The Good News is good because it's true! Join the truth-telling movement by entering our [video contest](#) and/or by joining us for a [symposium](#) on the subject at St. Charles Seminary on **May 24, 2017**.



*featured image from [atheism.about.com/od/ideasforatheistactivism/a/AffirmSwear.htm](http://atheism.about.com/od/ideasforatheistactivism/a/AffirmSwear.htm)*





## Dust in the wind (3-3-17)

At that risk of dating myself, I couldn't help but to borrow the title from a popular old song. The "moment" in the song refers to a lifetime, but it works also for this not-yet first week of Lent.

The moment of Ash Wednesday is gone. Christian foreheads are clear, and clerical thumbs have been cleansed. All that's left are the #ashtags, which come in all shapes and sizes, some oddly enough even with big smiles.

The opening Wednesday is a Lenten fanfare. It's also becoming an annual [Instagram craze](#), though [some poo-poo the practice](#) as not appropriately penitential. No, it's not supposed to be a "fun" day, but if the real image gets widespread virtual exposure, what's so wrong with letting the whole world see a mark of Christian faith?



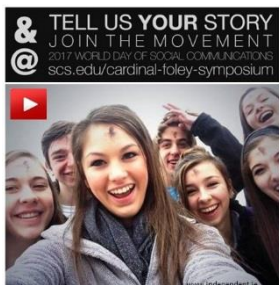
Still, Kansas gets it right: "only for a moment and the moment's gone." The biblical version, sometimes eschewed in favor of a positive Gospel spin, puts it more starkly: "remember that you are dust and unto dust you shall return."

It may be just a moment, relatively speaking, but that lifetime that comes from dust and (eventually) returns there is an opportunity. The Ashen reminder of our mortality is not necessarily something morbid. It's a chance, recalled each year, to recognize that our time on earth is our gift, given us by the Creator. What we do with our moment is what really matters.

Yes, some may fill their moments with mundane matters. It's fairly obvious, based just on numbers, that more folks visit churches on Ash Wednesday than will on any given Sunday of Lent (except for Palm Sunday, which is another giveaway day!) But that doesn't denigrate the message. It just means we all have more work to do.

[As Archbishop Chaput wisely notes](#), in reference to his new book called [Strangers in a Strange Land](#), Christians have a constant task, one that the season of Lent inspires us to reconsider. As he says, "the heart of the matter in every life, in every age, never changes. It's whether we're willing to ... *actually live* the Beatitudes, or at least to *try*, instead of just revering them as beautiful ideals. *We need to live the words of Jesus Christ that we all claim to believe.*"

In every age, that living example is the witness that needs to endure once the ashes fade. These days it is also a witness that can, and should, take advantage of the world of digital communications in which we live. To communicate hope and trust, based on the truth of Christ's Passion that we claim to believe, is also our social media challenge this Lent.



Now is our moment to try to live what we believe. Ash Wednesday reminds us, as [Pope Francis said in his homily](#), that "we are dust in the loving hands of God, who has breathed his spirit of life upon each one of us, and still wants to do so." By turning that image into reality, in the real world and by way of the virtual one, we seek to fulfill the pope's prayerful wish, "when, with the Psalmist, we can say: 'Restore to us the joy of your salvation, sustain in us a willing spirit', so that by our lives we may declare your praise (cf. *Ps* 51:12.15), and our dust – by the power of your breath of life - may become a 'dust of love'."

featured image from [www.youtube.com/watch?v= Vl3lydJy9s](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vl3lydJy9s)





## Instaversary (3-17-17)

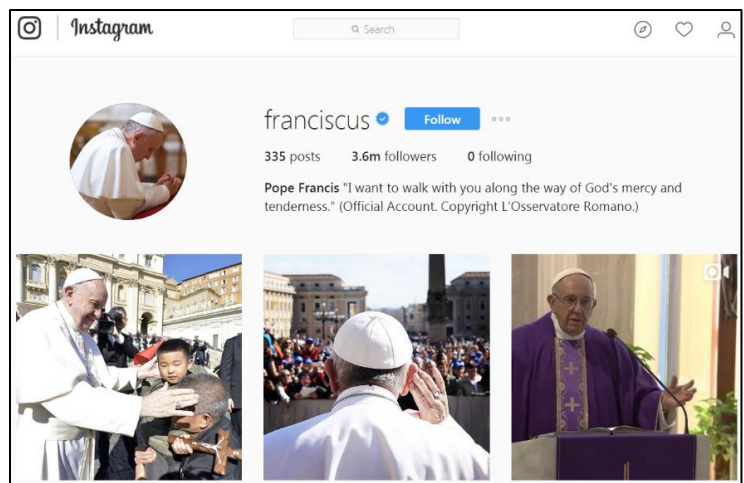
All things Irish will no doubt be the photographic focus on this high holy feast day. But another's anniversary could also be celebrated.

It's been one year since Pope Francis's [first post on Instagram](#). His simple message coincided with the devotional image that remains as his profile: "Pray for me." His profoundly human and pontifically pastoral intent for joining this virtual community spoke volumes and continues to headline his account: "I want to walk with you along the way of God's mercy and tenderness."

That papal account shattered records by amassing a million followers within the first twelve hours of being online. Today, more than 3.6 million people are daily #blessed by images of [franciscus](#).

The photos posted there may not have as direct or as significant an impact as seeing the pope in person, but the worldwide reach exceeds the assembled crowds anywhere. And in these momentary glimpses two momentous truths come to life.

One concerns the pope, himself. [Greg Burke](#), the director of the Vatican's press office, points it out: "The Pope has helped people rediscover the joy of what it means to believe. That despite anyone's limitations, despite their sins, despite the crosses one might have to carry, there is an inherent joy in the Christian life."



The other concerns the pope's work, his mission as "pontifex" to bridge the Church and the world. [Msgr. Lucio Adrian Ruiz](#) explains how, at a meeting with the co-founder of Instagram, Pope Francis spoke about the Church's historical affinity with pictures "as a way to be close to the people and even to do catechesis."

Today's preferred medium for this closeness may not be Renaissance art or stained glass windows. But, [as I've said before](#), it can effect a similar "epiphany" of understanding when the photos express the attractive beauty of the Gospel message. On Instagram, the world sees that message come to life in the day-to-day events on the pope's schedule.

Granted, a stream of photos does not, of itself, generate the [dialogue](#) that the pope so frequently says is necessary for real communications. And, yes, the pope is right to exhort people to [consult the Bible](#) as often as they do their cellphones.

But the digital world is where we live, whether or not we are active on social networks. And photos or videos are the preferred and enormously popular means of communications there. So, it's not just helpful that Pope Francis is on Instagram; it's necessary if he, and we, wish to encounter and engage the masses.

Today, while we raise a pint to celebrate Patrick, let's also wish Francis a Happy Instaversary!

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



## Watch how you walk! (3-31-17)

Television viewers in the 80's will recognize the iconic phrase from the show *Hill Street Blues*. Those were always the final words to the police shift's roll call.

Now it's a call also being made to people on the streets.

A [report released this week by the Associated Press](#) notes a spike in pedestrian deaths in 2016. As to why, "researchers say they think the biggest factor may be more drivers and walkers distracted by cellphones and other electronic devices." Because the increase in cellphone use far outpaces the uptick in steps walked or miles driven, they say that change in behavior has to be the culprit. But they also admit "that's hard to confirm."



Those who study the phenomenon have labeled it "inattentional blindness." They say that trying to combine walking and watching has the effect of slowing pedestrians down and/or causing them to veer off course – sometimes straight into oncoming traffic. It seems the idiom for clumsiness ("he can't walk and chew gum") has morphed into a diagnosis of danger.

Folks [north of the U.S. border](#) have considered instituting a ban on distracted walking. Elsewhere local governments have taken to posting warning signs – though one wonders who would see them if they're looking down at a phone.

Closer to home, city officials in Philadelphia have long thought that [public service announcements](#) would do the trick. Assuming you don't walk into an oncoming bus, signs outside and inside send the message:



Since there really is no cure for original sin, human distractedness is not likely to be eradicated by signs or laws. Paying attention to environmental surroundings, not to mention actual people in our midst, is something one must choose to do. Today the intentionality of that choice looms larger as the distracting devices grow smaller.

It's different data, but further evidence of the need for personal encounter that Pope Francis called for in his [first message for World Communications Day](#). In spiritual terms, it's a reminder that we all need to [look up](#)!

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



## Reprinting the legend (4-7-17)

The sacred season is now upon us. Granted, the real Holy Week of the year is still ten days away. But the other [high holy days](#) took place this week. Baseball is back!

But even there “fake news” seems to be at work. Case in point: Ty Cobb.

Everyone knows his story. He’s the first player voted into baseball’s Hall of Fame. But he’s the player that Shoeless Joe Jackson said (at least in the movie) no one liked. He has the highest lifetime batting average in MLB history. But he’s also been accused of homicide. When his career ended, he held ninety records. But when he’s talked about today, the image of a dirty player with high-flying spikes usually comes to mind.

Is it all just fake news? Yes! – says [Charles Leerhsen](#), author of a biography called [Ty Cobb: A Terrible Beauty](#) which is described as “groundbreaking, thorough and compelling.” In a [video summary of the book](#), Leerhsen gives voice to a journalistic credo that lies at the root of the phenomenon: “when the legend beats the facts ... print the legend!”



Legends become popular in their repeated re-telling precisely because we share a concern for the values they disclose (or, in this case, fail to show). But when the story is fabricated from falsehoods, the legend hides the lie. And therein lies the deeper social problem. Without truth how can we rightly co-exist and flourish together? This isn’t about creative writing or fictional license. It’s certainly not tabloid “news” - which any thinking person should know has no intention of being true. Instead, it’s about doing something that every child is taught from a tender age – tell the truth.

Granted, every story has a slant. The subjectivity of the source necessarily factors into the telling of any tale. But when a fake story is told, especially by those whose very profession is to communicate what people need to know, falsehood foment discord. When that fake story takes hold over generations, history is hurt.

But this is not a new phenomenon. More than 400 years ago, ST. FRANCIS DE SALES (1567-1622) wrote about this issue in his classic *Introduction to the Devout Life*, in a relatively lengthy chapter (pt. 3, chap. 29) on slander, which he describes as “the plague of society.” Sadly, this Doctor of the Church knew nothing of the joy of baseball. But he did know about holiness and its opposites. Although the saint was writing about interpersonal speech, his words of wisdom could pass as a worthwhile credo for authors, too:

Beware of imputing false crimes and sins to your neighbor, neither discovering those that are secret, nor exaggerating those that are obvious, nor interpreting evil in his good works, nor denying the good that you know to be in him, nor hiding it maliciously, nor diminishing it with words, for in all these ways you greatly offend God, but also by falsely accusing and denying the truth do harm to your neighbor. Indeed, it is a double sin: both to lie and to harm your neighbor at the same time.

Underway are attempts to stop “fake news” whether through [legal proscription](#) or [technological innovation](#). But truth-telling runs deeper, to the realm of the human spirit. As Pope Benedict XVI wrote in his [message for the 2008 World Day of Communications](#), the media “can and must contribute to making known the truth about humanity, and defending it against those who tend to deny or destroy it. One might even say that seeking and presenting the truth about humanity constitutes the highest vocation of social communication.”

That vocation calls out to all of us, not just journalists. It’s in the realm of the spirit, there within our minds and hearts, that we share the sacred experience of a new baseball season. So it’s there also, within the soul of each of us, that we should examine our consciences in what remains of this holy season of Lent.

## Words *are* necessary (4-28-17)

You've probably heard some variation on the saying from St. Francis of Assisi: "Preach the Gospel at all times, and if necessary use words." Whether that [ascription](#) is true or not, most folks grasp the meaning of the directive.



Actually, more folks get it than one might think. So says a recent [Gallup poll](#) that identified sermons as foremost among major factors among people attending church or a place of worship.

The top two factors, as ranked by three-quarters of the respondents, are "sermons or talks that teach you more about scripture" and "sermons or lectures that help you connect religion to your own life." These two stayed atop the poll even when denominational differences were taken into account.

For Catholic worshippers, the poll was a bit skewed. A conclusion that Protestants "may be more attuned to specific dynamics of what they prefer in their church experience than Catholics" fails to account for the sacramentality of the Mass. Able to choose only from preaching, programs for children, communal and social programs, music, or dynamic ministers, there's a glaring omission that misses what is primary in Catholic experience of worship, namely, Holy Communion.

Still, preaching matters. And for that, words *are* necessary.

One might rightly point out that the words that matter don't always come from the pulpit. Consider the reach of [Pope Francis's recent TED talk](#), which in just two days has been seen by nearly 800,000 viewers. In this, the power of modern social communications, expertly and professionally mastered, is evident.



Granted, words from the Holy Father carry the weight of his office. As Bruno Guissani, TED's International Curator, notes in his explanation of [the genesis of the talk](#): "In this complicated and often confusing world, Pope Francis has become possibly the only moral voice capable of reaching people across boundaries and providing clarity and a compelling message of hope."

But each and every week preachers have the opportunity to reach people in the pews ... in churches all around the world. With that opportunity comes a great responsibility -- to [give people something to remember](#).

But the importance of good preaching is not just so that people will come back the next week. It's because in the hearing, remembering and living of the Word of God that is preached, their eternal salvation plays out.

*featured image by Paul Haring (CNS) from [www.osv.com](http://www.osv.com)*



## Home in the Kingdom (5-5-17)

As campaigns go, [this one](#) appears to be gaining traction. It makes multi-faceted use of eye-catching visuals. It claims to be non-partisan and non-sectarian, which makes it appealing to anyone and everyone. Best of it, it simply supports a fundamental tenet of humanism; after all, who would publicly oppose the proposition and, instead, clamor to find a home for hate.

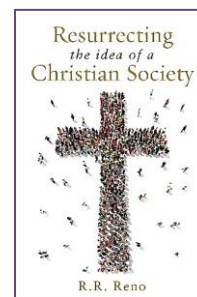


With no such sign on his own lawn, Archbishop Charles Chaput of Philadelphia astutely [analyzes the phenomenon of movements like this](#):

For most people, the campaign’s lawn signs show a laudable concern for the outcast. For others, they’re a simple expression of good will. And for some, they’re also a form of moral preening and of shaming their unenlightened neighbors. In any case, whatever their motive, lawn signs and slogans do not a better nation make. That takes patience, careful thinking, and sustained work—all things that are in short supply in our current, emotivist cultural climate, and things that we need right now.


The hard work of building to which the insightful archbishop refers entails the rigor of constructing a home and a society on the solid foundations of faith. Without that core material, the structure may stand but it will not last. Our home, ultimately, is a kingdom, but not one of this world.

Still, it is here in this world that we dwell for now. It’s here that hate too often rears its ugly presence. It’s here that hope is needed.



And “here” includes not only the physical locale of houses and neighborhoods, but also the realm of social media where we live and work and interact with others. Here, too, hate should have no home. That’s why Pope Francis wisely exhorts the world, in his [message for this year’s World Day of Social Communications](#), to learn to build messages of hope and trust in our time.

To see the blueprints for the pope’s kind of home in the social media neighborhood, join us for the [Cardinal Foley Symposium](#) on May 24 at Saint Charles Borromeo Seminary. With a panel of experts, we’ll discuss how to understand and apply the papal message. Afterward, we will bestow two awards – one to a professional and one to a young adult – for their exemplary work in bringing this theme to life through today’s media.




The John Cardinal Foley Symposium  
@ Saint Charles Borromeo Seminary

WORLD DAY OF SOCIAL COMMUNICATIONS 2017

**“Fear not, for I am with you” (Isaiah 43:5):  
Communicating Hope and Trust in Our Time**

*In His Son, God expresses his solidarity with every human situation  
and revealed that we are not alone, because we have a Father  
Who does not forget His children.*



[www.scs.edu/cardinal-foley-symposium](http://www.scs.edu/cardinal-foley-symposium)

featured image by [hatehasnohomehere.wordpress.com/](http://hatehasnohomehere.wordpress.com/)



## Phigiting in Church (5-19-17)

Troublesome toddlers are routine fodder for commentary on church-going etiquette. Should they have [a place in the pew](#) or be sequestered for the peace of the rest of the congregation? Is their crying out loud a distraction that creates angst for parents and pray-ers, or a sublime disclosure of the divine voice, [as Pope Francis has said](#) on multiple occasions?



Little ones are not today's concern. Other phigiters should have our attention.

No, that's not a misspelling, PHillies-style. It's a variation on the term coined by David Stillman to characterize Generation Z (those born between 1995 and 2012), which has been [described](#) as "the most entrepreneurially minded, tech-savvy multitaskers the world has ever seen." It combines the meaning of physical and digital, because members of [this age cohort](#) appear "unwilling or unable to draw a distinction between the physical world and its digital equivalent." To a phigital, Skyping into a meeting is essentially the same as actually being present in the room.

Stillman and his son, Jonah, are living proof of the generational divide and have taken a tag-team approach to informing others about the subject. Together, they've written the book, literally, on what this generation looks and acts like [in the workplace](#). Other authors are opining about Generation Z's emerging [impact on higher education](#) and their place in the [forthcoming industrial revolution](#).

But what happens when – or if – this generation goes to Church? Consider some statistics from the [GenZGurus](#):

If 40% of phigitals believe that working Wi-Fi is more important than working bathrooms, what importance will they give to liturgical experiences whose primary link is sacramental, not virtual?

If 62% of phigitals see the ideal length of a feedback session as 5 minutes or less, how can they endure a divine-human session at a longer-lasting Mass? How do preachers connect in such a short time-frame with a generation that prefers emojis and stickers and soundbites to the use of words and sentences and paragraphs (not to mention documents)?

If nearly 91% of phigitals say that a company's technological sophistication would impact their decision to work there, what does that mean for deciding to dwell in a church whose sophistication lies more in art and architecture and whose work is fundamentally a mystery?

The questions reveal that this writer comes from another generation, one that didn't have a letter or a name to designate it. But the questions also disclose a dire need for all of us to address the generational gap that exists in the church, a gap that often looms large between the pastor in the pulpit and the people in the pews.

Granted, the church is not in the business of adapting itself to the changing character of generations. After all, the message of salvation transcends every technology, and its eternal consequence encompasses every age group. But at 73 million strong, this cohort will have a significant impact on religious communities, now and into the future.

So, the pedagogy of our preaching and the strategy of our evangelization now need to account for [how this generation functions](#). Maybe some of those who have "only known a world where phones are smart" could text or snap us a few good ideas!

*featured image cropped from <http://youthlogix.com/10-things-you-should-know-before-hiring-generation-z/>*



## The Vicar's Visage (5-26-17)

A picture, they say, is worth a thousand words. Not always.

But at least as many words have been used to comment on the pope's seemingly dour countenance in his meeting with the U.S. president. Past photos from comparable state visits have been posted to suggest a contrarian, if not downright sinister, take on this particular rendezvous.

With typical journalistic hype, the visit between Pope Francis and President Trump was previewed and reviewed extensively. But the photos of the encounter have added the most grist to the digital mill.

The [ladies' attire](#) can be easily understood, even if some viewers don't care for protocol. But, unlike publicists for other celebrities, the Vatican's Greg Burke has not explained the papal look! So, popular reactions to the ["super sad pope"](#) now fill the virtual air.

Interestingly, Pope Francis addresses this in his [message for this year's World Day of Social Communications](#), which is celebrated this Sunday. He introduces the theme with this plea: "I wish to address this message to all those who, whether in their professional work or personal relationships, are like that mill, daily 'grinding out' information with the aim of providing rich fare for those with whom they communicate. I would like to encourage everyone to engage in constructive forms of communication that reject prejudice towards others and foster a culture of encounter, helping all of us to view the world around us with realism and trust."

Is it realistic to think the pope was sending a political message to the world by way of a photograph? Are any interpretations, [loving or hateful](#), to be trusted that read so much into a simple photo op?

Perhaps we should remember [Occam's razor](#) – the philosophical principle that the simplest explanation is usually the best. Or, adopting a spiritual tack, we could recall the advice of another Francis, the saint from Savoy, who writes in his *Introduction to the Devout Life* (3:28), "If an action has many different aspects, we must always think of which is the best."

Maybe the pope was tired; after all, his Wednesdays are most hectic. Maybe he just doesn't like photo ops, especially one so hyped as this; in fact, his remark to the president – "it's the protocol" – suggests as much.

But most clearly, the papal visage shows the seriousness of this encounter. Two world leaders about to engage in a conversation of global significance have weighty matters to discuss. The pope looks serious because the subject is. Bringing about peace in a world constantly in strife is serious business. That may not satisfy the entertainment industry that so dominates today's headlines. But bloggers and pundits and cartoonists don't have the worries of the world on their shoulders, like the pope does. (Compare this to the look on the pope's face whenever he celebrates Mass. For hi, encountering the sacred is also serious business.)

Yes, Francis is the "cover pope" whose smile is well known. Yes, his foundational teaching exhorts "the joy of the Gospel." But joy and seriousness are not mutually exclusive. In fact, after their morning get-together, Pope Francis had these words to say to the crowds that he met in his [general audience](#): "All of us" have had difficult and dark times, when there is "just a wall in front" of us. But "Jesus is always beside us to give us hope, warm our hearts and say, 'Go forward, I'm with you. Go forward.'"

That's the message from the Vicar of Christ to presidents and populace alike. Hope and trust come not from political posturing, but from the power of God at work in one's soul. Real joy is deeper than a smile on one's face.

*featured image cropped from the AP photo by Evan Vucci*