

www.semcasual.com



“A View from the Chair”



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

*The John Cardinal Foley Chair of Homiletics & Social Communications
@ Saint Charles Borromeo Seminary*

2017-2018

2017

- [7-7-17](#) Moving out ... online
- [7-14-17](#) Blowing up the Internet!
- [7-21-17](#) Faith resting on a “third stool”
- [7-28-17](#) Driving under the spell
- [8-11-17](#) Someone has to make the call
- [8-18-17](#) The heart pulses through the eyes
- [8-25-17](#) Smells and bells once again
- [9-8-17](#) Has the time of Christianity passed?
- [9-15-17](#) Bring back the space
- [9-25-17](#) Taking a stand on language
- [9-29-17](#) Angelic aid to counter "fake news"
- [10-20-17](#) Social Communications in Today's Captivity
- [10-27-17](#) IDK as a communications strategy
- [11-10-17](#) Digital signs of devotion
- [11-24-17](#) These days of our lives
- [12-22-17](#) Raging against the holiday

2018

- [1-19-18](#) Social media does not breed perfect idiots
- [2-9-18](#) Intentionality is instilled, not installed
- [2-23-18](#) Lean on Me
- [3-16-18](#) Let's close the church doors
- [3-23-18](#) Steps we can take to "remain" free
- [4-12-18](#) A God for all ages
- [4-27-18](#) Moralosis misdiagnosed





Moving out ... online (7-7-17)

With more than 60 boxes and a dozen crates of file folders (the fruits of 29 years of university teaching!), it was time to move from Center Valley to my new residence at Saint Charles Seminary in Philadelphia, there [to assume full-time the role of the John Cardinal Foley Chair of Homiletics & Social Communications](#).

Thankfully the university's maintenance crew generously offered to do the transport and heavy lifting! And given the lack of an elevator in a building constructed in 1869, the three helpers certainly got a workout.

But who knew that just as onerous would be the online move?

In our digital world, so much of life is lived online. It's where we learn news, where we connect with others, where we share who we are. And in this new role at the seminary, it's what we teach about where we work. As Fr. Antonio Spadaro rightly pointed out at [a recent conference](#), "it's no longer possible to talk about pastoral work without understanding what goes on in the digital world."

What goes on in that world nowadays requires a consciousness about security when it comes to personal identity. That's why accessing almost every online site requires a username and password, along with an email address.



So, in addition to changing a physical address, that meant I had to view, update, and change all my digital links (45 at last count) ... not to mention cleaning out old and duplicate ones. And then that process had to be repeated across multiple devices! (It would help if the faculty residence had access to Wi-Fi, but that's a lament for another day.)

Moving out online also required the time-consuming process of collecting and storing all my computer files. Thankfully they are not as heavy as the cardboard boxes! I lost count of the number of gigabytes it took to copy three decades worth of work. How humbling to see one's professional efforts reduced to a tiny container of plastic thumb drives!

But these are the tools of the trade in the world of social communications.

Some have opined that we should put up self-cautious [resistance](#) to the encroaching sphere of the Internet. But evading the digital world is not an option. Granted, we are not made *for* this world alone; but at least for now we are *in* it, and to thrive here we must live and work *with* it. [As Archbishop Chaput noted](#) at the recent national Convocation of Catholic Leaders, our task, as individuals and as Church, is not to escape contemporary society but to foster the religious development of conscience, rights, and responsibility that have been the hallmarks of American culture.

That's a task that demands our attention online, as well. It's the job that I've been given. And there's plenty of [work to do](#), for the sake of the next generation of priests and the evangelizing work of the Church.

Now if only I can figure out where I put everything ...

featured image from blog.metrostorage.com



Blowing up the Internet (7-14-17)

That was actually a thought proposed by a friend of mine. She's kidding, of course. At least, I hope!

Actually I'm sure she is, because otherwise her cleverly nostalgic and culturally insightful ["old news" feed](#) would disappear. Besides, I don't think she means for me to get fired from a job that I just took (again, I hope so). And let's remember there's a lot of value in the virtual world, too.

But her rage is real. And it's not just hers to express. That sort of outcry is a typical reaction to the proliferation of negative comments on any variety of subjects on the web.

Sadly, the nay-sayers are in the vast majority. Some might think it's actually presidential policy, if not just practice. These days, it seems, being snarky online is a digital sport. One current example: the race to see [who can be the top reply to a Trump tweet](#). And you can bet the reply won't be kind.

Disinhibition is certainly a defect of the digital world. Bullying trolls wander the web with virtual ease. But while the technology makes it possible and easy, it's still a matter of morality. [Hating for fun is hardly a worthy fellowship](#).

What is one to do, especially since blowing up the Internet is neither plausible nor possible? Even were it so, it would not be prudent. It's the world we live in, the social realm of work and play, the connective tissue that links people the world over.

If it's a movement you want, perhaps turning George Orwell's famous "Two Minutes Hate" (from *1984*) into two minutes of love could be the new rallying cry. In the Twitter world, it could work even with just two sentences.

If it's a routine you'd like to adopt, try following this sage advice from the same friend who opined about sending the Internet into oblivion. Instead of responding immediately with outrage to an undesirable headline, she writes, take a minute or more to consider (1) how does this make sense and (2) where did the post come from. Those two answers will likely calm the calamitous comment one is tempted to post.

If it's inspiration you seek, consider again the words of Pope Francis in his first ever [message for the World Day of Communications](#), when he raised up the Good Samaritan as an example for all citizens of the digital world to follow: "Let our communication be a balm which relieves pain and a fine wine which gladdens hearts. May the light we bring to others not be the result of cosmetics or special effects, but rather of our being loving and merciful 'neighbours' to those wounded and left on the side of the road."

Or, we can keep it simple. Just remember that there's always someone (actually many) on the other end of whatever your post, a reader who knows you only by the words you use. So, try being nice!

It can be done ... and the rest of us would certainly appreciate it.

featured image from www.linkedin.com/pulse/20140926102939-348223-how-the-internet-changed-value-perception

Faith resting on a “third stool” (7-21-17)

There’s been a hullabaloo about *Civiltà Cattolica* and its [article](#) criticizing the “ecumenism of hate” spawned by a supposed Evangelical-Catholic alignment of religion and politics in the USA.



Two key reasons for the frenzy of commentary are the semi-official status of the publication (whose contents are pre-approved by the Vatican’s Secretariat of State) and the close relationship of the authors (Antonio Spadaro, SJ and Marcelo Figueroa) to Pope Francis.

Reactions have been swift and strong. At one end of the spectrum are those exclaiming joy that someone has [“finally”](#) said what should be said by someone with the ecclesial clout to say it. At the other end are those resenting a “hit piece” and resorting to a [Twitter war](#) against the theo-political whining. One of the two authors of the article reacted to the reactions by suggesting that it sort of proves their point!

Beyond the reactions are more analytical commentaries that suggest [good reasons](#) for reading the piece and/or point out its lack of [understanding](#), [nuance](#), or fairness. At the very least, the [“controversy”](#) certainly has generated much interaction, however thoughtful or not that may be.

Interactivity is a primary feature of today’s communications. It’s sought by those who write and post. It appeals to those who read and comment. It’s what creates a social network.

And now, it seems, it could be a “third stool” on which religious debate sometimes sits (or teeters, as the case may be). That’s an image derived from an [editorial comment](#) explaining an expression about British schooling. To claim an academic text “fell between two stools” means that the subject matter is “too difficult for a beginner and not detailed enough for an advanced learner.” But in today’s world of new media, that gap in understanding doesn’t prevent interaction; on the contrary, it facilitates sharing, with or without learning.

If the original article were the start of an intellectual dialogue, the subject matter would be debated by those with the know-how to make a substantive contribution, for or against. But in the Wiki-world of new media, where anyone and everyone can easily contribute something, distinguishing real thought from mere opinion or emotion becomes a substantial challenge.

If the original article were an academic inquiry, the discussions would be less open-ended, at least at the outset; authors would write, select readers would critique, and authors would respond, revising where necessary. But in the iWorld, where speed and reach are points of emphasis, a quest for likes and a compulsion to post take precedence over the silent reflection and extended conversation necessary for fruitful thought to emerge.

The result: we tend simply to take sides, usually opposing ones that follow a position pre-determined by one’s established views on the topic or the authors or the publication. There’s little chance our filter bubbles will be broken, particularly when the subject matter touches on religion.

Talk about faith pushes personal buttons. When core beliefs come into play, the risk of falling between (or off) the stools is real. To avoid the risk, and escape a reliance on apocalypticism that the original article claims to find here, our faith must be willing to entertain ideas in dialogue with the world, must strive to understand more and better without ever relinquishing the truth revealed by God, and must always engage one another with respect and care.

Listening, learning, and loving – three sturdy stools necessary for faith to flourish in the world of new media.

Driving under the spell (7-28-17)

There's a new kind of DUI. But it concerns an entirely different influence that affects driving and could lead to a criminal citation.

This week the governor of New York [announced](#) a review process to examine use of a "Textalyzer" to crack down on what so many motorists seem to do harmlessly. But the data show otherwise. Cellphone-related car crashes in New York killed twelve people and injured more than 2,700 from 2011 to 2015. In that same time frame, 1.2 million tickets were issued for cellphone violations.



Can [new technology](#) come to the rescue? The Textalyzer, still under development, will be able to show the phone's open apps and recent activities with a time stamp. Correlating this to the time of an accident, police could determine culpability without the hassle of getting a search warrant. Proponents see this tool as a game-changer that could counteract the rising trend in traffic fatalities nationwide.

Of course, civil libertarians are leery about what they see as a new threat to privacy. How, with whom, and about what we communicate are private matters endangered by such surveillance technology. Get ready for another clash between personal rights and social obligations.

These days drivers are distracted easily and in varied ways: setting the GPS, changing music stations, gabbing with passengers, or taking in the sights along the way. Some even try to put on makeup or eat a meal, all the while steering with their knees.

Distracted driving can be deadly, for sure. But it's not a phone's fault. Compulsive use of devices should be a serious concern. But a Textalyzer doesn't target the real problem.

Unlike alcohol or narcotics, which chemically impair a driver's ability to operate a vehicle safely, a cellphone does not. The only "influence" it has on drivers is its power to tap into our [paranoid narcissism](#) and cast a FOMO spell on us. That's not a motor vehicle issue. It's a bigger, existential problem.

Thanks to the power of cellphone technology, we readily buy into [the myth of multi-tasking](#). In our digitally-powered existence, and in our technology-enhanced vehicles, we now see driving as just one thing to do during which we can do something else, too – until we crash.

The distractedness that results from overuse of digital technology raises serious personal and social concerns, at home as well as on the road. [Technoference](#) and screen [addictions](#) are real phenomena that negatively affect relationships. Just think of the last time you were in the company of friends or family and gave in to the supposed need to check your messages, post on Facebook, or update your Twitter feed – all the while falsely assuming you were still part of the conversation going on around you!

Unfortunately, neither existing legislation nor new technology will counteract original sin. We want to drive and eat from the Apple too!

Driving hands-free doesn't equate to being mindful. The Textalyzer can provide digital data to demonstrate this, but it doesn't resolve the real problem. For that, a choice is needed. Focusing on the task at hand when driving is the primary way to ensure safety on the road. Focusing our attention on people, not phones, is the better choice all-around choice.

featured image from www.geek.com



Someone has to make the call (8-11-17)

As the summer season plays on, the technological imperative grows stronger. That's the belief – really an assumption – that if things can be done better by machines (i.e., more speedily, efficiently, or effectively), then they should be.

It's the conviction underlying AI, whose “artificial” nomenclature belies the real source of a machine's “intelligence,” namely the necessarily human programmer. It's the wonder associated with robotic surgery, whose rallying points include precision and stamina in comparison to a human wielding the scalpel. Then again, guess who's guiding the robot.

These days, it's a topic that excites and agitates sports fans. Last evening at the ballpark, my otherwise astute college classmate and teammate, advanced the argument that America's pastime would be better served by replacing blue with steel gray. In the quest to get things right, he thinks we should replace baseball's umpires with computer-guided video cameras.

I dissent – not merely as a purist, but more so as a humanist. Our desire to supplant existential virtues with technological insight gives short shrift to who we are and who we seek to become.

Granted, getting a call right is critically important, especially where million-dollar investments are at stake and the line between happiness and heartache for fans is drawn in inches or played out in split seconds. But “right” encompasses more than precision. Being right (or not) pertains more to human ecology than computer technology.

Baseball discloses our human condition and reveals the vicissitudes of earthly life. The action on the field yields results sometimes blissful, other times woeful. Standing between the lines, umpires adjudicate the ambivalence.

They're not the only ones to get it wrong on occasion. Pitchers hang an 0-2 curveball, only to watch it disappear over the fence. Fielders flub an easy play, opening the proverbial flood gates to a crooked number of runs scored. Hitters take a third strike with the bases loaded, to a chorus of cheers or jeers depending on who is the home team.

As I've written elsewhere, baseball captures our imagination by embodying the quest for the virtuous life precisely through its distinctive embrace of these failure. Its flukes and gaffes are the stuff of lore. Its statistics include “error” as a significant part of the truth of the game, which sets baseball apart in the world of sports.

Baseball epitomizes a “spirituality of imperfection” that reflects a larger truth about life. Former baseball commissioner Fay Vincent accurately assessed this reality when he commented that “life rewards those who having failed, and having failed over and over, still manage to move on. It is the decision to try again that will eventually lead to a reward.” Is not this decision what fans vicariously cheer, because they know, even without being able to articulate it, that such is the nature of the game we all play in this season of our own mortality?

Umpires remain an integral part of this reality. The desire to deploy technological resources in their stead reflects our vain quest for perfection, in the assumption that we can get it right all the time. Camera-assisted replays may provide a help along the way. But even then, the human element remains indispensable – not only in those who engineer the software and compute the camera angles, but ultimately in the one who interprets the visual data. Safe or out, fair or foul, strike or ball – a *person* always has to make the call.



Yes, technology might facilitate accuracy, [even in baseball](#). But an [electronic eye](#) cannot replace judgment – a character trait peculiar to people, even those with whom we disagree. Besides, we would rue the loss of a good ole-fashioned rhubarb and the emphatic ejection that brings delight (or dismay) to fans in the stands.



Racism rears its ugly head – again.

The heart pulses through the eyes (8-18-17)

The images remain horrifying. Clashing groups of fellow citizens, illuminated by torch lights reminiscent of dark ages past, come to blows with each other. Cries of domestic terrorism ring out after bodies fly in the streets due to vehicular homicide.

Published statements decry the hatred and violence. [In his own response](#), Archbishop Chaput of Philadelphia not only called for prayer but dared to challenge the masses. “We need to keep the images of Charlottesville alive in our memories. If we want a different kind of country in the future,” he continued, “we need to start today with a conversion in our own hearts, and an insistence on the same in others.”

Rightly identifying the deeper problem as a matter of spirituality, his call for conversion links physiology and photography, hearts and images. Echoing the profound thought of another bishop from ages past, we might put it this way: the heart pulses through the eyes.

In his classic best-seller, the *Introduction to the Devout Life*, St. Francis de Sales (1567-1622) made the seemingly outlandish claim that “our heart breathes through the ear.” He was speaking of the dangers of evil friendships, especially the flirtatious games people played in search of conjugal conquests. “Let us keep close watch on our ears against breathing in the fowl air of filthy words,” he warned, “for otherwise our heart will soon become infected” (part III, chapter 21).

In today’s world of mass media, the ugly poison of racial unrest is more likely to come via the eyes. Bombarded, as we are, by images on news feeds and social networking sites, we can’t seem to escape the chaos. Pixels quicken the pulse of horror; more images increase moral outrage.

With the help of digital technology, some are now responding with other images. Facebook posts, [Twitter accounts](#), and other websites are being created to expose the perpetrators by making public their photos, profiles, and other publicly accessible information. [“Doxing”](#) the alleged culprits in this way compels accountability, they say. Or does it merely instigate further unrest, this time justified as righteous indignation?



Public anger at the obscenity of what transpired in Charlottesville is, indeed, warranted. But starting an online offensive hardly seems a path to the conversion we so need. Rather, one step in the right direction would be to initiate a digital [custody of the senses](#). This ascetical practice of being careful, and intentional, about what one views, recognizes that what goes on in our mind often begins with what we see and hear. Reveling in, or posting, incendiary comments does little good to ease the unrest. Sharing gruesome or guilt-laden images only furthers the fighting. Shaming brings no solace.

Only when we begin to break out of our filter bubbles, created in no small part by the online images that we see and share, will we begin to mend what the archbishop rightly calls “our public unraveling into real hatreds brutally expressed.” Only when we regain the ability actually to be in the company of others and speak with them, and not simply connect via devices we look at, will we start to rebuild from what he aptly describes as the “collapse of restraint and mutual respect now taking place across the country.”

For a conversion of hearts, a change in our social communications might be one good place to start.



Smells and bells once again (8-25-17)

A new year of formation has begun at Overbrook. In keeping with tradition, the campus came back to life with a [celebration of Vespers](#). The liturgical day celebrated the memorial of the Queenship of the Blessed Virgin Mary, but on this annual occasion, with its participants clad in cassocks and surplices and singing in Latin, full solemnity was on display.

This first instance of “smells and bells” emanating again from a crowded place of worship certainly contrasts with the three-priest concelebration without a congregation in a basement chapel that was our usual liturgical fare during the summer months! Thankfully the presence of the divine does not depend on the quality of the ritual performance. It’s not the celebration of the event that matters; it’s the event being celebrated.

Still, getting the liturgical action right remains important – not simply as adherence to proscribed rubrics, but with the aim of offering fitting praise to God. Our human efforts do not determine the bestowal of grace, which comes solely from the graciousness of our good God. But how we respond to such a gift should be appropriate in terms of the words and deeds with which we worship. And since this work of the Church is not just mine or ours to do on a local level, liturgical rectitude does matter.

This concern for suitable celebration should count beyond the seminary, too. Pope Francis [recently affirmed this](#) “with certain and magisterial authority” in reference to the irreversibility of the liturgical reforms that have instructed our worship since the Second Vatican Council.

With new men in new roles, getting the liturgy “right” is a work in progress! The gestures, movements, and other actions may not yet be familiar. Bumping into each other along the way (sometimes literally!) also characterizes a new year! But eventually they’ll learn, along with the rest of us.

Ideally, they’ll also learn to get beyond the mechanics. Reverence, attention, and love are facilitated by, and expressed in, propriety of action. But giving glory to God, and leading others to do so, is the real purpose of what we say and do during the liturgy.

As the pope puts it, getting our celebration right “is truly to enter into the mystery of God; to let oneself be led to the mystery and to be in the mystery.” This, ultimately, is [what’s at stake](#) for all of us.


That’s why the new year at the seminary begins with such solemnity. That’s why seminarians will spend so much time in the chapel, not just to learn what to do there, but to learn who to be there (and beyond there), in union with the God who has called them to this vocation.

Let’s hope (and pray) they do get it right.

For a look at the Church’s understanding of all the dimensions of priestly formation nowadays, join us here at the seminary on Monday night!

THE CARDINALS’ FORUM

to inaugurate the new academic year



@ Saint Charles Borromeo Seminary

an annual gathering that advances the academic formation of seminary students and provides continuing education for the lay faithful about a topic of contemporary concern

with featured speakers:

DR. JOHN HAAS
on behalf of the John Cardinal Egoi Chair of Moral Theology

FR. THOMAS DAILEY, O.S.F.S.
the John Cardinal Foley Chair of Homiletics & Social Communications


THE MOST REVEREND CHARLES CHAPUT, O.F.M. CAP.
the Archbishop of Philadelphia

August 28, 2017
in the **Vianney Hall Auditorium**
on the 2016 document
from the Congregation for the Clergy

The Gift of the Priestly Vocation

a new *Ratio Fundamentalis*
for the journey of priestly formation

7:00 – 8:30 p.m.



admission is free and open to the public



Has the time of Christianity passed? (9-8-17)

City skylines were once dominated by crosses atop grand cathedrals, and towns built up around the central church. But these days, when a solar eclipse represents “the most transcendent experience of the year,” [the religious landscape has surely changed](#).

That’s the assessment of the Barna research group, which has developed a “Post-Christian” metric to name and measure the change. Based on a set of sixteen criteria that signal “a lack of Christian identity, belief and practice,” their recent survey identifies [the most post-Christian cities in America](#), the majority of which are in the traditionally-religious Northeast.

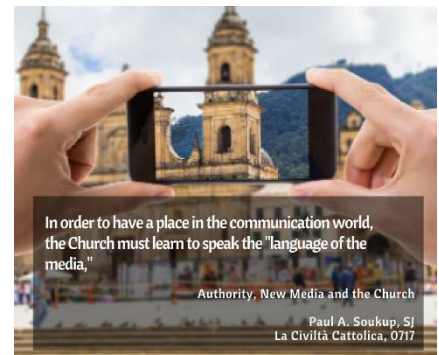
Contrast this with the [statistical representation](#) that points to Christianity as the largest religious tradition in every state, with Catholicism identifiably the largest grouping in the most counties across the USA. The numbers are there, it seems, but belief put into behavior appears to be on the wane.

According to Barna’s survey results, 48% of Catholic respondents were post-Christian. One could quibble with the accuracy of the criteria, which appear broadly religious in scope, use a vocabulary unfamiliar to all, and conflate demographic gaps. But one conclusion remains inescapable: there’s plenty of mission territory right here at home. (With Philadelphia ranking at #11 on Barna’s list, the city where the Catholic parochial school system began still faces the challenge of forming people in the faith.)

Far from a siren song sounding the end of Christianity, the numbers are still numbing. If Christianity, or any religion, doesn’t motivate adherents to behave according to their belief, something is clearly amiss. But first the message needs to be heard. For faith to be formative, the way the Church speaks needs to be re-considered.

Catholicism, in particular, has always relied heavily on words and texts to communicate its message. Jesus Christ, after all, is “the *word* made flesh,” and the books of the Bible necessarily remain foundational to the faith. But liturgical worship and Church teaching are also word-heavy. Unfortunately, the ritual forms and theological vocabulary familiar to previous generations resonate less with people in the digital era.

Before becoming post-Christian, the digital generation has been post-literate. More conversant with the “language” of sound and imagery, they aren’t accustomed to the Church’s use of words as a primary means of communication. Online-browsers and text-messagers don’t usually get siezed by missals and documents, no matter how religiously inspiring these may actually be.



As [Bishop Paul Tighe](#) once pointed out, the [challenge for the Church in a digital culture](#) is to discover a new language with which to speak. The richness of ritual and the profundity of theology certainly cannot be abandoned. But according to Tighe,

The new media undoubtedly offer the Church a greater opportunity to make known its teaching more widely and more directly to ever greater numbers and across all types of political and cultural boundaries. It is possible, using the new technologies, to reach new audiences, to invite them to a consideration of the great questions concerning the meaning and purpose of life and to offer to them the great wisdom of our tradition. We need to understand better how our message is being heard and understood by different audiences.

Then we can once again speak [“the truth, and nothing but”](#) that is our mission to proclaim in every age.



Bring back the space (9-15-17)

Hashtags abound, and no longer just in cyberspace.

Even the Phillies AAA affiliate jumped on the tagging bandwagon with their giveaway towels for fans at the ballpark. Realizing that most of the players who propelled the team into the playoffs were now playing for the major league team, they came up with this rallying cry: #Trusttheprosects.

With no spaces in-between the letters, that's a full sentence masquerading as a single word. Apparently, it's not even an original creation. But that's the thing [about hashtags](#). Anyone can make one, which is how the phenomenon began in 2007.



The hashtag originated on Twitter as a metadata marker – a tool to group messages together in order to make searching for a particular topic easier. It has evolved into a way of signaling emotions of every kind and a means of expressing tone or judgment with brevity and punch. Quickly the funky # has also become a marketing tool, intended to create buzz even beyond social media.

Whether as cause or effect, the trend to eliminate the space goes beyond digital communications. We seem now to be losing space in many ways. There's little space between vehicles on a busy road or between appointments on a hectic calendar. Thanks to ubiquitous online access, the space between work and home is gone, as is that between public and private life, even between the secular and the sacred.

In days past we considered space to be a limit, the “final frontier” as it were. We strove mightily to overcome this limit, and with the electronic revolution we are succeeding. Consider the miniaturization of computer technology. From behemoth machines in industrial complexes, they've shrunk to laptops and hand-held tablets. Today we can implant microchips into everything, [even people](#). Digital devices no longer take up much space; nor do they need space as they operate in wireless realms and across international networks.

What if, instead, we looked at space as an opportunity, as something “open” to us, maybe even “safe” for us? Space gives people the opportunity to breath, to reflect, to wonder, to imagine.

A university campus is designed to be such a space. Beyond the technologically efficient buildings, the “greens” offer an idyllic place for learning. There we can come to understand the keys to human development that truly liberal arts offer.

Even a “man cave” represents such a space. It may be cluttered to the point of bewilderment, but it provides a refuge from the busyness of the world. There we can enjoy a bit of leisure that counteracts the pressures of work and worry.

Churches or chapels also create such a space. They are configured with this opportunistic sense in mind, to provide space for us to engage something else, something more, something bigger and greater than ourselves. There we come to encounter the transcendent, the divine; there we experience an inspiration that can transform us in our return to the ways of the world.

Human beings need room to grow and to thrive. People need the spaces in life to become who they are meant to be. Words can be shortened, but human flourishing is meant to be expansive. Grammar aside, it would help to ... #bringbackthespace

Taking a stand on language (9-25-17)

Weighing in on the controversy du jour, this post isn't about racism or patriotism, about athletes or presidents, or even about Francis Scott Key's song. In all the hullabaloo about the Star-Spangled Banner, there seems to be a more basic disconnect — over the language we use.



President Trump has thrown down another proverbial gauntlet with his [comments](#) about professional athletes and their posture (or posturing) during the playing of the national anthem. In his view, they show a "total disrespect of our heritage ... of everything that we stand for." He called, with unnecessary profanity, for them to lose their jobs.

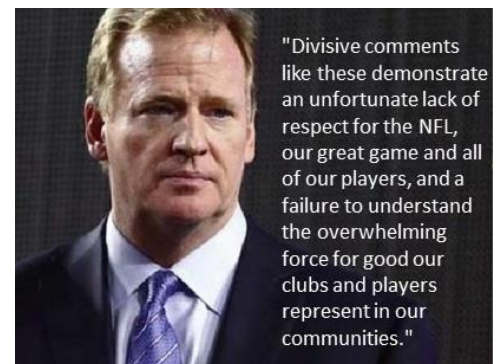
The resulting furor among athletes and others has risen to a fever pitch and runs the gamut of online shaming. The NBA's Stephen Curry defiantly claimed that "we all have to kind of stand as one the best we can," while LeBron James's called the president a "bum" who has dishonored the White House. The NFL's Deshaun Watson proudly tweeted that he "definitely will be making a statement no disrespect to our military of service," and added, "But we have to stick together as people!! Unity." Then there's former judge Jeanine Pirro [calling out](#) the NFL commissioner for "mouthing off" about professional football being "a force for good."

The cyber-mania will no doubt continue after last weekend's pre-game ceremonies, where attention to the anthem (or lack thereof) was met with protests and salutes and conspicuous absence. But what matters first, if not most, are the words being used. Perhaps we should clarify the meaning of three that are foundational to the social fray and then add one that seems in short supply.



UNITY is about singularity, a sense of "one" (uni-) that brings many together. Notwithstanding the odd physiology of Curry's claim ("kind of"?), the metaphorical standing as one that he and Watson exhort gives the image of many doing one thing. That's exactly what people used to do, when athletes (and fans) all stood together for the anthem. It's rather difficult to be united when individuals on a team or in a crowd are all doing their own thing by standing, kneeling, sitting, or hiding.

RESPECT begins as an attitude before it comes to outward expression. It's a disposition directed toward an other, a recognition of something of worth beyond me. It's often expressed non-verbally, as in the postures we take. (See [a father's first rule for his son](#) on this popular online list.) It's needed most, and expressed best, when people disagree. Disrespect hurts. But who and what is being (dis)respected in this controversy seems unclear, as both sides try to take the moral high ground. The question remains open: does the shared singing of that song focus on our flag, our country, our history, our leaders, our military, our veterans, our sports, our teams, our fans? Until that question is answered, the unity of "our" will be difficult to achieve.

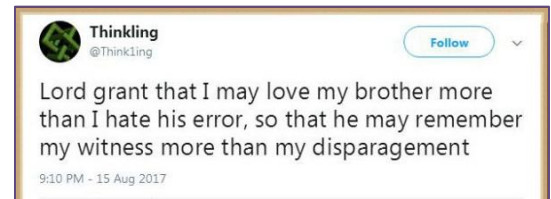




OPINION is a viewpoint anyone can have and no one can disprove. Politicians have them, and so do athletes. Everybody else does, too, often vociferously. Opinions may be supported (by facts, data, evidence), but they remain always debatable. Invited or not, opinions may be freely expressed, even [hyperbolically](#) (as our current president is wont to do, to the consternation of a nation). Opinions may be just as easily ignored. Controversy follows when we mistake opinion for truth. When disagreement over opinions comes from or leads to the

disparagement of people because of their opinion, we leave the realm of thought (where disputes can take place with respect) and enter the divisive zone of power (where differences are not usually resolved peacefully). Once there, it will be difficult to come or be together.

PRUDENCE is a virtue. It's a reasoned approach that enables people to act in a way that best suits a given situation when there are [multiple options](#) from which to choose. It judges when a particular course of action would be, in the long run, beneficial or harmful. It guides our decision to speak up or shut up. In this case, it puts "freedom of expression" into its rightful context, as the value of giving voice to something that furthers a good, and not simply the unencumbered right to say whatever I want whenever I want.



Words do matter — no matter the medium, no matter who uses them. If we can't keep straight the first three, or practice the fourth, the word "society" may lose its meaning, too.

featured image from snopes.com

Angelic aid to counter "fake news" (9-29-17)

As is customary, the [theme for the next World Day of Social Communications](#) is made known on today's feast of the three archangels (September 29). With the mighty ministrations of heavenly messengers, the theme appears to have a celestial character while it focuses on a profound human need.

That theme – **“The truth will set you free' (John 8:32): Fake News and Journalism for Peace”** – confronts a growing concern in today's world, namely "an often misleading distortion of facts" that has repercussions for persons and societies. The papal message, which will be published on January 24, 2018 (the memorial of St. Francis de Sales, patron of journalists), promises to offer "a reflection on the causes, the logic and the consequences of disinformation in the media." For today's consideration, we wonder how the archangels might play a role in promoting professional journalism?



MICHAEL is the warrior, known for his victory in the apocalyptic battle between good and evil. It may not be a sign of the end times, but disinformation has become a social-political weapon. These days it spreads globally with the ease of digital distribution. But falsehood is not "free speech." It does not advance human freedom, but instead flows from and/or generates a precarious position-taking with no foundation. This, in turn, leads to a divisiveness that endangers society. St. Michael, we pray, will aid journalists to get the story straight – not as a matter of commercial force or public preference, but in terms of a right understanding of issues and the truth of things.

GABRIEL is the bearer of Good News, known especially for the Annunciation to Mary about the conception and birth of Jesus. With "news" today often supplanted by opinion and commentary, the need for truth has never been greater. Only real truth, found ultimately in the One who is "the way, the truth, and the life," will set us free. That biblical notion grounds the world day's theme. According to Pope St. John Paul II, it contains "both a fundamental requirement and a warning: the requirement of an honest relationship with regard to truth as a condition for authentic freedom, and the warning to avoid every kind of illusory freedom, every superficial unilateral freedom, every freedom that fails to enter into the whole truth about man and the world" ([Redemptor Hominis, n. 12](#)). St. Gabriel, we pray, will help journalists keep this twofold perspective in all that they communicate.



RAPHAEL is the guide, known for aiding and accompanying Tobit. On the journey that is our constant search for peace, great challenges remain. Along the way, the media play a critical role, as the conduit for our awareness of what is going on around us. The words we read and the images we see can have a profound effect, particular in reports about painful realities of human existence and interaction. New media, in particularly powerful ways, facilitate our perception of the world and factor into our self-understanding and our social relations. St. Raphael, we pray, will remind journalists that they are our companions along the way, and that together we are all responsible for forming a peaceful society.



Social Communications in Today's Captivity (10-20-17)

This month marks the 500th anniversary of the ceremonial start of the Protestant Reformation, when Martin Luther nailed a list of 95 theses against the Catholic Church onto the door of a chapel in Wittenberg, Germany. Luther would later pen a stinging treatise – "On the Babylonian Captivity of the Church" – against the errors of sacramental theology and practice.

Captive we remain, still today, though in a way more secular than ecclesial. In his own thesis, [Archbishop Charles Chaput](#) pointedly describes our captivity in a culture "where the horizons of the eternal disappear into a fog of the urgent now." He then posits that "(t)he greatest captivity of Babylon, whatever name it goes by in any age, has little to do with persecution or repression. It's the lie that nothing deeper, nothing greater, nothing more beautiful and satisfying and permanent than itself, exists."



Correcting that lie is a perennial task for Christians. After Luther, the task was taken up by Counter-Reformation bishops like St. Charles Borromeo and St. Francis de Sales. The latter challenged the lie(s) in ways that can still work today as we seek, through digital communications, [to counter the "fake news"](#) that leads to a cultural deformation in our thinking and our living.



Striving to persuade hearts in order to convince minds, the Salesian method (a.k.a. ["the Chablais spirit"](#)) emphasizes interpersonal dialogue. Never disagreeable even when disagreeing, Francis de Sales was known for "the arts of respectful conversation, constructive apologetics, and persuasive preaching." As Wendy Wright points out, his approach affirmed the dignity of his interlocutors, "even when – perhaps most when – the ideas they held or the affiliations that claim them make them an 'enemy'." In today's world of [cyberwars and online propaganda](#), we need still to keep in mind the inherent worth of the real persons with or about whom we communicate.

A second facet of the Salesian approach was the public celebration of the sacred in liturgical rites. According to Jill Fehleison, the saint and his missionary companions "consciously used words, images, actions, and sounds in the form of rituals, processions, and theatrical performances to appeal to people's senses instead of their intellects." Francis knew that beauty attracts, that affection engendered by the Good News of the Gospel leads to conversion. In today's world, where church attendance continues to decline, we need even more to celebrate the liturgy worthily and well, as a way for people to see and experience the power of the sacred in this world.

Finally, Francis de Sales recognized the importance of the written word. Writing with what Elisabeth Stopp calls "inspired common sense," he penned his own collection of theses in defense of the faith, which he then distributed directly to people by posting them on doors of houses and in public places. For this first serial press action, and in view of his compelling letters and other writings, he was later named ["Heavenly Patron of All Writers,"](#) including especially [Journalists](#). In today's world, where social media have displaced pamphleteering, we still need to actively engage others with the truth of what we believe, expressing that conviction simply and directly, through words, images and other creative formats that prevail in the new world of communications.

As Archbishop Chaput notes, today's culture is "great mission territory" where the need for proclaiming that Jesus Christ is Lord remains as necessary as it was in Luther's day. When our social communications do this with respect for human dignity, delight in sacred beauty, and fidelity to the truth, we stand a better chance of emerging from our captivity.

*featured image of the frontispiece of "On the Babylonian Captivity of the Church"
and image of "The Flight of the Prisoners" by James Tissot from wikipedia.org*

IDK as a communications strategy (10-27-17)

In text-lingo, the caps mean "I don't know" – which doesn't sound like much of a communications strategy! For most leaders, an admission of ignorance suggests a deficiency. When Pope Francis says it, though, it seems to bolster his image and discloses his appeal as a communicator.



At least that's the claim made by Fr. Antonio Spadaro, SJ during a presentation of a new book he edited. Entitled *Adesso Fate le Vostre Domande* ("Now ask your questions"), the work collects eight interviews given by Pope Francis, described in the sub-title as "conversations on the Church and the world of tomorrow."

Spadaro's presentation of the book noted that the occasional uncertainty in the pope's "I don't know" actually makes his interviews more real. In formulating extemporaneous responses to questions the pope had not seen prior to an interview, that answer says something beyond ignorance. It discloses the conversational quality of this form of pope-speak, where the Holy Father freely shares his own hypotheses about the topic without claiming encyclopedic exactitude in his response. In this, Spadaro says, we see not a popular personality, but the pope as himself. It exemplifies not a shrewd communications strategy, but the "radically pastoral dimension" of his words.

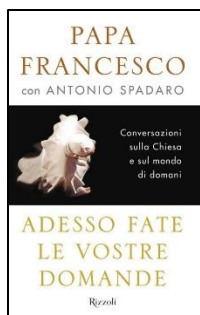
Spadaro's interlocutors during the presentation – two Italian journalists of long-standing reputation – echoed the same accolade. What struck them in (re)reading the interviews was the pope's rapport with journalists, the directness with which a pope would interact with the media and how this one does so with no fear. They noted that the interview, as a genre, can often be used to build up or tear down the one being interviewed. In the pope's case, however, neither happens. They attribute this to his dialogic approach (speaking "eye-to-eye"), compared to the less engaging experience of having to listen to a magisterial discourse.

Unfortunately, in a communications age that expects answers at the push of a search button, "I don't know" seems unacceptable in the quest to know. But the truth is that deep questions demand at least some reflection.

Church leaders tend to be asked about significant matters, sometimes supernatural in their mystery, but always of existential import to the questioner. In that case, no one should be surprised at the pope's IDK. It's a response any of us might give, in the humble acknowledgment that we don't always have a precise answer at the tip of our tongues when it comes to grasping the ambiguities and complexities of this mortal life.

But the pope knows that he must answer – because the world awaits his response! Eventually he usually does, either at a later moment in the interview when he comes back to a question, or in a subsequent follow-up after he has a chance to sleep on it.

We live now in a Twitter world, where questions are posed, answered or commented on in a limited number of words. The penchant for sound bites has penetrated not only media interviews but our very thinking. Referring to the effects of smartphone usage on our ability to remember information and reason about meaning, [Nicholas Carr recently noted](#) that "As the brain grows dependent on the technology, the research suggests, the intellect weakens."



But the Church, as the pope says, has to be able to insert itself into people's real-life conversations. In this we can follow the example of the risen Lord, who "interviewed" the discouraged disciples while walking with them on the road to Emmaus.

What's the best way to do this? IDK. But now that my book has arrived, I'll read it and get back to you.

featured image from Catholic News Service



Digital signs of devotion (11-10-17)

Yesterday, the Archdiocese of Philadelphia announced an innovative way to bring devotion into the digital world – the [Religious Signs for Families app](#). Touted as "a delightful and engaging way to learn ASL (American Sign Language)," the mobile tool offers everything "from signs for religious words and actions to everyday words and prayers."

The app will be especially helpful for families with deaf children or deaf couples with young children. Easy to follow, it provides an efficient and pleasing way to teach the prayers that many of us have learned by hearing them over and over again. This app gives the Deaf /hard of hearing an opportunity to learn these same prayers visually. In this way, technology supports the truth that the family is the first school of spirituality.



But it's even more important than that because it brings into digital reality a belief that is fundamental to our faith, namely, that the call to holiness is universal. The Deaf can (and should) be devout, as should we all.

But growth in the faith presupposes communication. As St. Paul writes in his letter to the Romans, salvation is for all. "But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him?" (10:14).

One answer to those questions comes from ST. FRANCIS DE SALES (1567-1622). The Bishop of Geneva and Doctor of the Church is renowned for championing the universal call to holiness in his *Introduction to the Devout Life*. Underscoring his teaching is the story of a real-life encounter that shows importance of communicating the faith to all.



While preaching in a nearby town in 1605, Francis met a deaf and mute man named Martin. The future saint, himself, prepared the young lad for his Easter communion there. Later the bishop brought him to work at the episcopal residence in Annecy. There he continued to give him lessons on the mysteries of salvation and the teachings of morality.

How they managed to communicate is a mystery! Francis signed, somehow, and Martin clearly learned. As a visitor attests, Martin could make the sign of the cross, follow Mass during the day, examine his conscience before going to bed, express his prayers to the Blessed Virgin Mary and the saints, and even go to Confession with the Bishop.

The story of Francis and Martin exemplifies the pastoral importance of "accompaniment" that Pope Francis is constantly extolling. Finding a way to care for someone spiritually has eternal consequences – for both parties!

For his inventive ways of teaching Martin, and the tender charity that characterized their encounters, Francis de Sales is now the patron saint of the deaf. For all of us, this example of accompanying young people in the development of their faith offers a model to be followed.

And now there's an app for that!

featured image from <http://deafcatholicphilly.org/religious-sign-app>



These days of our lives (11-24-17)

'Tis the season! The countdown to Christmas has begun, with a string of consecutive days to which we've given new names – and hashtags! All except the middle one.

#Thanksgiving – it needs no reference to the day of the week. It's always the fourth Thursday of November. Legally, that designation comes by way of presidential proclamation, [the first of which was issued in 1789](#). But the NFL schedule assures us that it will always be so. And the transportation industry counts on it.



#BlackFriday – despite its anticipation the day before, the day after Thanksgiving gets its name from the year's heaviest amount of retail shopping, which turned store accounts from the red of debt to the black of profit. Purportedly, the name originated here in Philadelphia to describe the massive traffic jams, both personal and vehicular, that accompanied all that shopping. Nowadays it is feted by sleeping outside the doors that will open early with special sales. It even has its own ["official" website!](#)

#SmallBusinessSaturday – this one arose more recently (2010), thanks to the American Express card. In response to the corporate supersizing of Black Friday, the Saturday focus turns to smaller businesses, especially local establishments in one's hometown. It celebrates the main street feel and neighborly character of the holiday season. Of course, all credit cards are accepted.



#CyberMonday – more than a response to retail demophobia (fear of crowds), this day capitalizes on the increasing popularity of online shopping. Fighting the fatigue brought on by Friday and Saturday, you can go anywhere on the Internet without leaving home. On this day the deals come to you. Santa will, too, on [sleighs driven by UPS and FedEx](#).

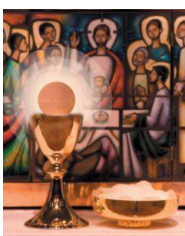
#GivingTuesday – this one reminds us not to forget those in need who won't get wrapped presents. It's a call to donate to charities, with a variety of non-profits counting on the end-of-year gifts. If you are overstuffed from the commercialization of the preceding days, this one brings relief, through the practice of philanthropy in the true spirit of the season.



But what about the day skipped amid this string of names?

It's a day of thanksgiving, with little travel needed. There are no special sales, because the gifts are free. It's celebrated in small towns with neighborly folks all around. It has no online access (yet!), but its deals transcend time and space. And on it we share generously with anyone in need through gifts of unmatched value.

Maybe it doesn't need a new name – just greater recognition and appreciation in our lives. For on this day, we can find the fulfillment of all that the season stands for.



It's called **SUNDAY**.

And you're invited to participate in its festivities not only this weekend, but all throughout the year.

images from thedialog.org, venuist-wordpress.com, cnet.com, conservativeread.com, blog.angara.com, daytonastate.edu, and historyofsalvationii-chaminade.blogspot.com/

Raging against the holidays (12-22-17)

The headline hurts: "Hate Christmas?" The sub-title offers a response: "There's a 'rage room' to let out holiday stress."

Utterly ridiculous?! Or might it be perfectly logical?

For just one day (last Monday), Londoners got to experience "[Rudolph's Rage Room](#)." There, for just \$25 (more rage), they could go underground to vent their frustrations at all that irritates them about the holiday, which the majority of humanity celebrates as a season of joy.



Patrons in that room dress in seasonally-colored overalls and don protective goggles – a necessary safeguard for a generation that has [grown up overprotected](#). For three minutes they could smash Christmas trees, ornaments, and other decorations – but hopefully not each other, despite the [heightened holiday stress typically triggered by family](#). The weapon of choice for this creepy catharsis is a bat – not one used in cricket, but a baseball bat, thereby blaspheming [America's athletic religion](#) along the way!

What are they thinking?

One hates the Christmas songs and the weather. Another assumes that by now "people are pretty sick of the Christmas music (and) all the decorations." A third "just imagined everyone from last Christmas who didn't get (him) anything and then showed them how it was." The organizer rejoices (oops!) that "everyone has loved it universally – whether they hate Christmas or they love Christmas."

Everyone? Really?

Rudolph may have been at risk of a brutal amputation in the room with his name. But even worse is the cultural disease looming large on the London streets and elsewhere. Where consumerism reigns, frustration follows. Without remembering the reason for the season, society does risk being pushed over the edge.

The real underground scene is that of a cave, an unadorned site where animals could take shelter from the weather. There, on Christmas, a child is born, "a Savior who is the Messiah and Lord" (Luke 2:11). In the still of night, that infant, "wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger," was a sign to all who saw him.

THAT scene we celebrate as "good news of great joy" – then as now. THAT room became a place of amazement, for shepherds then and worshippers today. THAT sight was the cause of homage by magi then and the impetus for adoration by wise people today.



Later would come the rage (by King Herod). His anger arose not over music or decorations or a lack of gifts, but the undeniable presence of a newborn king, one whose humble beginnings would signal a radical overturning of all that the world values. Mercy would be His great work and peace His lasting gift.

Releasing rage is hardly "the perfect holiday treat." It's a false escape, from which there is no escape.

To catch the real holiday spirit, it's best to recall its origins – in the Incarnation, the Word-made-flesh, the birth of the One who alone enables us to give "glory to God in the highest" and to enjoy "peace on earth for people of good will."

MERRY CHRISTMAS!

Social media does not breed perfect idiots (1-19-18)

A clash of recent news stories suggests the ambivalent power of social media.

First came the [CBS Philly report](#) that "a study looking at college students from 1989 to 2016 found that the personality traits that label someone a 'perfectionist' have risen dramatically in recent years.' Then came the national news story about the poisonous results – literally – of a phenomenon touted as the ["Tide Pod Challenge."](#) in which teenagers chomp on the detergent packet and then post a video of their experience.



I doubt the two groups of young people have any intersecting members. Where the stories do overlap is in their attribution of a significant contributing role in both problems played by social media.

The meta-analysis on perfectionism points to a connection. About that "irrational desire to achieve along with being overly critical of oneself and others," [lead author Thomas Curan says](#), "raw data suggest that social media pressures young adults to perfect themselves in comparison to others, which makes them dissatisfied with their bodies and increases social isolation." He admits that further research is needed to confirm this causation.

No research is needed, though [statistics will support it](#), to know there's a link between young people and social media, particularly the attractiveness of it, the compelling use of it, and the narcissistic desire to be liked and followed there. [Twitter carries the message](#): "The perfect meal. Retweet if you would eat this," with a photo of a bowl of Tide pods. YouTube reaches more than a billion people with the noxious culinary results.

The posts and pics are mind-boggling. But let's be real. Blaming social media is a deflection. No one can deny the powerful hold that social media have on young people, whose cell phones often function as lifelines. But communications technology is not the demon in either disease.

A "medium" (plural: media) is a go-between. It's a mechanism to convey something from someone to someone(s). The ease, speed, and reach by which social media effect that conveyance is revolutionary, and no doubt contributes to the proliferation of flawed ideas. But it's the idea – the "what" that is shared" – that is the problem here.



The quest for perfection can exert pressure. But the idea that someone can be perfect in any way is simply false. So, too, is the assumption that personal and social satisfaction is determined primarily by others. Clearly, young people need to learn where their value as a person lies. Hint: it's not in a device or in social media statistics.

Nor do devices dictate the idiocy of intentionally choosing to ingest poisonous detergents (a mix of ethanol and hydrogen peroxide, if you want the chemical details). Children who don't know better might confuse the colored pods for candy. But teenagers supposedly know better. Protect the former by keeping laundry detergent out of reach. How to safeguard the latter from themselves is an open question. [Perhaps the NFL can help](#). Or maybe a [humorous, but no less accurate and still gross, rendering of how temptation works](#) in this regard.



Yes, social media are powerful tools in a person's life. Admittedly, they can have deleterious effects – as can anything not used properly in, on, by, or between persons. But when it comes to seeking presumably necessary perfection or supposedly joking in dangerous ways, the medium is NOT the message.

Intentionality is instilled, not installed (2-9-18)

Cell phones can be addictive. This is not fake news.

More and more we are learning that cellphone addiction is real, not just perception. That reality, we now know, is by design, not just a by-product of popularity.



Techies are telling us of their own complicity in creating the "[persuasive designs](#)" that modify behavior by smartphone users. Corporate executives express [a desire to make a change](#). But the business model that depends on advertising revenues runs afoul of averting the problem. And consumers value the connectedness and productivity that the mobile revolution has made possible.

Responses to the problem have been wide-ranging. Individuals devise their own ploys, as when restaurant-goers put all their phones on the table and agree that the first one to reach for it has to pay for everyone's meal. Companies have spent countless billable hours devising policies for appropriate use of social media.

Now schools are getting into the act. The [French government](#) is set to ban the use of phones by students "as a public health message to families." [Catholic schools](#) closer to home are instituting similar restrictions on screen time, as a consequence of their mission to form a young person's soul.

New technology is coming to the rescue, too. Yondr offers an easy means to [create a phone-free space](#). Users entering a school, courtroom, hospital or other venue can lock away the distraction in a patented pouch that can only be opened when one exits the premises.

True addictions are disorders that require intervention. The minds and souls of the young do need overwatch for the sake of healthy formation. And every social gathering would benefit from the absence of annoying interruptions.

But the problem of distractedness is personal, not technological. In the adult world, at least, solutions to individual irresponsibility are not found in policies that circumscribe behavior for all.

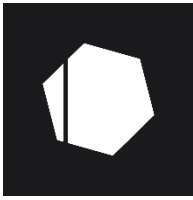
For parents and educators, as well as leaders and legislators, teaching responsibility may be the toughest task of all. Yet as a society it's also our most important. Accomplishing it requires the coupling of a respect for freedom and the cultivation of intentionality. It entails a tireless process of setting clear expectations for how people should act with and toward one another, and then applying consistently the consequences of transgressing the set standards.

Choices need to be made – by us, not for us. When it comes to being "smart" with one's phone, some choices are simple, like turning off notifications or deleting apps that are too easy to access. But to become smart as a person, the choices are more complex. Learning to make good choices is a life-long lesson.

We live in a digital world. There technology offers a trove of personal and professional treasures (along with potential dangers). There the "natives" are increasingly adept at multi-tasking (though it's really switch-tasking). There behavior can be engineered (in directions bad or good for us).

To find our way in this digital world, as in every other age, we need to teach responsibility and to learn intentionality. [Spending time well](#) is within our reach, but it cannot be coerced.

featured image of Yondr from theaustralian.com.au



Lean on Me (2-23-18)

If you're having a bad day, join the crowd! Apparently, we all have lots of them. As [CBS local news reports](#), a poll sponsored by Freeletics reveals that the average American is "stressed out, upset, or just cranky" about 60 days a year!

Not surprisingly, that sport and lifestyle company's solution is more exercise, premised on the idea that a gym is where you can get your life in shape. Very surprisingly, that idea doesn't seem to jibe with [a different study reported on the same news channel](#) just the day before. In that one, "Scientists at the University of California found two glasses of wine or beer a day reduced your risk of premature death by 18 percent, compared to just 11 percent for daily exercise." Go figure!

But neither barbells or beer can relieve us of our human propensity for stress or change our mortal nature. To counteract those existential realities, only a higher power can prevail.

Lent began with a jolt: "remember, o man, that you are dust and unto dust you shall return." To impress that truth on our consciousness, black ashes are pressed onto our foreheads. But not everyone is stressed by that; for some, like these smiling Catholic school students, the recognition of mortality appears to make for a good day.



That seeming contradiction is predicated not on a denial of reality but on a fuller grasp of it. Nor does relief from what winds us up or brings us down come about simply by "[leaning into an unpleasant feeling](#)" so that we can allow it to go away. Leaning on the Lord is the comprehensive solution that Lent invites us to reconsider. It works because faith forms the mind, informs the heart, and transforms the will.

The choice to believe in divine Providence is just that - a choice. When we decide to have faith, we adopt a reasoned and reasonable perspective on life in this world, namely, that all is fundamentally good, because it was made so and is intended to be so. Christians recognize by faith that the source of that first and final goodness is a benevolent God, one whose cruciform sign of unlimited mercy stands sturdily all around us. When we contemplate that Cross, we can keep our daily stresses in their proper perspective.

ST. FRANCIS DE SALES (1567-1622) counsels this supernatural perspective with a charmingly natural image: "Soon we shall be in eternity and then we shall see how insignificant our worldly preoccupations were and how



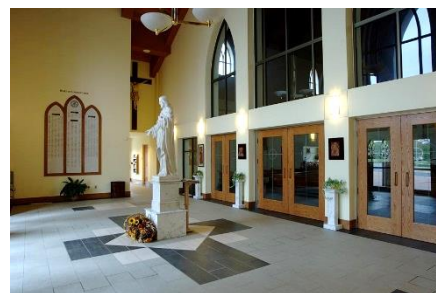
little it mattered whether some things got done or not; however, right now we rush about as if they were all-important. When we were little children how eagerly we used to gather pieces of broken tile, little sticks, and mud with which to build houses and other tiny buildings, and if someone knocked them over, how heartbroken we were and how we cried! But now we understand that these things really didn't amount to much. One day it will be like this for us in heaven when we shall see that some of the things we clung to on earth were only childish attachments" (*Letters of Spiritual Direction*, p. 159).

Of course, not all bad days are about childish matters. Sickness still happens, plans still fail, families still feud, and the home team still loses. Even our otherwise productive [cellphone capability contributes to our stress](#). Faith does not make all this magically disappear. Religion recognizes that as long as we still walk in this world, we have to face reality. That's why, in the Gospel for the second Sunday of Lent, Peter doesn't get to build his three tents on the mountaintop. The sight of God's glory in the transfigured Jesus is not (yet) a permanent vision. They have to get back to their journey ... and the stress that comes with it. But at least they now know what awaits them in their faithfulness.

So, keeping working out, if you like. Have another drink, if you prefer (but only two!). Then, if you want to get in the lasting shape of your life, turn back to God, as this holy season bids us all to do.

Let's close the church doors (3-16-18)

Years ago, when my mother lay in a hospital bed recuperating from a heart attack, she showed her couch habits. Without even thinking about it, she always had her legs crossed at the ankles. Whenever the cardiologist visited, upon his entry and exit, he would gently and without a word, uncross her feet so as to improve her circulation.



I'm reminded of this whenever I visit a parish church for Mass or another liturgical rite. I replicate the kind doctor's approach, though it's hard not to be as obvious about what I'm doing when I close all the inside doors to the church. Greeters open them, and I close them -- in what can sometimes be an endless dance of the doors.

It may seem like a quirk (one of my many), but the doors exist for more than decorative reasons. They are a physical demarcation between the world outside and the church inside. They provide a barrier between the loud busyness of society and the quiet prayerfulness of being in God's presence. Or at least that's the theory.

In practice, though, church spaces are taking on the character of common social places. Just recently, I visited a local parish and took the opportunity, before the rituals began, to observe the goings-on from my seat in the pews. A cell phone rang loudly, and the answerer told the caller that it was OK to chat because she was in the back of the church - a conversation that everyone inside also heard! Then a few little ones entered and ran up and down the slopped aisles - to their delight and everyone else's distraction. Finally, a few folks in a front pew decided to chat with their neighbors - who were five pews behind them!

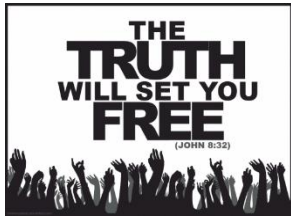
Of course, church is "social" - the People of God gathering to give thank and praise. Being a "welcoming" community remains vitally important to the parish experience. So, it is always good for the fellowship of believers to encounter and engage one another, especially on occasions of worshipping together.

But the proper place for that is *outside* the worship space. Most churches, or at least newer ones, include an ample narthex -- the area between the outer doors of the building and the inner doors of the worship space -- where folks can meet and greet, catch up and converse, and even take care of valuable parish business.

Once inside, though, conversations should shift to that communication with God known as prayer. To facilitate this more spiritual environment, quiet is necessary. Stillness aids in cultivating a recollection of mind and heart. Silence allows worshippers to enter into that colloquy with God that takes place without words spoken.

Without a prayerful ambience, where the divine Spirit inspires and the human spirit aspires, our encounter with God risks becoming merely another activity we do, a Sunday program, distinct from other days of the week only in the place in which it happens. But that place is designed to be different, to be set apart, to be holy. That's where church doors make a difference - for the sake of our spiritual circulation.

Granted, the ecclesiology of Pope Francis rightly exhorts us to open wide the doors, so that the believers who constitute the church can go out and bring Christ to the world, rather than remain closed in on themselves. But when it comes time to worship, let's keep the inside doors closed so that we, and others, can experience a bit of prayerful solitude that is increasingly difficult to find in our otherwise hectic lives.



Steps we can take to "remain" free (3-23-18)

In a recent homily, one of our deacons publicly announced a literary lacuna on this blog site! He told the congregation he could not find any post that offered "five easy steps" to put into practice the Gospel teaching in which Jesus proclaims that "the truth will set you free."

It's good to know *SemCasual* has such avid readers! For future reference, we offer here a response to his homily.

The deacon did well to highlight the oft-forgotten condition preceding Jesus' claim: "If you remain in my word, you will truly be my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (John 8:31-32). Rightly did the preacher note what Jesus did *not* say. Discipleship doesn't happen merely by reading or hearing the word, nor does it result automatically from studious understanding or interpretation of that word. The key to discipleship, to the knowledge and freedom of which Jesus speaks, is "remaining" (or "abiding") in His word.

But how does one do that ... especially when Jesus no longer remains (physically) in the midst of those whom he calls to be His disciples? The answer lies in various dimensions we can associate with the verb "remain."

Step 1 - stay near. The "remaining" of which Jesus speaks has a spatial dimension, as in staying nearby or remaining close. Today, we can remain in His word by drawing closer to it through a regular *reading* of Sacred Scripture (all of which is the Word of God). But this entails more than simply seeking information. The Word of God is, primarily, a Person who speaks. When we see or hear Him in our reading of that word, when we learn more about Him who fulfills that divine word, we draw closer to the One whose work of Redemption sets us free from the bonds of our sinful human condition.

Step 2 - stay with. The spatial dimension also has a transcendent aspect. We remain close to the divine word by staying with the Sacred Scriptures in *prayer*. In considering a biblical passage in meditation, we savor the word, ponder its possibilities, and can be inspired by a sacred imagination that teaches in ways only God can.

Step 3 - stay strong. This "remaining" also has a temporal dimension, as in the sense of continuing or enduring. We remain in Jesus' word when we stick with it, stick with Him, despite the multiplicity of other views that vie for our attention. The world offers many ways that purport to lead us to freedom and happiness. But will these really get us where we want to go? In the end, only Truth will get us there, so continuing education in *Theology*, especially in terms of moral decision-making, is necessary.

Step 4 - stay as is. More than just perseverance, the temporal dimension above also includes the notion of abiding as we are. Said differently, to "remain" means to be where we are, to be who we are, and not to desire or wish to be someone else. In this sense, the word challenges us to become who God intends us to be. For this, we can benefit from a daily *examination of conscience* that acknowledges the ways in which we do live according to that word and the ways in which we still need to grow in our conversion.

Step 5 - stay attentive. That continual growth in living God's word as a disciple of Jesus shows that "remaining" is much more active than "resting." We stay attentive to God's word when we remain on the lookout for that divine presence in our daily responsibilities and in the persons we encounter each day, such that we *learn to see God in all things*.

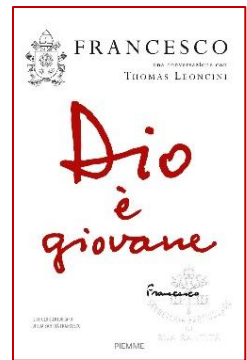
These may not be the "easy" steps the deacon was searching for on this blog site. But at least he can know that his homily did inspire the writing of this post!

feature image from worshipoutloud.wordpress.com

A God for All Ages (4-20-18)

How old is God? Eternal, you might say. But Pope Francis has another idea.

For many, God is a being the concept of whom is too abstract to picture. Sacred Scripture acknowledges that "no one has ever seen God" (John 1:18; 1 John 4:12). Biblical narratives of an encounter with the first Person of the Trinity take the form of mysterious manifestations ("theophanies"), often described in terms of natural phenomena such as a burning bush or a tumultuous whirlwind.



Artists have long been inspired to portray God in a variety of ways, usually in accord with the divine prowess and power. More recently, Hollywood directors depict God according to their creative imagination, from a grandfatherly sage (George Burns) to a hip helper (Morgan Freeman).



Now comes a new image from the Holy Father. According to the title of his latest book-length interview, released in Italian last month and coming out in English in October, *Dio è giovane* ("God is young"). Based on a line from the biblical book of Revelation (21:5), Pope Francis creates the new image with these words:

God is He who is always renewing, because He is always new: God is young! God is the Eternal One who has no time, but (He) is capable of renewing, rejuvenating (Himself) continually and rejuvenating everything. The most distinguishing characteristics of youth are also His. He is young because "he makes all things new" and loves novelty; because (He) astonishes and loves amazement; because (He) knows to dream and desires our dreams; because (He) is strong and enthusiastic; because (He) builds relationships and asks us to do the same, (He) is social.

Published in anticipation of the upcoming [Synod of Bishops](#) - on "Young People, the Faith and Vocational Discernment" - the book focuses on a wide range of questions reflecting the realities that they face in today's world. The papal responses demonstrate well his grasp of the youth culture and his affectionate concern for their well-being. His commentary also discloses his idiomatic thinking, as when he says that youth are different from adults in as much as their feet are not parallel but always one in front of the other, "ready to leave and scatter" and "always launching ahead."

For Pope Francis, both the "old dreamers" and the "young prophets" are critically important for a society that has lost its roots. He reminds us of the "revolution of tenderness" to which we are all called and offers this enduring plea: "Have no fear of diversity and of your fragility; life is unique and unrepeatable for what it is; God awaits us every morning when we awake to consign this gift to us again. Let us take care of it with love, gentleness, and naturalness."

It's a worthy thought for all ages, whatever image we might have of God.



Moralosis misdiagnosed (4-27-18)

A new contagion has been identified. It appears to have broken out already in Ireland. It's poised to break out in California. "Moralosis" is its name.

In an engaging commentary, [John Waters](#) defines this virus as "an attempt to separate the 'moral issues' from the core of Christianity." He sees the effects of this disease in his native Ireland, where a senator claimed "it's no wonder people feel disillusioned with the Catholic Church" after she listened to a priest at Easter Mass preaching about abortion. It also seems to ail the California State Assembly, which will soon vote on a bill the would ban the sale of books expressing [free religious speech in the realm of "sexual orientation change efforts."](#)

Waters rightly identifies the problem in the societal tendency to dismiss any statement of moral conviction as mere "moralism" that cannot be tolerated by an enlightened public. The symptoms are clear. But the diagnosis misreads the cause of the problem.

The instantiating sign of the emergence of this disease, for Waters, is Pope Francis's first interview (9/19/13), [published worldwide in Jesuit magazines](#). In response to a question about pastoral work with Christians living "in complex situations that represent open wounds," the pope said that the Church cannot insist on speaking only, or all the time, about moral issues. As he added there and has explained elsewhere, matters of morality are consequences, not starting points, of the proclamation of the Gospel.

According to Waters, the pope's "central point appears to be that an 'excessive' emphasis on moralism serves to suffocate the deeper message of Christianity." The papal position, in this diagnosis, appears as "a hastily conceived attempt to communicate a degree of relaxation in respect of certain aspects of Church teaching."

Upon further examination, however, that analysis misses the mark. What the pope encourages is communicating a message that seeks to dress people's wounds *before*, not instead of, providing longer-term treatment based on the truth of the Church's teaching. He prescribes not the relaxation of doctrine (about which [his words are clear](#)), but the medication of mercy as a first response. In other words, for the physician-pope emphasizing "the heart of Christ's message" is not an excision of morality from Christianity, but a necessary salve that distinguishes pastoral theology from religious ideology (cf. *Evangelii gaudium*, no. 34).



Returning to the initial diagnosis, there's a note in the chart that warrants further consideration. Waters supposes that "Most Catholics would agree that the Church should not pursue rules and ethics as discrete, self-standing realities, but only as concepts contextualized in the patterns of human freedom – a freedom defined ultimately by the Resurrection." But do they?

The real abnormality in attempts to quarantine moral positions from the public square is the *failure* to see the Church's teaching as rooted not merely in faith but also in reasoning about human anthropology and freedom. Nowadays, unfortunately, what people want outweighs what is true. Pope Francis's interview didn't cause this, though how people interpret his words may well be a contributing factor. Moralosis has long affected every kind of healthcare because of the perennial condition of being human.