

THE CARDINAL'S FORUM
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on *"The Vocation & Mission of the Family"*



remarks by

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Luckily for me, I get to limit my commentary to Families and Communication. Then again, the widespread and pervasive reach of social media today doesn't make for much of a limit.

In this arena, what I find interesting is the development in thought regarding social communications from the 2014 Synod to the 2015 Synod, along with the pronouncements of Pope Francis along the way.

In the build up to the 2014 Synod, there were multiple references to modern media; the [Instrumentum Laboris](#) even dedicated two entire paragraphs to the topic. Consistent with the focus of that synod – on the Pastoral Challenges of the Family – all the references were negative. These included: the media's bad influence on accepting the teaching of the Church about marriage & family (n. 9); the media's role in promoting a "reference-to-self only" view of what is natural (n. 29); and the media's support for the attitude that love cannot endure (n. 84). More specifically, the challenges identified at the 2014 Synod were: pornography, Internet addiction, information overload, and the negative impact of media on family in terms of misleading values, problems in relationships, and even the loss of leisure time (nn. 68-69).

Thankfully, the 2014 Synod's final document lightened up a bit! It includes only one reference to the negative influence of media, which in turn was included in the [Instrumentum Laboris](#) for the 2015 Synod. And that single statement is not at all shocking. I think everyone would agree that *"One of the fundamental challenges facing families today is undoubtedly that of raising children, made all the more difficult and complex by today's cultural reality and the great influence of the media"* (n. 142/60).

Looking toward the 2015 Synod, which will focus on the Vocation and Mission of the Family, there are only three other references to media in the *Instrumentum Laboris*. One describes the media as an "invasive presence" that weakens the educational role of parents (n. 144). But the other two references are more positive. One calls for everyone to "serve the common good of society ... through the use of the social network and the media" (n. 72), while the

other exhorts us to make use of communications in the “joyful and optimistic proclamation of the truths of the faith concerning the family” (n. 79).

Now, you might guess that, in terms of how the synod views social communications, I would welcome the shift from negative challenges to positive exhortations. And you would be correct! But I would also note that the approach taken to the media in both synodal documents remains primarily an instrumental one; that is, we still tend to look upon the tools of social communications as simply newfangled technological gadgets that serve as a means to some (other) end.

In my view, we will better serve “the vocation and mission of the family” when we modify that viewpoint. Technology today does provide powerful gadgets and fascinating applications. But the issue for families – and the important role they play – is much larger. So, for the sake of discussion, let me make three suggestions that may help us to see social communications in the family in a new light.

As I noted in [the inaugural Cardinal Foley Lecture](#), digital technology today is no longer simply a useful tool. It contributes to and is characteristic of the very environment in which we live. Social communications function as our culture’s “connective tissue” or “nervous system.” These metaphors suggest that the “wonderful technological discoveries,” as the Second Vatican Council called them, link our lives together (hence, “social” communications). Even if we are not extensive users of digital media, everything around us is still affected by them – our news, our sports, our politics, our entertainment, even our daily interactions with family and friends. So, just as we are not always consciously aware of the critical role that tissue and nerves play in our physical lives – until something hurts, that is! – so too the workings of the digital environment are such that without it, our lives would, in some real sense, fall apart.

This perspective recognizes the pervasive and permeating reality of social communications. Even the Holy Father acknowledges this, when he calls the modern media “essential,” particularly for young people (in his [Message for World Communications Day 2015](#)). Getting parents and families to recognize this truth about our digital environment, rather than flee from it or otherwise avoid it, is a first step I suggest we take.

Following from this, a second step would be for all of us to embrace fully the Holy Father’s call “to employ technology wisely, rather than letting ourselves be dominated by it.” In that exhortation lies a distinction that acknowledges how modern means of social communications can be “both a help and a hindrance to communication in and between families.”

Parents, especially, need to keep both in mind. Yes, significant dangers exist in the realm of social media, just as there are risks in every facet of growing up. And clearly children “cannot be left to their own devices” – either figuratively or literally! But once parents accept the premise that the iWorld is now the environment in which they and their children live, then they might actually look upon this world as an opportunity to engage more fully with what

their children are texting and posting and sharing ... and they might even learn a thing or two from them! (By the way ... the same could be said for pastors – or future pastors! – and their flocks.)

Closely connected to this opportunity for an encounter is the third and final step I suggest, and that would be to affirm the ultimately spiritual realm of all communications technology. This spiritual focus is, of course, what concerns Pope Francis, and by extension is of ultimate importance to families and to each of us. The Holy Father speaks about this concern in both his recent general audiences on the Family and in his latest encyclical, and in his comments he once again addresses the dual potential of social communications.

On the one hand, Pope Francis points out that mass media can contribute to a “social destitution” that damages the family. This happens when “pseud-models” are spread by the media “on the basis of consumerism and the cult of appearances” ([General Audience, 6/3/15](#)). As we know, the spiritual realm – even online – needs truth and beauty in order to thrive.

On the other hand, Pope Francis writes in *Laudato Si'* about an integrated human ecology, which today necessarily includes social communications. Specifically, he exhorts us to learn how “to live wisely, to think deeply, and to love generously” when it comes to media and the digital world (n. 47). The family is the place where this significant spiritual lesson is taught and learned.

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

The family teaches that real relationships are formed and held together despite individual differences (cf. [Evangelii Gaudium](#), n. 66). For this to develop, we should remember that the connections mediated by social networks involve real, not virtual, people. The way we interact online, in what we say and what we post, needs to respect this and do so with familial charity.

And the family is where the sharing of knowledge and affection is learned and cultivated. We can learn about and “like” lots of things online. Increasingly powerful technologies make possible ways to interact with an ever-wider world. The prospects for the future are truly exciting. But true admiration and affection will always be directed toward persons whom we love, those we encounter in the human family that is our origin and the Christian family that is our community.

Integrating social communications into the educational process of family life in the Church and the contemporary world continues to be a challenge for everyone – parents, teachers, seminarians, and priests alike. To quote the Holy Father one last time: “may we respond to that challenge with fresh energy and imagination as we seek to share with others the beauty of God” ([Message for World Communications Day, 2014](#)).