

[www.semcasual.com](http://www.semcasual.com)

# Seminarian Casual



## “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*

**2018-2019**

## **2018**

- [8-24-18](#) Why some church pews are empty
- [9-14-18](#) Words are not neutral
- [9-21-18](#) Seeing is ...
- [11-30-18](#) The unimportance of practically everything



## Why some church pews are empty (8-24-18)

The PEW researchers have once again taken to studying the state of life in the pews. In a national snapshot released just this month, they presented the findings from a study of [why Americans go \(and don't go\) to religious services](#).

The most popular reason given for the absence came from those who said, "I practice my faith in other ways" (37%). In second place came the admission that "I am not a believer" (28%), followed by those who apparently do believe but "haven't found a church/house of worship I like" (23%).

Despite an explanatory note, the report boggled the mind a bit in its references to non-believers. Among those who rarely/never attend because of a lack of faith, 15% still say they pray daily (to whom/what?); 61% say religion is very/somewhat important in their lives (religion without belief?); and 45% self-identify as at least somewhat religious or spiritual or both religious and spiritual (without belief having anything to do with it?).

Those oddities aside, the sad truth is that fewer and fewer people seem to find a home in the church or a place in the pews. For those who do go regularly, or who at least try to, the primary reason is clear – they want to draw closer to God (81%). That divine-human connection, we know, is the beginning and end of religion. Religious faith does have an important notional dimension (concerning what we believe about God), but at its heart faith is a relational phenomenon (focused on the divine One in whom we believe).

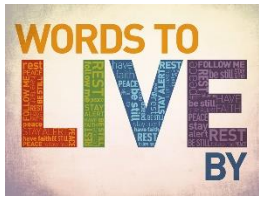
But on a more practical level, two tidbits can be linked to the research question, one found in the survey, another drawn from personal experience.

From the survey we learn that "Catholics who attend Mass regularly are *significantly less likely* than other Christian churchgoers to say that the sermons they hear are what keeps them coming back" (emphasis added!). Only 36% are likely "to say valuable sermons are a very important reason." Is that because the sermons they hear aren't valuable, or because any sermons is a less important reason? The problematic of the former explanation I shall grapple with in my new Homiletics courses this year! The logic of the latter explanation remains the by-product of a Catholic sacramental culture.

From recent experience, though, there may be a rather simple explanation. Some folks may not go to religious services because it is increasingly (and unconscionably) difficult to find out when Mass is being celebrated! Case in point – the Assumption holy day that falls during the time when many people are traveling on vacation.

In our online world, most information can be found in a matter of seconds with just a few clicks. But my digitally-savvy friend struggled to find a scheduled Mass on August 15. Of the ten Catholic churches located within ten miles of the hotel, only four had a web site. Of those four web sites, only one listed a "holy day" Mass schedule (even the cathedral's site had none). With a few extra clicks, two of the sites that had online bulletins finally gave up the sought-after times for Mass. But this discovery came only after telephoning one of the parishes and receiving the after-hours message that listed the Mass times for *Easter!*

Granted, website design has multiple features and functionalities. Costs for operating digital sites might be a prohibitive factor for some parishes. But if "going" to Church matters, it is incumbent upon parishes to provide the information that makes that going possible, both for believers and seekers. If we want digital natives in the pews of our churches, then our churches need to be more actively engaged in the digital world. Having a good website, and making Mass times easily accessible there, is a simple first step that every parish should take.



## Words are not neutral (9-14-18)

Pope Francis recently wrote the preface to a new book by Bishop Nunzio Galantino called *Vivere le parole: Per un vocabolario dell'esistenza* (To Live Words: For a Vocabulary of Existence). The book is marketed as filling the "urgent need to penetrate words and live them more deeply," especially "in times of hyper-information yet scorching non-communication between people." It seeks to counter today's tendency to reduce words to non-sense by emptying them of their concrete connection to the flesh and blood complexities of everyday life.

The author has selected 101 words that he categorizes into seven sections: tending toward the absolute (e.g., God, silence, grace), the essence of man (e.g., body, dignity, action), openness to others (e.g., encounter, promise, listening), social virtues (e.g., optimism, authenticity, tolerance), the way of mercy (e.g., forgiveness, tenderness, gratefulness), social action (e.g., culture, development, work), and the value of limits (e.g., humility, resilience, death).



As a gift to those at Saint Charles Borromeo Seminary who will be instituted as Lectors this weekend, and to all who read the words of *SemCasual*, here is my very unofficial translation of the preface by Pope Francis:

"Words are not neutral, nor do they ever leave things as they are. They are not born at a table, or in the salons good for closed and self-referential circles. Rather, they give voice to cultural and spiritual values rooted in the collective memory of a people, to whom they restore new vigor. Their fecundity is bound to a sharing of life; it is proportionate to the openness with which they allow themselves to be interrogated by and engaged in the realities, situations, and histories of persons."

"To live words means to overcome suspicions, fears, and isolations in order to assume the liberating courage of encounter. It is a journey that requires knowing how to rediscover the primacy of silence, from which everything takes its initiative. This (silence), in fact, remains the womb that, while it makes listening possible and guards it, permits us to go out of and go beyond ourselves. One then reaches the point of drawing near, of assuming attitudes and styles of proximity, eventually taking to oneself 'the joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted' (*Gaudium et spes*, 1)."

"Thus, whoever learns to listen finds himself in the company of men and women, animated by a spirit of dialogue that opens out to the culture of reciprocity, capable of teaching and learning, of giving and receiving, of offering and accepting ideas about meaning, hope, and the future. In such a dynamism also stands the freshness of words, which - always arising from experience - address the sensibility, formation, and profundity of the person. Together with the density of the contents, they are spread thanks to the attention given to seeking the most appropriate modality by which to reach the other and to draw forth a reply and response."

"For everyone who is baptized, this fidelity to man is the necessary condition that opens the way to the mission of announcing to all the Word that saves; it is the soul of discernment, that never tires of scrutinizing the signs of the times to search there for the will of God, reaching to the point of reading, interpreting, and taking positions in history; it is the secret of every evangelizing action, the charming power of the credibility and reliability of the words of the Church, the sign and instrument of the Kingdom."

"I have already observed that, precisely because of (their) authenticity, such words are weighty: he alone sustains them who incarnates them in life with a clear and impassioned witness."



"Of such witness this book is a sign, thanks to the ability of Bishop Nunzio Galantino to arrange voices of a dictionary that helps to re-appropriate the vitality and beauty of daily life."



## Seeing is ... (9-21-18)

If you said "believing" to fill in the title, you'd be correct! But when it comes to religious "seeing" as inspired by art, that believing is much more than merely a sensory confirmation of something thought or proposed.

Consider statues. Some may see them as relics of a religious past, remnants of a bygone age of representation. In today's world of YouTube videos, live Tweeting, and other active messaging via social media, it seems anachronistic to suggest that a still, silent statue communicates something meaningful.

Still, works of art continue to be commissioned, as happened this week at Overbrook. An artistic creation of Joe Finisdore entitled "*Ecce, Homo*" was blessed and dedicated in memory of John Cardinal Foley and now stands temporarily (and somewhat precariously) in the corridor outside the chapel of the Theological Seminary.



It joins the pantheon of other statues on campus that evoke figures linked to a seminary education, including the Blessed Virgin Mary, a few apostles, some angels, St. John Vianney, and this seminary's patron, St. Charles Borromeo. Add to this the many stained-glass windows, architectural arches and columns, and the array of prodigious paintings around the campus – and one can see art everywhere.

Some may wonder whether all this is extraneous to the seminary's mission, or even too costly for its upkeep. Wouldn't the money donated for artistic creations be better invested in operations or financial aid, they might ask. After all, formation is an interior process and education a costly one.

But true art communicates on another level, one both higher and deeper.

Art is evocative of that which it portrays. In the case of the "*Ecce, Homo*" statue, one is invited to consider the central act in the life of Jesus as priest, namely, the humbling and merciful gift of the God who sacrifices Himself for the redemption of all human life. It's something worth pondering by all those who enter a chapel to celebrate the liturgical memorial of that sacrifice.

Art like this is also provocative. The new statue has already generated any number of comments, whether critical or appreciative, some humorous and others wondrous. That's what good art does. It attracts our attention, reaches into our spirit, and draws forth a response.

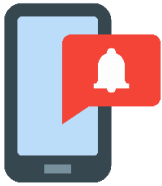
With religious renderings, that response is found, ultimately, in prayer. "*Ecce, Homo*" and other statues intend to draw viewers into the realm of the spirit. They generate a remembering of God's magnificent works in the people and the actions they memorialize. They do so not with [the selfie-interest of the vast majority of today's photos](#), nor with the historical accuracy of a biography. Rather, they point us toward a supernatural mystery that transcends both. Beautiful religious art touches upon the eternal.

As St. John Paul II reminds us, in his [Letter to Artists](#), "for everyone, believers or not, the works of art inspired by Scripture remain a reflection of the unfathomable mystery which engulfs and inhabits the world." So, too, "every genuine art form in its own way is a path to the inmost reality of man and of the world. It is therefore a wholly valid approach to the realm of faith, which gives human experience its ultimate meaning."

Cardinal Foley is remembered for having worked so creatively and faithfully in the world of modern social communications. To dedicate a statue to his memory may seem old-fashioned or out-of-place. But as he once preached to seminarians here: "whatever task you are given, view it as the Will of God for you – as a means of offering hope to a world in which there is so little hope ... as a way of expressing your faith and of showing your love and the love of Jesus Christ who gave his life for love of us."

*Ecce, homo* – "behold the Man" – indeed.

featured image from: [www.seeingisbelieving.vision](http://www.seeingisbelieving.vision)



## The unimportance of practically everything (11-30-18)

It's been a busy week online, with #CyberMonday and #Giving Tuesday vying for our digital attention. One school I know sent at least half a dozen messages about donating, including an announcement about the online drive, an opening bell for the day, a midway-through notice, a two-hour warning toward the end, a "what a day" exhale, and a final tally of the donations.

Marketers and fund-raisers are becoming tenacious with their digital notifications. Some recipients of the onslaught find these to be helpful reminders, while others see the online deluge as reason to opt-out or unsubscribe altogether.

Whether news or nuisance, notifications are designed to get our attention. All too often we give it, turning our focus to our devices reflexively and without any further thought.

The unhesitating way we attune ourselves to these notifications, and to our devices in general, should give us pause. Are we really being "present" to one another when we are quick to take out our phones while seated at table? Do we notice how readily we may turn away from in-person conversations to give our attention, instead, to someone on the other end of a wireless device?

Despite the moaning of many, the problem here is not the communications technology that engenders an overload of notifications or information. The focus, as with most digital challenges, should be on the user; after all, it's still a fact that they (we) choose when and where and how to respond to each digital touch.

With every notifying banner, sound, or badge comes a sense of urgency, or at least what appears to be so. Receiving such a signal, we presume it necessary to look immediately and respond right away. It's like dopamine, [they say](#). Pavlov was right, [they claim](#). Perhaps. But the real culprit, as well as the solution, is our own freedom.

With our devices at hand, we have trained ourselves to ask Google impulsively, as if every question that comes up in a conversation necessitates an immediate and definitive answer. We have convinced ourselves to keep our phones close by in the event that someone of importance may want to contact us, as if our ever-readiness to respond were a contemporary job requirement or a modern-day form of fealty.

Here's a different notification to consider: *nothing is that urgent!*

Despite our rationalizations, we don't really need to know or respond to things right away. Not everything is an emergency needing immediate attention! Truth be told, the only real emergencies in life are when someone can't breathe or is bleeding profusely, neither of which can usually be helped by another at a digital distance!

What may help to lessen the digital demand on our consciousness is a healthy dose of [Essentialism](#) – as in the best-selling book by Greg McKeown, subtitled "The Disciplined Pursuit of Less." Core competencies constituting this mind-set include choosing (something always within our power to do), discerning (because most of the things that seem to matter really don't), and prioritizing (since having it all or doing it all is really impossible).

Applied to life in the digital realm, cultivating this discipline means purposefully deciding when and where to use our devices (and, most likely, to use them less). Contrary to what we may assume, that decision is not pre-determined by the technology, nor is constant use justly demanded by others.

Essentially, using our devices is up to us. Choosing when and where and how we respond to all those notifications – that's how we know who and what are our priorities; that's how we show who and what really matter.

