Pope Francis Online

Year IV (2016-2017)

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

Last week, Pope Francis joined Instagram. The papal account -- @Franciscus -- shattered records by amassing a million followers within just twelve hours. Add this to the 27 million followers on his Twitter accounts, and this pope is easily the world’s most-recognized social media phenomenon. Why on earth would a pope bother to immerse himself (and by extension the Catholic Church) in the passing fancies of the “selfie” generation?

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

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

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

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

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

Pope Francis knows this. He communicates this through social media. Millions of people can now “see” the message on multiple platforms. When they participate in these holy encounters, and “share” that with others, the Gospel is proclaimed to all the world. That inspiring proclamation, facilitated now by the social media through which people regularly communicate, fulfills what the Church has always been called to do.
Having finally read the entire document, I think it’s fair to say that Pope Francis’ apostolic exhortation is about the “ideal” of marriage. But the implications of that vary widely, from the lamenting critique that the pope has failed to uphold the ideal, to the giddy supposition that since no one can achieve an ideal the pope has equalized all marital situations.

As usual, extreme views fail to be accurate!

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

featured images from usccb.org and wordonfire.org
It must be big – it has its own hashtag!

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

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

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

But we plan to change that … at least locally!

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

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

The symposium concludes with a luncheon celebration, during which the Seminary will present the first Cardinal Foley Award in Communications to a media professional who excels in the field. (Contact Cathy Peacock at the Seminary to reserve your tickets for the luncheon.) The inaugural winner of the Cardinal Foley Award is longtime Philly favorite PAT CIARROCCHI, who recently retired from CBS-3 after more than thirty years in television and radio broadcasting. Among the many stories she covered, Pat shared with Philadelphians live reports from the canonization of Philadelphia native St. Katherine Drexel in 2000, the funeral of Pope John Paul II in 2005, the historic resignation of Pope Benedict XVI in 2013, and most recently the World Meeting of Families and visit of Pope Francis last September.

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

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

featured images from http://www.chiesacattolica.it/GMCS2016
Parents beware … and be wary! (5-20-16)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

images from www.screenagersmovie.com
The pope and cell phones (9-16-16)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

featured image from brandonvogt.com
News about the news (9-23-16)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Church’s mission is to proclaim Good News. From the Babel of modern media will come, we hope, a dynamic and coordinated transmission of that message. When it is honest, socially constructive and humanly respectful -- that, indeed, will be big news!
Digital works of mercy (11-4-16)

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

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

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CORPAL</th>
<th>DIGITAL</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Feed the hungry</td>
<td>Post</td>
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<tr>
<td>Give drink to the thirsty</td>
<td>Post the positive</td>
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<tr>
<td>Shelter the homeless</td>
<td>Like the like-less</td>
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<tr>
<td>Clothe the naked</td>
<td>Hashtag the homeless</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visit the sick</td>
<td>TOMS Buy one, give one</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visit the imprisoned</td>
<td>Send some care</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bury the dead</td>
<td>Bury the hatchet</td>
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Post the positive. Humans hunger for connection. But online social networks tend to be filled with negativity, from nasty comments to devilish trolls. Be merciful by posting only positive thoughts and/or images.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

featured image from www.ssaparish.com / image of corporal works from www.catholic-link.org
Theology in the News (11-18-16)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*featured image from L’Osservatore Romano*
The misery of technology (12-2-16)

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

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

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

![Misericordia et Misera](image)

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

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

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

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

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

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

featured image from www.mygodpictures.com
Then, now, always (12-23-16)

Some may purchase it, but most won’t “buy” it!

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Hipster images from www.modernnativity.com / Giotto image (public domain) from www.aleteia.org
A hyper-connected journey (1-20-17)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

featured image from Siggiblog.com
A new lens for life (1-27-17)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Take a look through our lens in this promotional video to learn more! featured image from medimaxatl.com
A time and place for social media (2-10-17)

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

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

No more! Or so it seems with digital media.

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

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

Let not reality intrude on accessibility!

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

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

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

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

featured image from Dung Hoang Illustrations at http://shaolinjury.com/project/digital-immortality/
… and everything but the truth (2-24-17)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

featured image from heism.about.com/od/ideasforatheistactivism/a/AffirmSwear.htm
Dust in the wind (3-3-17)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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