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INTERNET AND SOCIAL MEDIA

Bridge or Barrier for a Culture of Communion?

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October 29 of next year will be the golden anniversary of the transmission of the first digital message, which was sent between two of the U.S. Defense Ministry's ARPAnet computers in 1969. This was the birth of the Internet, and the groundbreaking test run was both happy and foreboding. Charley Kline was trying to send the simple prompt "LOGIN" from UCLA to Bill Duvall at Stanford Research Institute about 350 miles away. Only the first two letters were sent before the system crashed, however, making the very first digital message one that was lost in transmission. Nevertheless, the full message was successfully relayed an hour later after a reboot, and the rest is history.[1]

Last year, the French bishops' conference came up with a document entitled "Eglise en réseaux—Quelle communion à l'ère du numérique?" In this pastoral text, they described "digital networks" as a "huge challenge" and "double-sided issue" while asking, "What kind of communion is possible in the digital age?" This article as such aims to explore the challenges to and opportunities in the way people relate

[1]G. Raz, "'Lo' and Behold: A Communication Revolution," *National Public Radio* (October 29, 2009). Available at https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=114280698 (accessed January 25, 2018).

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to one another other as posed by the Internet and social media as well as how these rapidly evolving technologies can be a bridge or barrier for a culture of communion.

Network of Networks

It is not an unknown fact that the Internet was originally developed as a communication mechanism for war. It began with ARPANET (Advanced Research Project Agency Network) which was under the wing of the U.S. government's DARPA (Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency) and only in the 1980s was its use expanded to non-military purposes—specifically for academic cooperation and the sharing of knowledge—through the initiative of the National Science Foundation. The World Wide Web, which further expanded the function and reach of the Internet, was also beginning its development at around this time.

In its primary stage or Web 1.0, the Internet was called the "web of information connections"[2] or what I have called the "informative web."[3] It consisted of individual sites or pages that contained information and which were located on "servers" that were physically separated from one another but connected through the Internet. More than just a static collection of websites functioning like a type of virtual library, however, the Internet continued to evolve as a dynamic "information highway" for sharing knowledge across the globe. We thus have the terms "web" and "net," highly evocative images that highlight its

[2]These descriptors are taken from S. Aghaei, M. Nematbakhsh, and H. Farsani ("Evolution of the World Wide Web: From Web 1.0 to Web 4.0," *International Journal of Web & Semantic Technology* 3:1 [January 2012]. Available at http://www.ftsm.ukm.my/ss/Book/EVOLUTION%20OF%20WWW.pdf [accessed February 28, 2017]).

[3]You may want to see a lengthier discussion about the evolution of the World Wide Web and how religions in Asia have responded to it in L.-M. Ocampo, "How to Communicate in the Age of Web 4.0?: Challenges and Possibilities for Religions in Asia," *Religion and Social Communication* 14:2 (2016): 106–121.

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interconnectivity; indeed, the term "Internet" itself means "network of networks," a connection of connections that effectively link not only machines but also the people who are using them. As Allemang and Hendler said, "essential to the notion of the Web is the idea of an open community."[4]

Many were quick to harness this potential by coming up with their own websites to establish their presence online and make key documents and other important information available to their followers. A simple website on Web 1.0, for instance, can serve as a community's bulletin board or newsletter which can be accessed more conveniently and produced more economically compared to its physical world counterpart. Making information such as schedules and announcements readily available may seem very trivial indeed, but doing so is very important not only for keeping members well informed but also for building their sense of belonging and community. As Eilers said, "informed people are happier people because they feel part of the Church and/or the organization they belong to."[5]

Making data available to many instead of limiting it to a privileged few also empowers as many stakeholders as there are those who have access to such information. This in turn can lead to increased participation in affairs and issues concerning the community. For instance, combining the Freedom of Information laws that we now have with the availability of public records in digital format allows the general public to access vital data held by their governments. This enables even ordinary citizens to not only be informed about matters concerning them but also engage more actively (and intelligently!) in public discourse and hold their government officials and agencies accountable. As Tapscott remarked about the technology-savvy generation:

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[4]D. Allemang & J. Hendler, *Semantic Web for the Working Ontologist: Effective Modeling in RDFS and OWL*, 2nd ed. (Waltham, MA: Morgan Kaufmann Publishers, 2011), 2.

[5]F.-J. Eilers, *Communicating in Ministry and Mission: An Introduction to Pastoral and Evangelizing Communication* (Manila: Logos Publications Inc., 2009), 180.

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> they want to be involved directly: to interact with [their governments], contribute ideas, scrutinize their actions, work to catalyze initiatives not just during elections but as they govern. And they will insist on integrity from politicians.… They are going to shake up both politics and government.[6]

Similarly for the religious sphere, we now have veritable theological libraries on the web for at least all the major religions. In fact, these are often better equipped, more efficiently searched, and easily available compared to libraries we find in typical local faith communities and even in seminaries or training institutes for religious leaders. This allows the laity, who have been for the most part only passive receivers of doctrine, to study and explore more freely and directly even complex topics that used to fall within the exclusive domain of clergy and scholars. Anyone these days who has an Internet connection can have first-hand access to sacred texts and other key sources of doctrine as well as to varying theological currents and opinions, thereby short-circuiting the process of doctrinal reception. "For the first time, lay people can easily separate religious commands from tradition by looking at holy texts and scholarship rather than [by] relying on local preachers."[7] They are enabled, therefore, to engage religious leaders not only in dialogue and discussion but also in debate and dispute as well as—later on, perhaps—in deliberation and decision-making. Sharing information leads to shared knowledge and power which, in turn, potentially leads to the sharing of authority, responsibility, and leadership.

The original capability of the Internet for connectivity would expand even more as it became bi-directional and more dynamic with the addition of a "write-function." In this second stage of the Internet or Web 2.0—which has also been called the "web of people connections" or what I would call the "interactive web," regular users

[6]D. Tapscott, *Grown Up Digital: How the Net Generation is Changing Your World* (New York: McGraw Hill, 2009), 244.

[7]"Islam and Technology: The Online Ummah," *The Economist* (August 18, 2012). Available at http://www.economist.com/node/21560541 (accessed February 28, 2017).

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can now upload their own content to various online platforms such as *Friendster, Multiply,* or *Blogger*—and, later on, to *YouTube*, *Facebook*, *Twitter*, *Instagram*, etc. They can also interact with fellow users in many ways such as through liking/reacting and asking/commenting on posts. Such developments would in turn give rise to online communities or "digital networks" that are formed and bonded by what is aptly termed "*social* media." These online individuals, now known as "netizens," form a virtual "global village" that is inhabited today by at least 3.7 billion people, a true "digital continent" where users are intertwined in a "fabric of communications."[8]

Social media platforms are meant by design to facilitate and host interaction among their users. Facebook, the most popular example, was inspired by social directories customarily given to university students in the United States to encourage them to get acquainted with their schoolmates. The platform began by linking people from the same town, school, or office and has since evolved in its capability to connect users with all kinds of commonalities. Indeed, this social character of the Web coincides with the findings of a recent survey done by the Global Web Index in January of 2018 which show that the most prevalent motivation of almost half of social network users today is in fact social in nature: "to stay in touch with what my friends are doing" (42%). As a matter of fact, most of the other motivations that made it to the top ten of the survey results are patently relational: at fifth place, we have "general networking with other people" (34%); at sixth, "because a lot of my friends are on them" (33%); at seventh and

[8]Benedict XVI, *The Priest and Pastoral Ministry in a Digital World: New Media at the Service of the Word* [message for the 44th World Communications Day] (January 24, 2010). Available at http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/messages/communications/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20100124_44th-world-communications-day.html. See also Benedict XVI, *New Technologies, New Relationships: Promoting a Culture of Respect, Dialogue and Friendship* [message for the 43rd World Communications Day] (January 24, 2009). Available at http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/messages/communications/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20090124_43rd-world-communications-day.html.

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eighth, "to share photos or videos with others" (32%) and "to share my opinion" (30%); and at tenth place, "to meet new people" (27%).[9]

Aside from posts, comments, and reactions which are public, another important aspect of social media platforms is their private messaging feature which makes them a cheaper and more convenient alternative for communication compared to the telephone or mobile, allowing family and friends from and in different parts of the world to stay in touch with one another. The online experience is enhanced even further with photo and video messaging, along with other cosmetic effects like emojis, animated stickers, and GIF images. Even work is made more efficient and cost-effective through collaborative features such as "digital brainstorms"[10] and web-conferencing in platforms and applications such as *Dropbox, Google Docs, Google Hangouts, GoToMeeting, Quip*, and many others.

Many social media platforms also allow users to create and maintain some form of "blog," a truncation of the word "weblog" which refers to an informal personal website that features mostly casual and motley diary-style entries. A user's Facebook profile, for instance, is basically a blog made up of texts and images while Instagram is a visual blog. Twitter, on the other hand, is a micro blog where entries were originally limited to 140 characters; this limit has since doubled to 280. Composed of various pieces of content that one creates or shares, these blogs serve as one's online address and represent one's online image. A well-designed and engaging weblog gives positive online representation for a person or group, which in turn can attract and generate even more social media connections. One post going viral is sometimes enough, in fact, to make one an overnight Internet celebrity with followers and subscribers in the millions. By publishing such blogs online, social media users keep each other constantly updated about

[9]O. Valentine, "Top 10 Reasons for Using Social Media," *Global Web Index*. Available at https://blog.globalwebindex.net/chart-of-the-day/social-media/ (accessed February 15, 2018).

[10]Tapscott, *Grown Up Digital,* 262.

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their personal lives, with some going as far as if they were seeing each other every day or every hour.

Caincross signaled as early as 1997 the "Death of Distance"[11] as one of the consequences of this revolution in social communications. The Internet's social function has become so important that it has also been influential in determining how the Internet has been taking shape, with its other operations such as for commerce, industry, and education being built around this key feature. Parks noted this *interpersonalization* of digital media, pointing out that

> social life, including important interpersonal relationships, may have become *mediatized*, but it is also the case that media have become *interpersonalized*. As we have seen, the media that individuals use for communication have become increasingly aligned with the rhythms and structure of their personal relationships and social networks.[12]

As such, many of the online platforms and applications currently in circulation are designed to mimic or at least integrate with their social media counterparts. *Edmodo*, for instance, is a popular Learning Management System that appears and functions like Facebook but with an explicit educational purpose. Another example is in online gaming where the trend is leaning in the direction of interactive and collaborative multiplayer games. Thus, while it may seem at first that gamers are withdrawing *from* human society and into the world of online games, we can also say that they are being immersed in another human society that exists *within* the world of online games.

And yet even more recently, many of the online platforms have begun carrying an added component that is characteristic of Web 3.0, also known as the "web of knowledge connections" or what I call the "intuitive web." This main feature of the third stage in the development of the Internet, which reached more than one billion websites in 2014,

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[11]F. Cairncross, *The Death of Distance: How the Communications Revolution Will Change Our Lives* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 1997).

[12]M. Parks, "Embracing the Challenges and Opportunities of Mixed-Media Relationships," *Human Communication Research* 43:4 (2017): 513.

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is the ability to link, structure, and integrate massive amounts of online data to make content more "user-sensitive" and thereby more relevant and responsive to each individual. Many websites and applications automatically filter, adjust, and refine the content that is presented to each particular user on the basis of their standing online activity, search and usage history, and other personal data such as age, gender, and location which they themselves provided (whether voluntarily and consciously or otherwise). This is made possible through the use of data-driven programmed responses called "algorithms." In this way, online platforms determine what pages you will likely find interesting, what things you are likely to purchase when advertised to you, and what kind of people you are likely to enjoy connecting with. They will then lead you to the specific kind of content that will engage you and to like-minded people that you will enjoy interacting with.

This heightened ability to determine and propose the precise online connections that users are likely to click and get hooked on exponentially raises the capacity of digital technology to connect people with one another. With a power that no technology before it has ever had, Web 3.0 is able to create and strengthen bonds between individuals across the globe through its capacity for determining the precise matter that can create, nurture, and sustain those bonds—from having the same background, occupation, or industry to sharing similar philosophical, religious, or political beliefs or simply enjoying the same sports, games, or hobbies. At the same time, the advent of tablets and smartphones that people can carry around with them, along with the development of wireless Internet connectivity, has now made it possible for us to stay online almost constantly.

As Web 3.0 continues to develop its capacity to link, structure, and integrate not only online but now offline data as well, we find capabilities emerging that have important ramifications for the way people connect. Through applications like *Grab* and *Uber* or *AirBnB*, for instance, the Internet links drivers with their passengers and transients with available lodging. In the field of education, more and more academic institutions are already offering Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) that allow an unlimited number of people to enroll

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and participate in a class regardless of their schedule or location. Even the matchmaking capabilities of the Internet—the latter has been used to connect seekers with potential mates long before Web 3.0—have also been significantly enhanced given the amount of personal data that can be gathered and processed this time around. Private offline experiences become online shared ones, such as when people who are viewing the same show on television in the privacy of their own homes chat and interact with fellow viewers through the use of official hashtags,[13] and any event nowadays can be readily broadcast and streamed live through a social media platform, allowing people to watch and take part from their own place and at their own convenient time. Indeed, the Internet of today carries with it a greater potential to influence offline realities such as the outcome of electoral processes, e.g., as seen in the campaigns of Obama, Trump, and Duterte. It also has the ability to shape public opinion, galvanize people for specific causes, and even spark revolutions as in the case of the Arab Spring.

In light of this progression, Aghaei et al. envisage that the coming Web 4.0 will become a "web of intelligence connections" or what I would call the "integrative web." According to their prediction, it will be a symbiotic and not just semantic web that is characterized by a much more permeable and seamless "interaction between humans and machines in symbiosis."[14] The walls will blur between online and offline, and there will be a "fusion of horizons" between the Internet and the world outside of it. As we see more people spend more of their time online, virtual reality will now become their new habitual reality while reality itself becomes more and more permeated by the Internet as it becomes even more pervasive, more ubiquitous, and more omnipresent.

In fact, Meredith Gould has already suggested that the distinctions between real and virtual are no longer as helpful as they once were

[13]A. Raney & Q. Ji, "Entertaining Each Other? Modeling the Socially Shared Television Viewing Experience: Social TV Entertainment," *Human Communication Research* 43:4 (2017): 425–426.

[14]Aghaei et al., "Evolution of the World Wide Web: From Web 1.0 to Web 4.0," 8.

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back when social media was still in its early stages. An expert in the religious use of social media, she points out for instance that "online communities of faith are *real* to members who have come to rely on them for inspiration and support.…"[15] She also mentions that participants in a September 4, 2012 #ChSocM Twitter chat have begun to stop the use of the acronym IRL ("in real life"), and there has even been a suggestion to replace it with ITF ("in the flesh").[16] For these individuals, online human interactions may not be physical but are real and personal nonetheless, involving real people and fostering real relationships.

Though it may still be an issue for digital migrants, digital natives appear to no longer find difficulty in seeing online relationships as true and real, with many families and friends in global diaspora remaining intimately connected through various Internet platforms. For them, the Internet is not only a "tool" but also a "space" where people can meet and love each other. Janet Murray refers to this as the "spatial affordance" of the Internet, that which denotes the capacity of digital media to function as a kind of space that people inhabit.[17] The Internet in this sense has evolved from being a mere highway or nexus to a place or locus of gathering. Can it serve, then, as a locus for connection and communion, and perhaps not only among human persons but also with the Divine?

On November 2, 2001, John Paul II published the encyclical *Ecclesia in Oceania* over the Internet. Also worthy of note are highly useful apps such as the *iBreviary* and *iMissal* as well as corresponding tools for Confession, the Rosary, and the Examen that serve as aids to liturgy and piety. There are also virtual shrines and prayer sites such as for online retreats, recollections, and *Visita Iglesia*—in the German

[15]M. Gould, *The Social Media Gospel: Sharing the Good News in New Ways*, 2nd ed. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2015), 30.

[16]Gould, *The Social Media Gospel*, 30.

[17]See J. Murray, *Inventing the Medium: Principles of Interaction Design as a Cultural Practice* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012), 51–87.

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city on the Internet called *FunCity*,[18] for instance, there has even been a virtual parish named St. Bonifatius which has been shepherding souls online since 1998. Not only does it have a full staff of nine pastoral workers who take turns to be available for parishioners online, it also has a functioning library, oratory, and, more recently, a virtual cloister where you can drop notes such as prayer requests for religious who will read and respond to them.

2013 was a special year for Catholicism and the Internet. Before the first blessing of the then newly-elected Pope Francis, Jean Cardinal Tauran added "the new means of social communication" as a medium on top of radio and television by which the faithful who were remotely following the events in St. Peter's Square could gain the plenary indulgence attached to the blessing. It was the first time that this was ever done for indulgences. The same concession was then given to those who followed the events of the 28th World Youth Day, held that year in Rio de Janeiro, through social media accounts like Facebook and Twitter, albeit with the condition that this was to be done "always with the proper devotion"[19] (it nevertheless caused quite a stir among more conservative circles). In addition, the Apostolic Penitentiary also granted a plenary indulgence within that year for the faithful who made the virtual pilgrimage to Lourdes as organized by the North American Lourdes Volunteers.[20] Indeed, such gestures can be understood as tacit affirmations of the potential of cyberspace to be a sacred space where one can really encounter God and receive grace.

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[18]See the website of *FunCity* at http://funama.de/.

[19]Apostolic Penitentiary, *Decree … according to which Special Indulgences are Granted to the Faithful on the Occasion of the 28th World Youth Day* (Rome: June 24, 2013). Available at http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/tribunals/apost_penit/documents/rc_trib_appen_doc_20130709_decreto-indulgenze-gmg_en.html (accessed October 12, 2017).

[20]See https://lourdesvolunteers.org/plenary-indulgence/ (accessed October 12, 2018).

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Nevertheless, the Church at the same time appears to keep a rather strict sense of boundary and reserve regarding the practice of religion online:

> Virtual reality is no substitute for the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist, the sacramental reality of the other sacraments, and shared worship in a flesh-and-blood human community. There are no sacraments on the Internet; and even the religious experiences possible there by the grace of God are insufficient apart from real-world interaction with other persons of faith.[21]

One cardinal was even quoted as saying that we should not pray with our smartphones despite the fact that many young and not-so-young Catholics find this practice to be helpful.[22]

Internet as Threat

In his keynote lecture at the opening of Theology Week at the Pontifical University of Santo Tomas, Manila in January 2018, Charles Maung Cardinal Bo shared his experience of seeing some Buddhist monks engrossed in social media instead of meditating. The monks that he saw were actually no different from many of our own people today, especially the youth, who constantly check the Internet and social media on their tablets and smartphones. This points us to the other side of the reality of the Web—as the potential enemy of communion, exacerbated by the threat of Internet addiction which is beginning to take hold of many people, oftentimes without their noticing it. As Nicholas Carr pointed out, "[The Internet] is so much our servant that it would seem churlish to notice that it is also our master."[23]

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[21]Pontifical Council for Social Communications, *The Church and Internet,* 9. Available at https://www.ewtn.com/library/curia/pcscchnt.htm.

[22]C. Garden, "Cardinal Sarah says we shouldn't pray with our phones. I'm not so sure," *Catholic Herald* (September 21, 2017). Available at https://catholicherald.co.uk/commentandblogs/2017/09/21/cardinal-sarah-says-we-shouldnt-pray-with-our-phones-im-not-so-sure/(accessed October 12, 2017).

[23]N. Carr, *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2011), 4.

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Sometimes referred to as "PIU" (Problematic Internet Use) or "CIU" (Compulsive Internet Use), "Internet addiction" simply put pertains to "excessive Internet use that interferes with daily life."[24] When one, for instance, is unable to focus on work or study because of constant distraction from using the Internet, one would already qualify as suffering from PIU or CIU under this rubric. We must note, however, that "Internet addiction" as such has yet to gain formal recognition and definition from the field of psychiatry—in the fifth and latest edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) which came out in November 2013, "Internet gaming disorder" was identified as a "condition for further study," i.e., a probable mental disorder subject to validation and confirmation, while addiction to the Internet itself was not mentioned.[25]

Nevertheless, addiction to the Internet is becoming more noticeable. This can already be observed in Western (and Westernized) cultures in what is called Generation Z or the Post-Millennials, those born within the years 1995–2012. They are the first to be dubbed as "digital natives" who became adept at using cyber technology from an early age. Among those surveyed by a 2015 study conducted by Microsoft in Canada, for example, 77% of those aged 18–24 said that they usually reach for their mobile phone when nothing is occupying their attention while 52% check their phone every thirty minutes at the least.[26] Such statistics, while seemingly harmless, may actually be symptoms of a developing compulsion. Indeed, the time people spend online can reach up to as much as nine hours a day for the Internet, with four of those hours devoted to social media.[27] This can potentially

[24]S. Byun et al., "Internet Addiction: Metasynthesis of 1996–2006 Quantitative Research," *Cyberpsychology & Behavior* 12:2 (2009): 204.

[25]See American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 5th ed. (Arlington, VA: American Psychiatric Publishing, 2013), 797–798.

[26]See Consumer Insights—Microsoft Canada, *Attention Spans* (Spring 2015). Available at http://dl.motamem.org/microsoft-attention-spans-research-report.pdf.

[27]We Are Social & Hootsuite, *Digital in 2017: Global Overview* (January 24, 2017). Available at http://wearesocial.com/sg/blog/2017/01/digital-in-2017-global-overview (accessed April 3, 2017).

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affect one's productivity and take time away from other activities like physical, face-to-face bonding with friends and family even when doing so is possible. One study, for instance, reports that some students in China prefer online to offline social interaction and resort to overuse of the Internet as a means of escaping societal pressure.[28]

People may thus be physically present with each other yet mentally and emotionally absent from one another because they are actually more present online. Turkle described this phenomenon with the oxymoron "alone together."[29] Indeed, there are those who maintain that authentic human connection or communion is not really possible on the Web. As one study on Buddhism and the Internet gathered:

> Not everyone agreed that Buddhism online offered a spiritual connection to others. One respondent said that they only felt community online as they would with the rest of the world and that the Internet was *for information and not communion.* Another respondent said, "I feel a sense of community when I look into one's eyes."[30]

A study in 2014, moreover, linked the use of Facebook to depressive symptoms.[31] Even without direct cyberbullying, the self-esteem of users fluctuated as they saw other users' posts and the reactions these garnered while unconsciously comparing themselves to others. In line with this, we also have the phenomenon of "FOMO" or the "Fear of Missing Out," which is rooted in the same unhealthy dynamics of

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[28]See L. Zhang, C. Amos, & W. McDowell, "A Comparative Study of Internet Addiction between the United States and China," *Cyberpsychology & Behavior* 11:6 (2008): 727–729. See also C.-F. Yen, J.-Y. Yen, & C.-H. Ko, "Internet Addiction: Ongoing Research in Asia," *World Psychiatry* 9:2 (2010): 97 as well as F. Cao & L. Su, "Internet Addiction among Chinese Adolescents: Prevalence and Psychological Features," *Child: Care, Health and Development* 33:3 (2007): 275–281.

[29]See S. Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (New York: Basic Books, 2011).

[30]A. Ostrowski, "Buddha Browsing: American Buddhism and the Internet," *Contemporary Buddhism* 7:1 (2006): 99 (emphasis added).

[31]See M.-L. Steers, R. Wickham, & L. Acitelli, "Seeing Everyone Else's Highlight Reels: How Facebook Usage is Linked to Depressive Symptoms," *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology* 33:8 (2014): 701–731.

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social comparison and feeds on the strong narcissistic tendencies of young people: "They're having exciting experiences that you're not. They attended the hottest concert in town and you didn't.… Person after person is having the time of their lives. And you? Well, not so much."[32] The irony, however, is that people remain hooked to the Internet and to social media in spite of this, constantly checking for updates for the same reason that they do not want to miss out on the latest "trending" content. As the character Stuart said in the British sitcom *Vicious*, "They make me nervous, all these young people, skittering about like mice, desperate to get back to the Internet." Hence, they end up trapped in a wide-open cage:

> Addicted to pocket computers, such as smartphones and tablets, anxious teenagers are constantly monitoring their popularity among their peers, tormented by feelings of inadequacy and doubt. Easy access to pornography fosters this paranoia, offering a distorted image of human bodies and relationships. Unchecked, all of this transparent neurosis can lead to a disastrous loss of privacy, to the torture of being bullied, to self-harm and despair.[33]

If such can be said of Generation Z, what more can be said of the upcoming generation which they propose to call Generation A? These are the true "digital natives" who were raised by "iNanny" and who learned their rudiments from online applications such as "ABC Letters," "Busy Shapes," and "E-Flash Apps." For them, the digital world from the onset has been cradle, home, and school in place of exposure to intimate human interaction. Hence, while there may be efforts on the part of some parents and teachers to adopt a more analog or at least a mixed approach, the trend is pointing to a more pervasive influence of digital technology on this generation which is likely to be even more attached to it compared to the previous one.[34]

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[32]L. Sapadin, "Fear of Missing Out," *PsychCentral* (2015). Available at https://psychcentral.com/blog/archives/2015/10/12/fear-of-missing-out/ (accessed April 3, 2017).

[33]D. O'Leary, "Missing the Point," *The Tablet* (January 23, 2014): 8.

[34]For some pioneering explorations in several directions, see the article of N. Bilton, "The Child, the Tablet and the Developing Mind" (*The New York*

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Thus, while formal recognition from experts is still pending, Internet addiction has been gaining acknowledgement and attention from many clinical practitioners who have begun to pin down its symptoms and effects. Dr. Richard Graham, for instance, who runs the first rehabilitation center for technology addiction in Britain, has identified five major indicators of Internet addiction, namely: lack of interest in other activities, constant talk or distraction about technology, mood swings, withdrawal symptoms, and devious or maladaptive behavior connected to using the Internet. Among these symptoms, Dr. Graham singles out withdrawal to be the clear sign of addiction as evidenced by signs of "severe distress and agitation" whenever one is separated from the Internet, analogous to how alcohol, drug, or tobacco dependents crave a "hit" at regular intervals.[35] Many practitioners as such have actually begun to recognize and address what the Center for Internet Addiction has already called "a growing epidemic"[36] even before its formal recognition as a mental disorder in the DSM.

Aside from the direct effects that we have mentioned above, what concerns us especially are the harmful consequences that high exposure to the Internet and digital technology can have for individuals, particularly for the communicative and social skills of those who are overexposed to such, with their capacity to connect and commune with other people gradually being eroded. For example, Small quoted a Stanford University study which found that traditional face-to-face interaction time dropped by almost thirty minutes for every hour spent in front of a computer screen. Essential social skills like understanding emotional contexts and reading non-verbal cues tended to decline, and there was a greater likelihood of misinterpreting such contexts

Times [March 31, 2013]. Available at https://bits.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/03/31/disruptions-what-does-a-tablet-do-to-the-childs-mind/).

[35]V. Woollaston, "The Five Signs Your Child is Addicted to their iPad—and How to Give Them a 'Digital Detox,'" *MailOnline* (October 30, 2013). Available at http://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-2479109/The-signs-child-addicted-iPad--digital-detox.html (accessed April 3, 2017).

[36]See http://netaddiction.com/.

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and cues or missing them altogether which in turn can lead to more frequent misunderstandings.[37]

Another concern that has been pointed out is the constant exposure to gadgets especially from an early age, which can hinder the development of the capacity not only to relate with other people but also to be alone and relate with oneself. In this manner, the dynamic struggle involved in relating with others and with oneself is readily replaced with the comfortable complacency of dealing with machines instead, or what has been called "robotic companionship."[38] Picking up one's gadget to browse social media or play online games automatically occupies every available time that could have been spent in social interaction or quiet reflection. This kind of tendency is especially magnified in the case of individuals who are already lonely and depressed to begin with, who are more likely to resort to online social interaction as a convenient replacement for offline human interaction which demands relatively more depth, intensity, and intimacy. Such withdrawal can spiral into other destructive dynamics, including but not limited to Compulsive or Problematic Internet Use.[39]

The wide repercussions of this loss not only of the skills but also of the gusto for intimate and authentic human interaction can only be imagined. How do we build communion among individuals who would rather relate through or *with* gadgets? Similarly affected is the capacity to commune with God and with oneself, especially when a person is constantly and incessantly preoccupied with such devices and there is no more room for silence or deep prayer. As Carr avers, "There is no Sleepy Hollow on the Internet, no peaceful spot where contemplativeness can work its restorative magic."[40] The person who

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[37]See G. Small & G. Vorgan, *iBrain: Surviving the Technological Alteration of the Modern Mind* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008).

[38]See Turkle, *Alone Together*.

[39]See S. Caplan, "Preference for Online Social Interaction: A Theory of Problematic Internet Use and Psychosocial Well-Being," *Communication Research* 30:6 (2003): 625–628.

[40]Carr, *The Shallows*, 220.

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is constantly hooked to the digital realm may end up progressively isolated and empty, unable to relate or simply be present with other people, with God, and even with oneself:

> Minds wander. Attention drifts. But we've never carried on our person a tool that so insistently captivates our senses and divides our attention. By connecting us to a symbolic elsewhere, the smartphone … exiles us from the here and now. We lose the power of presence.[41]

We add to this the many other ways by which the Internet and social media directly serve as a hindrance to communion, counteracting and sometimes almost overturning their gift for human connection. Indeed, connection does not always translate to communion. The same Web 1.0 that promotes inclusion and participation, for instance, can also become the source of exclusion. With "digital literacy" becoming as important as traditional literacy, the "computer illiterate" are the new illiterate who are marginalized and disadvantaged in many ways, from education and employment to social access. Educational systems that are already hard put in combating traditional illiteracy struggle to integrate computer literacy in their school curricula. Companies that are mechanized and digitalized gain an advantage over those that use analog means of production which depend heavily on human labor; as a consequence, there is growing pressure to shift more and more to mechanization and digitalization, which in turn leads to the displacement especially of low-skilled laborers. Internet penetration levels and other related variables such as connection speed, cost, and availability are thus shifting the playing field on both the national and international scale in favor of those on the greener side of the "digital divide" while those on the other side are being left out.

Improved information dissemination leading to empowerment and greater participation can also result in increased conflict instead of increased harmony. The faithful who are now more informed but not necessarily more discerning can, for instance, become more critical and defiant toward their religious authorities who in turn are not always

[41]N. Carr, *The Glass Cage: How Our Computers are Changing Us* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2014), 200.

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ready to deal with dissent and differences of opinion in a constructive manner. Last year, a starlet turned blogger who later on became a government official argued on social media for the return of the death penalty. She offered an exegesis of a passage from the Torah, claiming that the fifth commandment is more accurately translated as "Thou Shalt Not Murder" instead of "Thou Shalt Not Kill," and ended her post by saying, "With all due respect to the priests, people today are now able to read the Bible so when you quote, make sure that you quote in context."[42] The said post quickly went viral, generating more than 36,000 reactions, 2,300 comments, and 10,000 shares. Yet popularity is not the best barometer of veracity—as the Caribbean bishops lamented, "we have far more access to information but sometimes less access to truth,"[43] even with the convenience of the Internet at our fingertips.

The world of social media as such is pregnant not only with opportunities but also with threats to a culture of communion. While the Internet has truly become a web and net of human connectivity, the same network of networks is exploited to facilitate pornography, prostitution, and human trafficking—including the involvement of minors and children. One source, for instance, estimates that 28,258 users are watching pornography on the Internet every second while 35% of all Internet downloads are related to pornography.[44] According to *Thorn*, a non-profit organization dedicated to combating child pornography, the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children was reviewing 25 million images every year or about 480,769 images

[42]M. Uson, Facebook post (February 19, 2017, 10:28 P.M.). Available at https://www.facebook.com/Mochablogger/ (accessed February 15, 2018).

[43]Antilles Episcopal Conference, *Being Church in a Digital Milieu: A Pastoral Letter on Communications from the Bishops of the Antilles Episcopal Conference* (August 6, 2017), 26. Available at http://aecbishops.org/a-pastoral-letter-new-ways-of-being-church-in-a-digital-milieu/.

[44]Webroot, "Internet Pornography by the Numbers: A Significant Threat to Society," *Webroot*. Available at https://www.webroot.com/us/en/home/resources/tips/digital-family-life/internet-pornography-by-the-numbers (accessed February 15, 2018).

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per week in the aftermath of the pornography explosion brought about by the Internet.[45] Social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter, meanwhile, are likewise being used in human trafficking, from the recruitment of potential victims to advertisement and marketing.[46] In this way, the Internet's capacity to connect people is abused for the wrong purposes and those who are involved are dehumanized instead of uplifted. As Pope Francis remarked in his address to the participants of the "World Congress on Child Dignity in the Digital World,"

> We encounter extremely troubling things on the net, including the spread of ever more extreme pornography, since habitual use raises the threshold of stimulation; the increasing phenomenon of *sexting* between young men and women who use the social media; and the growth of online bullying, a true form of moral and physical attack on the dignity of other young people. To this can be added *sextortion;* the solicitation of minors for sexual purposes, now widely reported in the news; to say nothing of the grave and appalling crimes of online trafficking in persons, prostitution, and even the commissioning and live viewing of acts of rape and violence against minors in other parts of the world. The net has its dark side (the "dark net"), where evil finds ever new, effective and pervasive ways to act and to expand.[47]

We also note the proliferation of fake news which has become commonplace as of late. People get their news more and more from the Internet nowadays, where it can be had almost in real time, instead of through newspapers, radio, and television. There are, however, no gatekeepers of information on the Internet to assure the veracity

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[45]"Child Pornography and Abuse Statistics," *Thorn.* Available at https://www.wearethorn.org/child-pornography-and-abuse-statistics/ (accessed February 15, 2018).

[46]USC Annenberg Center on Communication Leadership & Policy, *Human Trafficking Online: Cases and Patterns*, University of Southern California. Available at https://technologyandtrafficking.usc.edu/report/human-trafficking-online-cases-patterns/ (accessed February 15, 2018).

[47]Francis, address to the participants at the congress on *Child Dignity in the Digital World* (October 6, 2017). Available at https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2017/october/documents/papa-francesco_20171006_congresso-childdignity-digitalworld.html (accessed February 15, 2018).

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and accuracy of posted content. This situation is thus abused by unscrupulous individuals who deliberately sow disinformation on the Web to advance their own agenda.

A recent study describes how such "networked disinformation production" has already evolved into an underground industry right here in the Philippines: "an invisible machine: industrial in its scope and organization, strategic in its outlook and expertise, and exploitative in its morality and ethics."[48] Those involved in this systematic spread of disinformation "hijack people's sentiments and sow public divisiveness" as well as "silence political dissent and enact historical revisionism."[49] The rapid spread of fake news, moreover, is fueled not only by the work of trolls and bots but also by the feelings and ignorance of people who uncritically believe and share such reports, especially those that are in line with their own opinions or sentiments:

> Since anyone can easily create a blog or website, misleading and damaging information that sow discord and misunderstanding is likewise very easy to spread through the Internet in the form of fake news or rumors. These rumors are usually self-propelling and quickly become viral, especially since they feed on the emotions or sentiments of a particular group who are likely to spread them by clicking, liking and sharing.[50]

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[48]J. Ong & J. Cabañes, "Architects of Networked Disinformation: Behind the Scenes of Troll Accounts and Fake News Production in the Philippines: An Executive Summary," *The Newton Tech4dev Network* (2018). Available at http://newtontechfordev.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Architects-of-Networked-Disinformation-Executive-Summary-Final.pdf (accessed February 15, 2018), 3.

[49]J. Ong & J. Cabañes, "Architects of Networked Disinformation: Behind the Scenes of Troll Accounts and Fake News Production in the Philippines," *The Newton Tech4dev Network* (2018). Available at http://newtontechfordev.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/ARCHITECTS-OF-NETWORKED-DISINFORMATION-FULL-REPORT.pdf (accessed February 15, 2018), 61.

[50]A. Olcott, "Rumor—The Evil Twin of Strategic Communication," in G. Dalziel, ed., *Rumor and Communication in Asia in the Internet Age* (Oxford: Routledge, 2013), 161.

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The situation is made even worse, however, by the algorithmic function of the intuitive web as it adjusts and refines the contents that it presents to each user in social media, effectively locking the person up in a narrow "echo chamber" where only sympathetic opinions are heard and all opposition is effectively filtered out. As Francis said in his message for this year's World Communications Day:

> The difficulty of unmasking and eliminating fake news is due also to the fact that many people interact in homogeneous digital environments impervious to differing perspectives and opinions. *Disinformation* thus thrives on the absence of healthy confrontation with other sources of information that could effectively challenge prejudices and generate constructive dialogue; instead, it risks turning people into unwilling accomplices in spreading biased and baseless ideas. The tragedy of disinformation is that it discredits others, presenting them as enemies, to the point of demonizing them and fomenting conflict. Fake news is a sign of intolerant and hypersensitive attitudes, and leads only to the spread of arrogance and hatred. That is the end result of untruth.[51]

This kind of hate speech can be very cruel and virulent; like fake news, it can spread quickly at digital speed and result in irreversible damage. We have, for instance, the recent case of Fr. James Martin, S.J., a Catholic priest and author who used to be a very popular personality both offline and online until he published the book *Building a Bridge: How the Catholic Church and the LGBT Community Can Enter Into a Relationship of Respect, Compassion and Sensitivity*. The release of this work sparked controversy and made him the target of concerted attacks on Twitter, Facebook, and other social media platforms. This is how Ahern describes it:

> The vitriolic, uncharitable, and downright mean comments are shocking, embarrassing, and unbecoming for anyone who claims a Catholic faith that values communion, love, reconciliation, dialogue, and human dignity. ("This is how all will know that you are my

[51]Francis, *"The Truth Will Set You Free" (Jn. 8:32): Fake News and Journalism for Peace* [message for World Communications Day 2018] (January 24, 2018). Available at https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/communications/documents/papa-francesco_20180124_messaggio-comunicazioni-sociali.html (accessed January 25, 2018).

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> disciples, if you have love for one another"—John 13:35.) I would be deeply embarrassed for my students to see the way the so-called "Catholic Twitter" has evolved over recent months with its distasteful memes, name-calling, fake Twitter accounts, and twisting of words. Indeed, it is not surprising that many of the comments come from Twitter accounts hiding behind the safety of anonymity.[52]

Faggiolo says that

> this sort of vitriol is profoundly changing the communion of the Catholic Church, not just in its ethos, but also in the way it functions. It signals a new kind of censorship that uses verbal violence to intimidate individual Catholics, as well as institutions within the Church—institutions that exist (also) to protect the rights of Catholics.[53]

Not only is the case of Fr. Martin an extreme instance of cyber bullying, it is also a brutal form of repression which hinders dialogue, precludes reconciliation, and damages communion. As Bruni commented, "the vitriol to which he has been subjected is breathtaking, a reminder not just of how much homophobia is still out there but also of how presumptuous, overwrought, cruel and destructive discourse in this digital age can be."[54] In fact, even the present Pope himself has been the subject of many such online attacks coming from those who disagree with him. Indeed, Ahern even went so far as to remark that the "scariest place in the Church in 2018" is none other than Catholic Twitter.

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[52]K. Ahern, "A Failure in Public Theology: The Non-Defense of James Martin, SJ," *Daily Theology* (February 4, 2018). Available at https://dailytheology.org/2018/02/04/a-failure-in-public-theology-the-non-defense-of-james-martin-sj/ (accessed February 15, 2018).

[53]M. Faggioli, "Catholic Cyber-Militias and the New Censorship," *La Croix* (December 29, 2017). Available at https://international.la-croix.com/news/catholic-cyber-militias-and-the-new-censorship/5923 (accessed February 15, 2018).

[54]F. Bruni, "The Scariest Catholic in America," *The New York Times* (February 3, 2018). Available at https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/03/opinion/sunday/scariest-catholic-james-martin.html (accessed February 15, 2018).

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The problem, however, lies not only with the so-called "Catholic alt-right," a term which is itself divisive. As Thompson points out, both parties take sides absolutely and balkanize the other, locking themselves in the kind of "echo chamber" which we have described earlier and thereby rendering themselves unable to engage with differing opinions. "On hot-button issues, conservatives retweet only conservatives and liberals only liberals."[55] Toxic hate speech, when made into an issue in itself, becomes a convenient scapegoat for the "Catholic alt-left" to avoid answering questions of doctrine, worship, and morals from the other side which are not always impertinent or invalid. In this way, it becomes all the more difficult to begin the dialogue that should have taken place between the two sides.

The matrix of the Internet as an instrument of violence and war, as original as its matrix for connecting people, thus continues to manifest itself. Sadly, though, such high-speed and menacing digital fundamentalism is not confined only to Catholics or the religious sphere. There is concern, for instance, over the practice of what has been termed *e-jihad*, which can range from spreading jihadist propagandas and campaigns online and launching cyber attacks by means such as hacking and cracking to using the Internet to organize terrorist operations.[56] We also have the rise of online trolls, now known as "Internet Hindus," who rally under the banner of *Hindutva* and attack websites which they deem to be offensive to Hindu religion and culture. Here in the Philippines, the war being waged online by the *Dutertards* and *Delawans*—as they call each other—is not only worsening but also beginning to overflow offline.

[55]D. Thompson, "How Online Propaganda is Tearing the Church Apart," *Catholic Herald* (October 5, 2017). Available at http://www.catholicherald.co.uk/issues/october-6th-2017/how-online-propaganda-is-tearing-the-church-apart/ (accessed February 15, 2018).

[56]See G. Bunt, *Islam in the Digital Age: E-Jihad, Online Fatwas and Cyber Islamic Environments* (London: Pluto Press, 2003).

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Fides Quarens Nexus?

While the Internet from its inception was a means not only of conveying information but also of connecting people, it was, at the same time, an instrument originally meant to be used for war. This ambivalent if not paradoxical character of digital technology vis-à-vis communion persists until now and has been magnified even more by the interactive capabilities afforded by Web 2.0, which gave birth to what we now know as "social media" and are being further enhanced by ongoing developments in Web 3.0 and onwards.

Owing to its inherent social nature and power for connectivity from the very beginning, the digital world on the one hand carries so much potential for bringing people together. Indeed, the network of networks has continued to evolve rapidly from being simply a nexus to becoming a locus for human communion—"a network not of wires but of people."[57] On the other hand, though, the same Web can also be a nexus and locus of division, conflict, and violence when placed in the wrong hands and exploited for the wrong ends, a grim and stubborn reminder of its dark roots as an instrument of war. The Biblical image of a two-edged sword that cuts both ways may be an appropriate metaphor to describe the Internet and social media in relation to communion. Where should the Church situate herself then in relation to digital technology?

Invoking the image of the ancient marketplace where the Greeks and Romans used to congregate, John Paul II called the Internet the "Neo Areopagus"[58] where the people of today converge. He also described it as "the new Forum" where we find the best and worst

[57]Francis, *Communication at the Service of an Authentic Culture of Encounter* [message for the 48th World Communications Day] (January 24, 2014). Available at http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/communications/documents/papa-francesco_20140124_messaggio-comunicazioni-sociali.html.

[58]John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio* 37.

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of humanity.[59] As such, we have no choice but to take advantage of this vast missionary frontier that is filled with so much promise and fraught with so much danger. The challenge for us is to harness the potential of the Internet so it becomes a bridge and not a barrier to a culture of communion. Francis observes that

> if a choice has to be made between a bruised Church which goes out to the streets and a Church suffering from self-absorption, I certainly prefer the first. Those "streets" are the world where people live and where they can be reached, both effectively and affectively. The digital highway is one of them, a street teeming with people who are often hurting, men and women looking for salvation or hope. By means of the Internet, the Christian message can reach "to the ends of the earth" (*Acts* 1:8). Keeping the doors of our churches open also means keeping them open in the digital environment so that people, whatever their situation in life, can enter, and so that the Gospel can go out to reach everyone.[60]

On the fourth day of the aforementioned Theology Week at the University of Santo Tomas, Fr. Mercado asked Fr. Aureada a very interesting question. He began by recalling the three distinct notions of faith, facets of one reality that are all important but which have taken turns preoccupying theology in various historical periods: *fides quaerens intellectum* (faith seeking understanding), *fides quaerens iustitiam socialem* (faith seeking social justice), and *fides quaerens adorationem* (faith seeking adoration). He then mused about what notion of faith might preoccupy our generation—might it be *fides quaerens nexus* or faith seeking connection?

Here Fr. Mercado raises an important point about connectivity being perhaps the most distinctive trademark of this period in history, an important prompt for theologians in reading the "signs of the times" and discerning the movement of the Holy Spirit. Yet connectivity alone

[59]John Paul II, *Internet: A New Forum for Proclaiming the Gospel* [message for the 36th World Communications Day] (January 24, 2002), 2. Available at http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/communications/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_20020122_world-communications-day.html.

[60]Francis, *Communication at the Service of an Authentic Culture of Encounter.*

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should be considered not as a goal in itself but only as a means for faith to pursue something deeper and more essential. Taking the cue once again from the Pope, it "is not enough to be passersby on the digital highways, simply 'connected'; connections need to grow into true encounters." *Nexus quaerens communionem. Fides quaerens communionem.*

Communion here is more than just a passing fad or preoccupation, more than merely one of the facets of faith. It belongs to the very matrix of our Trinitarian God who is a communion of persons and to our matrix as human beings created in God's image. With its tremendous capacity for connectivity, digital technology as seen from this perspective may thus be one of the most important means the Lord has given us in the service of this communion if we will not allow it to be corrupted by the enemy who loves to sow tares among the wheat.

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