

Through the looking glass of an iPhone



The call of Pope Francis to take the Gospel to the streets also includes the digital ones. The first message of Pope Francis for World Communications Day is consistent with the Holy Father's concern for reaching individuals where they are. Today that often means the virtual confines of the digital environment.

The Holy Father's message is focused on the prospect of authentic encounter in a digital culture. Pope Francis invokes the well-worn image of the highway — a comparison often drawn by those who view the Internet as an “information superhighway.” In his recasting of the highway analogy, the Holy Father considers the hollowing out of relationships that occurs in a world of speed and efficiency, “It is not enough to be passersby on the digital highways, simply “connected”; connections need to grow into true encounters. We cannot live apart, closed in on ourselves.”

To stretch the analogy a bit further, the image of people encased in vehicles of modern transportation, closed in on themselves as they rush from one thing to another, mirrors the modern communications environment. The sublime subtleties of nature are a mere blur from the climate controlled confines of a car or plane. The suffering of individuals homeless, stranded or injured hardly penetrates the callous veneers of steel and glass that fly by in pursuit of maximum efficiency.

A transmission view of communication, wherein media are merely modes of message transport, lacks the depth of engagement that authentic encounter requires. The Holy Father admonishes, “only those who go out of themselves in their communication can become a true point of reference for others.”

The world as seen through the glass and silicon of iPhones and laptops often lacks the ethical force of a face-to-face encounter. Jewish philosopher of communication Emmanuel Lévinas says that the human face “orders and ordains us” to serve the other. Thus, a popular social networking site like Facebook presents an opportunity for ethical encounter but only if the encounter is rooted in solidarity and

service to the other.

It is here that we are reminded of the most unique proposition of our faith, the glory of the Incarnation. It is in this vein that Pope Francis uses the parable of the Good Samaritan to call us out of ourselves on the digital highway to encounter the visceral realities of our fellow travelers. Authentic communication is not merely the transportation of bodiless messages but the ritualization of embodied experience.

The Good Samaritan “tended to the wounds of the injured man by pouring oil and wine over them.” For Pope Francis, communication can be the “balm which relieves pain” and the “fine wine that gladdens hearts.” Like oil and wine, the language, symbols and images that make up online communication are media for delivering the compassion and grace that divine charity demands.

In his book *Jesus of Nazareth*, Pope Benedict XVI reflects on the passersby in the parable of the Good Samaritan with remarkable charity, “There is no need to suppose that they were especially cold-hearted people; perhaps they were afraid themselves and were hurrying to get to the city as quickly as possible, or perhaps they were inexpert and did not know how to go about helping the man—especially since it looked as though he was quite beyond help anyway.”



How often we find ourselves in this situation online. The drive-by nature of digital communication does not move us in the way that the physical presence of another might. It is unclear, lacking the subtle cues of the other's presence, what might best alleviate their suffering. Further, the erosion of empathy fostered in part by the digital devices themselves renders many helpless when confronted with the pain of another.

Being immersed in a digital environment of information and images while attempting to remain grounded in the real is a difficult task. Pope Francis offers a solution in the form of another highway analogy, the road to Emmaus. Jesus, the mysterious travel companion who encourages the faith of the disciples by quoting the prophets and Scripture, enlivens the conversation. But is not until Jesus reveals Himself to them in the breaking of the bread that their eyes are truly opened.

Here the Holy Father provides a Christian vision for communication in the digital streets. Communication should not be viewed as a mere mode of transport. Rather, communication is a ritual

encounter in which something real is exchanged and solidarity is strengthened. We lead by listening and entering into authentic dialogue, “to understand [the other’s] expectations, doubts and hopes, and bring them the Gospel, Jesus Christ himself ... To dialogue means to believe that the “other” has something worthwhile to say.”

The ways in which Christ can be manifested online through charitable communication are as manifold as the millions of online exchanges that take place every day. Let us bring the living bread of Emmaus to the highways, side roads and outposts of the digital frontier by privileging presence over just passing by.

*Brett T. Robinson
Visiting Professor of Marketing
in the Mendoza College of Business
at the University of Notre Dame*

Brett T. Robinson - L'Osservatore Romano