

## WORLD COMMUNICATIONS DAY 2009

Homily given by Fr. Dennis Koliński, SJC

St. Peter's Church, Volo, Illinois

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New digital technologies are such an integral part of our everyday lives that most of us don't stop to think about how they are radically changing the ways in which we communicate with each other, which in turn profoundly affect our interpersonal relationships. And this is the primary focus of Benedict XVI's message to us today on World Communications Day.

He notes that "young people, in particular, have grasped the enormous capacity of the new media to foster connectedness, communication and understanding between individuals and communities, and they are turning to them as means of communicating with existing friends, of meeting new friends, of forming communities and networks, of seeking information and news, and of sharing their ideas and opinions. Many benefits flow from this new culture of communication: families are able to maintain contact across great distances; students and researchers have more immediate and easier access to documents, sources and scientific discoveries."<sup>1</sup> Many young people these days turn to the Internet in pursuing a vocation. In fact, most of the men, who inquire about a vocation to the Canons Regular of St. John Cantius, know about us from the Internet.

The popularity of these new technologies of communication is actually rooted in the "fundamental desire of people to communicate and to relate to each other. This desire for communication and friendship is rooted in our very nature as human beings and cannot be adequately understood [merely] as a response to technical innovations."<sup>2</sup> It is a reflection of the basic and enduring yearning of humans to reach beyond themselves and to seek communion with others.<sup>3</sup>

But, Benedict points out, "it is important to focus not just on [the] undoubted capacity [of these new technologies] to foster contact between people, but on the quality of the content that is put into circulation using these means."<sup>4</sup> We have to, at the same time, commit ourselves to the promotion of a "culture of respect, dialogue and friendship", (III) which respects the dignity and worth of the human person.<sup>5</sup> This means that "if the new technologies are to serve the good of individuals and of society, all users will avoid the sharing of words and images that are degrading of human beings, that promote hatred and intolerance, that debase the goodness and intimacy of human sexuality or that exploit the weak and vulnerable."<sup>6</sup>

Archbishop Charles Chaput of Denver, one of the most outspoken bishops presently in our country, has pointed out that the media have also created "a culture based on 'immediacy, brevity, visual stimulation, celebrity and self-absorption,' [and] warned [that] this has great implications for the Christian's place in American society."<sup>7</sup> He says that it is not enough to be proficient in using these new technologies but that it is also crucial that we understand how they work on us, so that we can learn to judge them "soberly and critically," because if we do not, the consequences may be "very unhappy."<sup>8</sup>

The Internet suicide of a Florida teen this past November witnessed by an online audience, who did nothing, is an example of the "enormous moral cost" that this can have in our present culture.<sup>9</sup> Despondent about how things hadn't been working out in his life,

the teen decided to commit suicide by drug overdose and transmit his death on a live video streaming Web site. Over a twelve hour period, hundreds of people watched him slowly die on the Internet. Viewers commented on-line from the comfort of their homes about what they saw—some mocked him; others cheered him on. No one thought of calling the police until it was too late to save him.

Shortly after the incident, a research professor for the Institute for the Psychological Sciences, Roger Scruton, said that one of the present problems with the Internet is that its anonymity “abolishes shame... Viewing the world from behind a screen, the Internet addict can relish every kind of narcissistic, sadistic and hateful feeling without cost.”<sup>10</sup> “Nobody sees him; nobody knows what he is doing; nobody judges,”<sup>11</sup> or so he believes. The fascinated spectators of the Internet suicide “could enjoy a cost-free sadistic spree, and—when the dreadful event was over—turn their vicarious lives in another direction, as though nothing had happened.”<sup>12</sup> Scruton noted that “his is but one instance of the enormous moral cost of screen addiction. As we shall increasingly see, the result of the Internet will be a widespread hardening of the human heart, and a replacement of true relationships between people with their cyber-substitutes.”<sup>13</sup> “Only concerted action now can control this menace; and it is important that all decent people turn their attention to the question of how it might be done.”<sup>14</sup>

Bishop Chaput points out that the United States was founded in a time when patterns of thought were formed by print media<sup>15</sup> and that “the more sensory, immediate and emotional our culture becomes, the farther it gets from the habits of serious thought that sustain its ideals.”<sup>16</sup> The very technology and media, which so fascinate us, have changed our patterns of thought. For many people, they have truly opened the way for dialogue not only within our own personal sphere, but also with others around the world at the touch of our fingers. But Benedict cautions us that this dialogue “must be rooted in a genuine and mutual searching for truth” because “life is not just a succession of events or experiences: it is a search for the true, the good and the beautiful.”<sup>17</sup> We should never “trivialize the concept or the experience of friendship. It would be sad if our desire to sustain and develop *on-line* friendships were to be at the cost of our availability to engage with our families, our neighbors and those we meet in the daily reality of our places of work, education and recreation.”<sup>18</sup>

Perhaps, suggests Bishop Chaput, “as a remedy, Catholics [should] give up computers, televisions, cell phones, and iPods for ‘just one night’ a week” to prove to themselves that they are not dominated by the very technology they use.<sup>19</sup> “One night a week spent reading, talking with each other, listening to each other and praying over Scripture. We can *at least* do that much. And if we do, we’ll discover that eventually we’re sober again and not drunk on technology and our own overheated appetites.”<sup>20</sup>

The media and various technologies of communication are here to stay. Not only should we guard against being dominated by them, but we should also be active in using them in a positive way for the good. They are not evil in themselves but if used for a genuine search for truth, can be of great benefit to us and the world. They can actually help evangelize the world just as the invention of the printing press made the Bible more accessible to people. Jesus told His disciples that he would send the Paraclete, the Spirit of Truth. It is only the truth that can transform us and we know how it transformed them. If we use these new technologies for the sake of the good and the true, they have the powerful potential to transform the world.

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<sup>1</sup> Message of the Holy Father Benedict XVI for the 43<sup>rd</sup> World Day of Communications: “New Technologies, New Relationships. Promoting a Culture of Respect, Dialogue and Friendship”, 24 May 2009, ([http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/messages/communications/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_mes\\_20090124\\_43rd-world-communications-day\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/messages/communications/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20090124_43rd-world-communications-day_en.html)).

<sup>2</sup> Benedict XVI.

<sup>3</sup> Benedict XVI.

<sup>4</sup> Benedict XVI.

<sup>5</sup> Benedict XVI.

<sup>6</sup> Benedict XVI.

<sup>7</sup> “Archbishop Chaput: Media culture and compromise undermining Christian life”, Catholic News Agency-CAN, 6 May 2009, (<http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/new.php?n=15876>).

<sup>8</sup> “Archbishop Chaput”.

<sup>9</sup> “Expert: Internet Addiction Carries a ‘Moral Cost’”, 25 November 2008, (<http://www.zenit.org/article-24368?l=english>).

<sup>10</sup> “Expert”.

<sup>11</sup> “Expert”.

<sup>12</sup> “Expert”.

<sup>13</sup> “Expert”.

<sup>14</sup> “Expert”.

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