

Technology and Catechesis **The Digital Generation and the New Technologies** Carson Weber

Pope2You.net

A Vatican webpage designed with the aim of bringing the words and messages of Benedict XVI to the youth. This site features the Pope's message for the 43rd World Day of Communications. From this site, young people can send virtual cards to friends that contain an attractive image of the Pope and a quote from one of his addresses.

Pope2You.net also contains the follow features:

- Facebook application
- iPhone application
- The Vatican's official YouTube channel (<http://youtube.com/vatican>)

'I am conscious of those who constitute the so-called digital generation and I would like to share with them, in particular, some ideas concerning the extraordinary potential of the new technologies, if they are used to promote human understanding and solidarity.'

With these opening words, Pope Benedict communicated his message for the 43rd World Communications Day on May 24, 2009, which held the official title: 'New Technologies, New Relationships. Promoting a culture of Respect, Dialogue and Friendship.'ⁱ

In sum, our Holy Father addressed the reality pervasive in the lives of those popularly identified as *Generation Y* as well as those born in the 1990's and the 21st Century in Western or First World countries, whom sociologists now identify as *Generation Z*, *Generation I*, or the *iGeneration* ('i' for 'internet').ⁱⁱ We are experiencing 'fundamental shifts in patterns of communications' that affect how we relate to one another. The digital world brought upon us by the advent of the Internet and cellular communications has changed the method by which we converse and relate in our day-to-day lives.

I say 'we' because I wish to break a pervasive myth that adults and teens live in different worlds; adults in a world of traditional media (e.g. newspapers and television) and teens immersed in the digital world. In June of 2009, a Nielson Company report on 'the myths and realities of teen media trends' revealed that teens and adults consume much of the same media.ⁱⁱⁱ In fact, while teens love the Internet, they spend far less time (less than ½ the time) browsing the web than adults and watch less online video than most adults. This is due not so much to less interest, but due to the constraints of reality. Teens are bound to a school day, extracurricular activities, and other events that keep them from an Internet connection, whereas adults have far more access in the course of their day. So

while those with less birthdays behind them may be more digitally savvy, the advent of new means of communicating runs across the generational divide.

A Gift to Humanity

Pope Benedict calls these technologies ‘truly a gift to humanity’ because they ‘foster connectedness, communication and understanding between individuals and communities.’ Made in the *imago Dei*, the image of God, we are hard-wired for communion, and the art of communication partially fulfills this intrinsic need of the human soul.^{IV}

When we prudently employ the new social media to enter into authentic friendships and foster existing relationships, we experience the blessings of this contemporary gift of God; we grow in our humanity. In fact, the Pope explains how many often misunderstand the popularity of the new technologies in terms of a response to innovation. Instead, he remarks, ‘they respond to a fundamental desire of people to communicate and to relate to each other,’ a desire written on the human heart, imprinted in our human nature.

We have an inner desire for connectedness, a divinely implanted instinct for communication. According to the aforementioned Nielson report, the average US mobile teen sends or receives an average of 2,899 text messages per month. In the context of catechesis, what if we were to show our students that their constant urge to pull the cell phone and text message a friend is an outward sign of the divine image? What if they came to understand how a persistent desire to log into Facebook and communicate through digital words and images is positive evidence that they are made for eternal union with the Blessed Trinity? Our hearts yearn for ‘the communicative and unifying Love of God’.

Friendship

Pope Benedict goes on to describe how the online social networks, which have emerged in recent years have revived the concept of *friendship*, which he calls ‘one of the noblest achievements of human culture.’ He warns us of trivializing the concept or experience of friendship. How sad it would be if we were to develop online ‘friendships’ while neglecting our immediate familial relationships and the personal encounters we make daily in our places of work and daily living. Compared to 2,899 text messages, the average US teen with a mobile phone receives or initiates only 191 calls each month. The desire for virtual connectedness has the potential for an obsession that that can isolate us from true social interaction ‘while also disrupting the patterns of rest, silence and reflection that are necessary for healthy human development.’

At the same 43rd World Communications Day, Jesuit Father Federico Lombardi, director of the Vatican press office, warned us of ‘the dangers of limiting oneself to play, of wasting time, of flight from reality, and remaining on the surface of things.’ He added, ‘[W]e must not be victims of the fascination with the

extraordinary technological successes, we must continue to... seek in profundity that solid soil of the vital relationship with God and others'

Technology, as with any tool, should not serve as an end. Nor should it serve as a means to evade communion with our Heavenly Father and our neighbor. Rather, technology should find its place as a means in our quest to build a culture of respect, dialogue, and friendship. Wasting our precious time unnecessarily with technology is a wound many of us have experienced in our daily lives, and it will continue to serve as a persistent temptation as it advances.

Prudence and Prayer

The key to engaging the new technologies is the virtue of prudence, which the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* defines as 'the virtue that disposes practical reason to discern our true good in every circumstance and to choose the right means of achieving it' (CCC 1806). We have the urgent task of disciplining our students in the art of utilizing technology to achieve the true good. Do our students know how to *rightly order*, within their daily lives, email, text messaging, Facebook, Twitter, Vimeo, YouTube, Wikipedia, instant messaging, MySpace, and iPods as servants in our daily lives so that we remain their masters and not vice versa? Before we are able serve as guides to those under our care, we must first ask ourselves if we have achieved the virtue of prudence with regard to these technologies in our personal and professional lives.

The key to the exercise and achievement of prudence in the life of the Christian is the life of prayer. An authentic, daily communion with the Master will enable our mastery of these tools, these gifts. Spend time away from the blaring computer monitor to ask the Holy Spirit to increase the cardinal virtue of prudence in your soul, to lead and guide you in your use of the new technologies.

Diocesan Guidelines

Social media networks (e.g. Facebook and MySpace) and web blogging platforms (e.g. TypePad and WordPress) have revolutionized the way we communicate and share information with one another; they introduce effective means of communicating with those we minister to, especially for those engaged in youth ministry. On the flipside, these technologies call for prudent guidelines and clear policies. Before you engage in such endeavors for purposes of ministry, be sure to check with your diocesan officials to see if your diocese has guidelines or policies in place for the use of technology, especially social media, in ministry. These are terribly important to know and follow to determine appropriate boundaries, especially within minors and vulnerable adults.^v

Text messages, emails, communications on Facebook/MySpace, blog posts, comments on blog entries... all of these leave a permanent record and nothing published through these and like means are guaranteed to remain private. This fact alone calls for ever-greater diligence in their use.

Internet Evangelists

Just before the 43rd World Communications Day at his Wednesday audience, Pope Benedict urged on the digital generation: ‘Young people in particular, I appeal to you: bear witness to your faith through the digital world! Employ these new technologies to make the Gospel known, so that the Good News of God’s infinite love for all people, will resound in new ways across our increasingly technological world!’^{vi}

The call of Christ through his Vicar is clear. We are to be digital martyrs (from the Greek *martyria*, meaning ‘witness’), bearing the Gospel through circuit boards, WiFi networks, virtual forums, electronic mail, cellular towers, and LCD monitors. As the roads of the Roman Empire required travel preparations on the part of the Apostles and potholes to be circumnavigated, so the digital highway and like means will require virtue, diligence, and prayer on our part. Yet, the journey is promising and the field of souls is ripe for the harvest.^{vii}

NOTES

ⁱ The full message of Pope Benedict XVI for the 43rd World Communications Day is accessible online at <http://www.zenit.org/article-24879?l=english>

ⁱⁱ See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Generation_Z

ⁱⁱⁱ ‘How Teens Use Media’ (Nielson, June 2009), accessible online as an Adobe Acrobat PDF document at <http://is.gd/1Yc3w> (Note: this link is case sensitive)

^{iv} ‘God is love and in himself he lives a mystery of personal loving communion. Creating the human race in his own image ... God inscribed in the humanity of man and woman the vocation, and thus the capacity and responsibility, of love and communion.’ (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 2331)

^v For example, see *Pastoral Guidelines for the Use of Technology* for the Diocese of San Jose, California at <http://is.gd/258Vf>

^{vi} Given on May 20th, 2009 – see <http://is.gd/25bCj>

^{vii} See Luke 10:12.