

# Social Network



*Social network*: you either love it or you hate it; it's difficult to take a middle stance. But if you ask what it is, it's hard to get to the core. The most frequent answer is: *Facebook*. Yes, but what is Facebook? "It's a web site that you subscribe to so as to exchange words, photos, links and thoughts with your friends." Effectively, a social network is just that: a virtual place where you can

manifest, create and/or maintain relations with a specific group of persons.

By definition, social network refers to a group united by social or territorial affinity, by interests, hobbies, etc. Facebook, (literally, *a book of faces*), was created by Mark Zuckerberg at Harvard University (4 February 2004) to put students in contact with one another, but very soon other universities began asking to subscribe and so the site was opened up to the whole world on 11 November 2006.

The phenomenon of social network, developed thanks to the advanced process of computerization and a decrease in the *digital divide*, has enjoyed exponential development due especially to two elements very important to the human being:

1. *The need for human interaction*. Globalization and life in big cities are depersonalizing. The social network is a fast and inexpensive way of allowing an individual to remain in contact with his/her own social group, with the possibility of amplifying it based on one's interests, desires and inclinations.
2. *The need for self-revelation*. Due to globalization, an individual runs the risk of losing a sense of "self"—of no longer identifying with him/herself but with the masses. Besides favoring the creation of special interest groups, the social network is also a type of showcase where a person can "display" his/her identity (either real or reconstructed), thus making it possible for that individual to exist within a group but at the same time to also "stand out" from it. It is here that the power of images overrules content, drawing the "visitor," like the sirens of Ulysses, through the magnet of symbols.

Marck Zuckerberg, basing himself on Frigyes Karinthy's idea (1929) of the existence of "six degrees of separation" between one subject and another, came up with an ambitious plan to create a service capable of mapping all the existing relationships between persons.

Recalling how much St. Paul accomplished through the promptings of the Spirit, we can't let this great possibility escape us. The Apostle of the Gentiles, that tireless evangelizer, visited foreign lands, wove relationships and strengthened his connections with people by correspondence and by sending persons dear to him to the communities he founded. If we think of the actual communities in the web and the possibilities of keeping in touch with others through e-mail, chat and video chat sites, telephones and e-conferencing, we realize very quickly that we have at our disposal extremely swift and efficacious instruments that can make us new evangelizers in today's new *courtyard of the gentiles*. In speaking about the means of social communication in *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (n. 45), Pope Paul VI reminds us that the Church "would feel guilty before the Lord if she did not utilize these powerful means." That significant statement was made in 1975 and it is even more true today, thirty-six years later. In fact, we are constantly urged on by the current Pontiff to embrace the media as a "place" of evangelization.

In his message for the 45<sup>th</sup> World Day of Social Communications, Benedict XVI says that “this means of spreading information and knowledge is giving birth to a new way of learning and thinking, with unprecedented opportunities for establishing relationships and building fellowship.” In other words, we must use the media for evangelization and the social network is certainly a great help in this.

If St. Paul were living today, he would not let the opportunities offered by the *new media* to escape him. He would take advantage not only of traditional correspondence but also e-mail, Youtube and the social network. We are sure he would not view these modern technologies as the *only* way to communicate, but would instead integrate them with all the other forms of human contact, seeing them as a continuation of these.

This is what most of the people who use Facebook do. They live in continual flux between face-to-face interactions (characterized by the warmth of another person’s concrete presence, gaze, slap on the shoulder, etc.) and online interactions (limited by absence—but only of the physical presence of the speaker) experienced as the prolongation of relationships already begun. The real and the virtual are not in conflict—one helps the other. This last consideration nullifies the myth of “armchair evangelization.”

A final basic element consists in how we handle relationships. On Facebook, it is easy to add “friends” to your profile; the system lets you have as many as 5000. But the issue is completely different. Evangelization involves interaction with other people and we usually can’t handle more than twenty relationships in an in-depth and fruitful way. This means that while it is true we can contact a multitude of “friends” more quickly, it is equally true that we can’t possibly nurture all these contacts, at least not in the same way and to the same degree.

These considerations are not meant to demonize the new media but to put them in their rightful place and pacify alarmists who think that virtual relationships “replace” the person. The Lord of life chose to become a person: he was a human being who walked the earth, established many different kinds and degrees of relationships with the people of his time, and sent some of these people out to evangelize. Thus it is the *person* who proclaims the great love of the risen Lord, primarily through the indispensable testimony of his/her life, aided by the powerful instruments of communication.

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