

LIKE PETER, LET US CAST OUT OUR NETS



And the catchword of the day is: Long live the Net! Understood as the World Wide Web and in particular the social network system. It doesn't matter if it is hated or loved (which usually depends on the generation to which one belongs—either “digital natives” or “digital immigrants”), what counts is to be a part of it. But how?

The word “net” is an image laden with meaning. It brings to mind the Gospel scene in which Peter, at the end of a long and fruitless night of fishing, heard Jesus call out to him to cast his net yet again and, upon obeying him, hauled in a load of fish so huge that it filled his boat. But the World Wide Web can also be likened to a door or, even better, to a public square (*agorà*)—an integral and fundamental element in the life of Mediterranean cultures. Today the Web, populated by virtual people, prompts us to reflect on our role as communicators and evaluate the positive and negative aspects of this instrument of communications.

We have to acknowledge that the delicate question of the social media has now entered by right into the debate concerning culture—a subject that cannot be avoided by those who work with the new communications technologies.

In just a few years, social networking has become such an integral part of our life that those who choose not to participate in it know that they are excluded from a good part of the communications process. It is enough to think of how we use social networking on our mobile devices, thus ensuring that we never interrupt our contact with others. We are subjected to a perennial flood of images, words and events that at the same time oblige us to

give up our privacy. By means of Wi-Fi, we can keep track of what is happening in real time in another part of the world. The other side of the coin is that we can no longer appreciate a sunset without taking pictures of it or watch a movie without using WhatsApp to reply to a friend, going into panic mode if we discover that our device is out of range. Thus perennial availability has made us all relentless communicators and has accelerated our lifestyle. At the same time, communications has shifted from vertical to horizontal and, as a noted political movement has taught us, it is now the Net—the people—who have the last word.

But these people should be guided by those who are communicators by vocation. Today's multiform and variegated technological “prosthetics” should help those who work in the area of communications, not lead them astray. My response to those who criticize the ambiguity of social networks is to quote a statement of Fr. James Alberione, Founder of the Pauline Family, who often said: “Remember that you are *in* the world but not *of* the world.”

Our presence in the world should be marked by the uprightness, respect, discretion, and—I dare add—discernment typical of a spiritual journey very familiar to those who follow the path of the consecrated life. Thus those who communicate cannot and must not allow themselves to be engulfed by the power and attraction hidden in the media. We can find everything in the flow of communications and by now the bible of contemporary society has become the world-renowned Google, in which even more can be found. We must realize that good communicators are persons who know when and how to communicate and who also cultivate silence





because “when word and silence become mutually exclusive, communication breaks down, either because it gives rise to confusion or because, on the contrary, it creates an atmosphere of coldness; when they complement one another, however, communication acquires value and meaning.”¹

Communicating our daily happenings to others is not enough. We must cast out stimuli for reflection and debate that can help us

¹ Benedict XVI, *Message for the 46th World Communications Day 2012*.

strengthen our Christian identity. The Net is hungry for faces but all too often it is starved when it comes to content and indifferent with regard to personal sensitivities (it is enough to think of “cyber-bullying”).

We cannot continue to think that social networks are a copy of our life. In using them, we have to be ourselves and nourish the communications process by taking as our starting point the new way of being human that distinguishes the Christian lifestyle.

Therefore, the net cast by Peter is today an invisible Net, constructed with the subtle fibers of ether. As social communications workers, we are called to fill that Net with ideas and make the best possible use of it to haul in a big catch of fish. If the advent of social media is prodding us more and more in the direction of changing our usual way of living and acting, as well as our view of the world, then we must not ignore those provocations. Consequently, those who work in the areas of culture and communications should not be intimidated by the new technologies but should realize that they enrich those who are seeking the Gospel and can be valid vehicles of its message.

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