

FROM THE "CROWD OF SOLITUDES" TO THE TECHNOLOGIES OF COMMUNITY



Usually, we think of the media—above all the digital and social media—from the perspective of a weakening of bonds. As André Caron and Letizia Caronia pointed out a few years ago in a good book: if two people go out to dinner and each one has their own cell phone, then in fact it is dinner for four. Digital devices are actors on the social scene: they are not mere instruments because instruments do not alert us, they do not invite us to respond, they do not push us to do things. Moreover, these devices—small and always connected—allow us to fill the “dead times” (few, to be honest) in our day and to completely rethink our temporal experience.

Time is dense in the world of digital media. It is a space in which different times are packaged in layers and lived concurrently. This is why digital media weaken bonds: because they allow us to put in our due work hours while enjoying leisure time and also family time contemporaneously. That is what happens when I’m sitting in the living room with my son at my side, watching TV while answering my email on my laptop. The two of us seem to embody the title of Sherry Turkle’s book, *Alone Together*. Due to the presence of media devices, we are distracted and isolated; we forget about the other

person, who is consequently alienated. The erosion of bonds, the retreat into our private world, and disconnection understood as losing sight of relationships, is the price we pay for building a society that seems to promise us the exact opposite, that is, the opportunity to be connected always and everywhere.

In his Pastoral Letter *Ephphatha, Be Opened*, Cardinal Martini uses an eloquent metaphor to express this condition, calling it the “crowd of solitudes in which people brush up against each other but do not speak to each other.” It was this kind of a crowd that gathered around Jesus in Mt. 15:29-31: “Jesus walked by the Sea of Galilee, went up on the mountain, and sat down there. Great crowds came to him, having with them the lame, the blind, the deformed, the mute, and many others. They placed them at his feet, and he cured them. The crowds were amazed when they saw the mute speaking, the deformed made whole.” Martini compares this scene to the one he witnessed on a visit to Varanasi (Benares), India, where he saw an immense crowd of suffering people preparing to bathe in the Ganges River. What struck the Cardinal forcibly in both the biblical scenario and the one before his eyes was the fact that each of the desperate people in those two contexts was thinking only of him/herself and his/her sufferings and that none of them spoke to the people beside them.

Two aspects stand out in the image of this “crowd of solitudes.” The first is isolation, a block of communication, focus on oneself: without a doubt, these are all valid ways of describing a certain way of using social media today—a way in which the other person doesn’t count. Instead, what counts is the capacity of the individual to make him/herself appreciated and to be the center of attention. But there is a second aspect that emerges in this image, namely that both crowds were made up of people who wanted to be healed, who were struggling to get out of their situation in some way. We could say that they were trying to engage in authentic communication, even though unintentionally and disjointedly.

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