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## **Sailing Safely on the Digital Seas**

"We need to accompany young people so that they acquire an upright conscience, and help them to prepare for the battles of daily life. Then they will mature and learn how to act in every environment with naturalness and Christian conviction."

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Today's educational adventure includes the challenge to learn and teach others how to channel the new

means of communication so that their use helps us to mature as persons, and doesn't undermine the quality of family life but rather improves it. Therefore it would be counter-productive to simply forbid the use of new forms of technology – exclusion is not always the best way to educate. Instead, it is more beneficial to learn how to put these new means to good use, drawing the best from them. As the Holy Father advises, “good communication helps us to grow closer, to know one another better, and ultimately, to grow in unity.”[1]

We need to accompany young people so that they acquire an upright conscience, and help them to prepare for the battles of daily life. Then they will mature and learn how to act in every environment with naturalness and Christian conviction. Educating effectively requires building firm virtues, along with strong personal

principles. Only then will children be able to lead a good life, order and moderate their natural impulses, control their actions, and overcome obstacles cheerfully in seeking and doing the true good, also in the digital world.

Since each person is different, we need to consider the best way to reach each child. Husband and wife should spend time together discussing the needs of their children and how best to help each one. One topic for these conversations should be the use of new technologies. Educating well in any area requires time, dedication and an ordered approach.

The goal in educating children is to help them acquire self-dominion. This is achieved by teaching them to struggle and win out in specific small battles. They need to learn to live a schedule, to respect others' times of

silence, to have a set timetable for playing video games and being on the Internet. As Saint John Paul II said, “struggle and personal effort is necessary whereby the body is made temperate but even more importantly the entire human being gets to experience the joy of both self-discipline and overcoming hurdles and difficulties. This indeed is one of the elements of maturity that marks the years of youth.”[2]

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches that “temperance is the moral virtue that moderates the attraction of pleasures and provides balance in the use of created goods. It ensures the will’s mastery over instincts and keeps desires within the limits of what is honorable. The temperate person directs the sensitive appetites toward what is good and maintains a healthy discretion” (no. 1809). Temperance results in self-mastery in the use of

created goods, achieved through ordering one's inclinations towards the true good. "Life then takes on again shades and tones which intemperance had tended to blur. We find ourselves able to care for the needs of others, to share what is ours with everyone, to devote our energies to great causes."[3]

## **Digital decorum**

"The anxiety to be connected to digital technology can end up isolating us from our neighbor, from the people who happen to be at our side."[4] An ever-present challenge is that of fostering personal interaction with others. For example, more significant matters are best communicated via face-to-face conversations. Important topics cannot be settled by text messages or in the virtual world. This family policy would be very beneficial at home. A personal conversation is the

best way to ask someone's pardon after offending them or to consult special plans in the family.

At the same time, it can be helpful to explain the value of not getting carried away by what is immediate and short-term. Precipitation could lead, for example, to a lack of courtesy or good manners with our neighbor. Other useful rules of "digital decorum" could include not taking calls while speaking with someone, turning off electronic devices during meals, respecting set times for using the computer at home, etc.

It is also useful to explain to children why responding to messages when annoyed or upset isn't a good idea, especially when a wide audience is reached, as is the case with social media, Whatsapp groups, etc. In these situations, one's irritation could lead to saying or writing things that

one may later regret. If parents are attentive and notice that a child is acting in anger or haste, it could be an opportunity to have a deeper conversation about the need to temper their character, and encourage them to behave serenely and not to overreact due to momentary flare-ups.

### **Learning to control curiosity**

A good way for parents to win the trust and confidence of their children is to try to find answers to their curiosity, even when they are still very young and begin to ask the “why” of things. Children will open up to their parents when they discover they are ready to listen to all their concerns. It is good to make it easy for them to talk freely about all the questions and doubts that naturally start arising. At times parents may not have the answer to every problem. But they can tell their

child clearly: “I don’t know but I’ll try to find out.” And later they can return with an explanation.

If children trust their parents to resolve doubts and questions that arise, they won’t need to always have recourse to the Internet. Many parents are worried about the ease with which children can access pornography or other harmful content such as messages that foster hate or manuals that explain how to make weapons, etc. One can come across such material without even looking for it. With just a few “clicks,” a curious boy or girl can access a world of violence and hate, sensuality and offensive language, etc. At times this information is found on apparently harmless websites. Therefore it is important to teach children to use the Internet with a clear goal, and never just to waste time. And if harmful content does appear unwanted on the screen,

they need to block it out immediately, putting Saint Josemaría's advice into practice: "Allow me to repeat it: have the courage to run away and the moral strength not to dally with your weakness or wonder how far you can go."[5]

At times it can be good for parents to ask their children for help to configure the privacy options for their personal social network, or speak about a "malicious" email that one of the parents has received. Thus parent can gradually give solid criteria to their children, who are the ones ultimately who will have to act freely. Parents need the "risky trust" of allowing them to grow in responsibility in accord with each child's age.

## **Learning to focus**

A common complaint nowadays is that the digital technologies lead to superficiality. But what is often not

mentioned is that the root of the problem lies in trying to do three or four things at the same time, which leads to dispersion and lack of attention. Some young people, while trying to read a book, not only listen to music but keep checking for updates on social media and new messages on their smartphone. The boundary between one activity and another is blurred. Certainly some tasks can be performed simultaneously fairly effectively, while others, such as studying, need more concentrated attention. The mind cannot maintain the same intensity while engaged in multiple activities at the same time. Therefore children need to be taught ways to focus their attention on one task at a time, which is also one of the best pieces of advice to help them become good professionals in the future.

Here parents need to help children grasp the *why* behind the rule. When

asked why they cannot watch a short 3-minute video now, children should be told that it is not only a question of time, but also of resisting the impulse to respond to every stimulus around us, which distracts us from the work we are doing right now: “do what you ought and concentrate on what you are doing.”[6]

Pope Francis reminds us: “We need, for example, to recover a certain sense of deliberateness and calm. This calls for time and the ability to be silent and to listen.”[7] We have to be on guard against dissipation. Teaching children to avoid dispersion and to focus their attention helps them to concentrate when studying and also to pray more readily. Otherwise they will find it hard to do anything worthwhile. “You slake your senses and faculties in whatever pool you meet on the way. And you can feel the results: unsettled purpose, scattered

attention, deadened will and quickened concupiscence.”[8]

## **Superficiality and vanity**

Many present-day technological advances, if not properly used, can lead to a growing individualism and to focusing exclusively on how one appears to others, characteristic of a superficial mentality. “Young people are particularly sensitive to the empty, meaningless values that often surround them. Unfortunately, moreover, it is they who pay the consequences.”[9]

A clear sign of vanity is the obsession to increase the number of contacts (friends and followers) accumulated in the digital world. On the social networks, those who regularly post material that is interesting or funny or very personal usually acquire a greater following. “First of all, we must be aware that the truth we long to share does not derive its worth

from its ‘popularity’ or from the amount of attention it receives. We must make it known in its integrity, instead of seeking to make it acceptable or diluting it. It must become daily nourishment and not a fleeting attraction.”[10]

A possible temptation is that of wanting to bring into the public domain things that are more private or intimate, which attracts people’s attention and awakens curiosity. Young people will learn to avoid these dangers if they carry out an optimistic struggle, through specific victories in little acts of virtue and self-dominion.

Good communication at home will help young people understand the underlying issues and create an atmosphere of trust where they can freely raise their doubts and uncertainties. Saint Josemaría encouraged parents to speak in a

noble way with their children and be happy to see them mature, gradually removing restrictions and allowing their freedom and personality to strengthen.

## **Sociability**

Human beings are social by nature. A great part of our personal growth involves being in touch with others and communicating who we are. Adolescence is the phase during which these social relations begin to take clearer shape and depth. The need to relate to others socially is closely connected to feeling part of a group. The digital technologies offer young people resources to strengthen their group of friends. In fact, it is quite common to form virtual groups for sharing content just among friends (although sometimes friends of friends are accepted in the group, and thus the content of the

information shared ends up being accessible to a large audience.)

At times the strong sense of belonging to a group can lead young people to be excessively concerned about checking updates in the status of their friends and new contacts. It can also happen that in social gatherings or parties they are more concerned about the photos they take and how fast they can upload them on social media than actually enjoying the company of the other people present. The challenge is to take advantage of these opportunities to teach young people in a friendly way about the respect they owe others and the need for good manners.

## **Fortitude and freedom**

Teaching people how to say 'no' is the same as teaching them how to say a generous 'yes,' by showing them the beauty of the virtues as the pathway

to a happy life. Therefore it is very helpful to explain the value of knowing how to say 'no,' clearly and firmly, if the situation calls for it. Saying 'no' will be a tangible expression of self-mastery, without losing one's calm or good manners.

Children should find in their parents the greatest defenders of their personal freedom. Freedom should combine with responsibility, depending on each one's age, when it comes to the private use of electronic devices. When children have *smartphones* or *tablets*, it might not be opportune to deny them the ability to use passwords; although in some families the parents may also encourage them to share their devices with one of their siblings from time to time, in which case their private information will become accessible to others. Thus young people will learn to be transparent, since one of their

siblings may have to make use of their device unexpectedly. This should be done not in order to pry into their activities, but rather to create an atmosphere of detachment and sharing with others in family life.

When all is said and done, we cannot forget that the secret of family happiness lies in the most ordinary daily events, “in making the best use of all the benefits that civilization offers to make family life pleasant, life simpler and education more effective.”[11]

*The New Technologies and Christian Coherence*

*Interior Quiet in the Digital Age*

*Educating in the New Technologies*

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[1] Pope Francis, *Message for the 48th World Communications Day, 23 January 2014.*

[2] Saint John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Dilecti Amici*, no. 14.

[3] Saint Josemaría, *Friends of God*, no. 84.

[4] Francis, *Message for the 48th World Communications Day, 23 January 2014.*

[5] Saint Josemaria, *Furrow*, no. 137.

[6] Saint, Josemaria, *The Way*, no. 815.

[7] Francis, *Message for the 48th World Communications Day, 23 January 2014.*

[8] Saint Josemaria, *The Way*, no. 375.

[9] Francis, *Angelus, St. Peter Square, 4 August 2013.*

[10] Benedict XVI, *Message for the 45th World Communications Day, 5 June 2011.*

[11] Saint Josemaria, *Conversations*, no. 91.

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