Social Media and Personal Relations

The social networks are valuable if they foster truly human communication. An article on the virtuous use of the new technologies.

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What should we do to attain eternal life? Saint Luke's gospel contains this question put to Jesus by a doctor of the Law.[1] Our Lord invites him to focus on what the Scriptures say about the commandment of love for God and neighbor. *But he, wanting to*

justify himself, said to Jesus. "And who is my neighbor?"[2] The Master responds with the parable of the Good Samaritan, which can help us to widen the scope of our personal relations, as Jesus did for that doctor of the Law, so as to include all men and women from every background.

To be sincerely close to people around us is a teaching that has special relevance for our culture, permeated as it is by communication technology. Pope Francis refers to the story of the Good Samaritan to point out how these new tools have to lead to an authentic encounter among persons, and become a means to practice charity with others. "It is not enough to be passersby on the digital highways, simply 'connected': connections need to grow into true encounters. We cannot live apart, closed in on ourselves. We need to love and to be loved. We need tenderness."[3]

Nowadays the times when we interact with parents, friends and colleagues are multiplying. Thanks to new technology the frequency of communication is growing; we can talk to someone who perhaps lives thousands of miles away, as well as share photos and video clips about what we are doing right now. Faced with this reality, we can ask ourselves what we can do to make this not just an exchange of information but a means to establish authentic human relationships, with a Christian meaning.

Identity on social media

The virtue of sincerity is essential in social relations. "Men cannot live together if there is no mutual trust, if they do not express the truth,"[4] Saint Thomas Aquinas tells us. For order to be preserved in a community, those who are part of it need to speak the truth. Otherwise it

would be difficult, for example, to undertake projects together or to trust a leader. This sincerity embraces not only external facts (for example, the price of a product or the results of a raffle), but also the identity of the persons themselves: who they are, what position they occupy in society, what their life history is, etc.

For our social relations to be enriching and lasting, we need to present ourselves in the digital world in a way that is coherent with what we are. This means that the identity, or profile, that we create on social media should reflect our true way of being and acting. Thus those we meet online can have the assurance that the data we share corresponds to the life that we live, and that we won't use these means for purposes we would be ashamed of in the "real" world.

The reality of our social condition entails that as our relationships grow and mature, in the family or among friends, sincerity takes on a special importance. We seek to communicate not just external facts, but also what is taking place in our interior world: our likes and dislikes, our emotions and opinions. Revealing ourselves with simplicity becomes essential, without hiding our true identity. In the current context this effort often involves making use of the means that the new technologies offer: a text message, a post on social media, an email. We should not forget that, whenever we share news or opinions with others, we are also making ourselves known. As Pope Benedict said with regard to the social networks: "the people involved in them must make an effort to be authentic since, in these spaces, it is not only ideas and information that

are shared, but ultimately our very selves."[5]

Protecting human relations

In the digital world, besides the sincerity that leads us to not hide our true identity, we need the prudence required to have a good grasp of who will actually be reached by our efforts to keep in contact with others. The public that will view what we place on the Internet will not always be the same. Sometimes we are addressing ourselves to family members, sometimes to friends or acquaintances, members of a group, etc. At the same time, we realize that what we send can be shared, and eventually reach a much wider public than we had initially intended (it is a common practice now to forward messages and photos to third parties).

At times this is exactly what we want to achieve, for example, when

seeking to spread good news or an initiative that others might like to support. However when we send material with personal content, excessive spreading is not always a good idea. This material also often remains available on the web and could be accessed later when the context that made it understandable may have changed.

To set and control limits of what is private and what is public on the web can be quite difficult. The providers of this service seem to be ever more aware of this need, and it is good to keep informed about possible technical solutions. But this doesn't eliminate our personal responsibility in the material we send out, for example, photos or remarks about a specific topic. A phrase that when someone is speaking would be readily understood as a joke (through the tone of voice, facial expression, etc.)

can seem impertinent or rude on the Internet. A hastily written message could lead others to waste their time, or give a wrong impression of our relationship with another person, and without wanting to, could create confusion.

The new technologies, and social media in particular, lead the user to play an active role in creating and providing material. Therefore we need to be particularly prudent when sharing more personal and intimate information, whether about oneself or others. It is not just a matter of controlling information. Rather this need is closely tied to the sense of modesty that leads us to want to protect our own intimacy and that of others, protecting personal or family data that, if made know to others, could provoke curiosity or vanity.

Before sending out something that involves other people, it is good to ask ourselves if they would be pleased to see their names mentioned in this context, or if rather they would prefer that certain events or situations not appear on the web.

An authentic dialogue

"The development of social networks calls for commitment: people are engaged in building relationships and making friends, in looking for answers to their questions and being entertained, but also in finding intellectual stimulation and sharing knowledge and know-how."[6] The social media foster dialogue and frequently make it richer, by adding images and relevant quotes. They also enable people from very different cultures and places to interact. This possibility places before us the challenge of

establishing a fruitful dialogue that preserves the capacity for reflection when the speed of communication seems to demand an immediate answer. Without wanting to, we can diminish the dialogue by not being ready to wait and consider the matter more calmly.

Saint James teaches us that controlling our tongue is an act of true charity, and that failing to do so can cause incalculable damage. *The tongue is a little member and boasts of great things. How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire!*[7] And Saint Josemaria asks: "Do you know what damage you may cause by throwing stones with your eyes blindfold? Neither do you know the harm you may cause—and at times it is very great—by letting drop uncharitable remarks that to you seem trifling, because your eyes are blinded by thoughtlessness or passion."[8]

If a spoken comment can have such unforeseen consequences, how much more care is needed in digital communication, where words can be spread with unimaginable speed? "The social media thus need the commitment of all who are conscious of the value of dialogue, reasoned debate and logical argumentation; of people who strive to cultivate forms of discourse and expression which appeal to the noblest aspirations of those engaged in the communication process."[9] We will give authentic Christian witness if we try to practice special refinement, always being positive and respectful on the Internet.

Friendship and apostolate on the Internet

It is only natural that those who have received the gift of the faith want to spread it with respect and refinement to those they interact

with in the digital world. "We have to conquer for Christ every noble human value,"[10] and striving to spread the Gospel by all the means at our disposal is a consequence of being a Christian. But to transmit the Christian message effectively it is good to know the specifics about the means we are using and the relationships that are formed there. Charity requires much more than just sending spiritual messages to a list of contacts; we need to take a real interest in the persons themselves and try to help each one, both within and outside the Internet

Those who are well prepared, also technically, can find ways to transmit the faith effectively by digital means. However, it is good to be aware of the real impact these means can have, and avoid investing energy that could be better employed in other initiatives of greater apostolic impact. Simple and effective means

to influence society are within everyone's reach, such as sharing a piece of news or a good article, or writing a note to the author of a publication. Thus, taking into account our own personal circumstances, we will learn how to employ the new technologies correctly and virtuously, in a way proper to a Christian in the middle of the world.

The new technologies are a new channel for developing friendships. The social media can help further what Saint Josemaria called the "apostolate of friendship and confidence." "Through your personal contact, through you loyal and true friendship, you create in others a hunger for God and you help them to discover new horizons."[11]

The Internet can be a means to come in contact again with an old friend or to stay in contact with someone who

has moved. However we know that personal friendships are forged mainly in the real world. And we can never overlook the fact that personal apostolate counts primarily on direct contact: "the Gospel tells us constantly to run the risk of a face-to-face encounter with others, with their physical presence which challenges us, with their pain and their pleas, with their joy which infects us in our close and continuous interaction."[12]

The sincere desire to pass on the treasure of the faith will spur Christians to go out to encounter others with an authentic personal apostolate that makes use of all the available means, including those in the digital world.

Interior Quiet in the Digital Age

Educating in the New Technologies

[1] *Lk* 10:25 ff.

[2] *Lk* 10:29.

[3] Pope Francis, Message for the 48th World Communications Day, 24 January 2014.

[4] Saint Thomas Aquinas, *S.Th.* II-II, q.109, a.3 ad 1.

[5] Benedict XVI, Message for the 47th World Communications Day, 24 January 2013.

[6] Benedict XVI, Message for the 47th World Communications Day, 24 January 2013.

[7] *Jas* 3:5.

[8] Saint Josemaria, *The Way*, no. 455.

[9] Benedict XVI, Message for the 47th World Communications Day, 24 January 2013.

[10] Saint Josemaria, *The Forge*, no. 682.

[11] Saint Josemaria, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 149.

[12] Pope Francis, Apost. Exhort. *Evangelii gaudium*, 24 November 2013, no. 88.