

Social Media Background Documents

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Social-Networking Protocol for the Catholic Church in Australia

*Bishops Commission for Mission and Faith Formation
ACBC 2011*

<http://mediablog.catholic.org.au/?p=335>

Introduction

In the vast world of new technology, a myriad of possibilities for communication has been opened up for evangelisation and for building bridges. The Catholic Church recognises the enormous potential which these new technologies bring.

Addressing young people who have grown up in a digital world, Pope Benedict XVI in his message for the World Day of Communications 2011 recognised the great opportunities and challenges brought by social networking and the internet.

'The new technologies are not only changing the way we communicate, but communication itself, so much so that it could be said that we are living through a period of vast cultural transformation. 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.'

Social networking, using platforms such as Facebook, MySpace or Xt3, is a phenomenon which allows groups to share information, build friendships and promote activities. Indeed, social networking has already proven to be a powerful way to engage with and promote the Gospel of Jesus Christ in a wide variety of fora.

The Church, in her desire to use technology for the greater glory of God, understands that this technology should be pursued only to the point to which it allows growth in faith and in communion with others.

The overarching principle in this communion should be that of human dignity, and at each step in the social networking endeavour, care should be taken by Church personnel to ensure that the innate dignity of each person is upheld.

These protocols are intended as a guide for those working at various levels of Church organisations. They are by no means exhaustive and may simply form the basis for more comprehensive and specific protocols at local levels.

On-line or off-line, respect for human dignity rules

On-line and off-line behaviour of clergy, Church employees and members of Church organisations – particularly those representing the Church – should always demonstrate a Christ-centred love for others. Even those working in Church organisations who might not be Christian should still ensure that when representing the Church, their behaviour off-line and on-line should demonstrate a respect for human dignity. Boundaries should always be taken into consideration and observed, particular in relating to young people in a youth ministry setting.

In particular, those involved in work with young people should be aware of the Church's child protection protocols and policies of both the Church and of civil authorities.

Those who engage in social networking as part of their Church ministry should do so in the name of evangelisation; to build appropriate relationships that can encourage and foster growth in faith. This engagement should facilitate a growing in relationship with Christ.

The sharing of information on sites should be of appropriate materials for faith formation or catechesis. Social-Networking sites can be ideal for promotion of Church events or activities and for sharing worship resources in a wide range of formats, be it video, text or sound.

The teachings of the Catholic Church should be consistently upheld in these social networking activities, and should not move beyond appropriate personal communication with those being ministered to.

Clear distinctions should be maintained between personal and professional communication in the social networking environment.

The following pointers might be helpful to Church organisations which wish to engage in social networking on the wide variety of platforms available.

On public sites

Catholic Bishops around Australia have developed some presence on social networking sites such as MySpace and Facebook during recent years, and other Church personnel, members of the clergy or religious, might wish to also extend their engagement in this field. There are a number of options for setting up a profile on Facebook or MySpace which others working in Church might like to consider, based on these experiences.

- Some Bishops have elected to set up a public profile on Facebook, which displays them as a public figure – for example, the Archbishop of Canberra and Goulburn would be listed as a public figure, with a photo and information about his work and ministry. Those using these sites may wish to become a ‘fan’ of the Archbishop as a public figure. This can avoid some of the tensions which can come with accepting or denying ‘friend’ requests.
- Other Church personnel and some Bishops have chosen to set up a personal profile, and accept ‘friend’ requests which a personal profile requires. This allows some control over who appears as an associate on a page, but requires a more consistent engagement with the page.
- Those working in a youth ministry or other Church capacity which could involve social networking should seek permission

from their Bishop before engaging in this area – particularly if this involves ‘friending’ people to whom they minister.

- Clergy, Church workers or religious who use social networking sites in a professional capacity should keep this distinct from a private capacity and care should be taken in accepting or adding ‘friends’. There is great potential for a blurring of boundaries in the social networking field.
- Those Church organisations which wish to engage officially in social networking activities might choose to do so as a group, and start a page which can be administered by a number of people – for example, Darwin Youth Ministry might be the name given to the profile, rather than the name of one of the Youth Ministers in the Diocese as an appropriate way of setting boundaries in that ministry relationship. This system does not prevent Church workers from having their own personal profiles; it simply places a clear line between personal and work. This can also remove any ambiguity about friendship relationships or ministry relationships.
- Church groups and organisations – particularly those which are officially recognised as speaking for the Church on various matters, should be placed under the ‘Religious Organisations’ grouping on social networking sites and should clearly identify that they are members of or coordinators of the Official Group of the Diocese/Parish/Catholic organisation.
- The use of photographs or videos should be carefully monitored, and permissions should be sought from all who appear in photographs or videos before being posted or tagged. While in some public contexts, it can be assumed that people know they are being photographed to go on a website or a Facebook page; other situations might not be so obvious. Material should always be appropriate, and the sharing of embarrassing or offensive photos or videos should always be avoided.
- Church networking activities should be monitored by a third-party where possible, and where this is difficult, the Church worker should refer to underlying principles and teaching of the Church. Commentaries appearing on social networking sites of a rude or offensive nature or those which are vulgar or which could be interpreted as bullying should be immediately removed.

- Privacy should be of the utmost importance, and care should be taken to protect people, especially youth, from their personal information being displayed on a social networking site. This particularly refers to phone numbers, email addresses and date-of-birth.

Twitter

More and more, Twitter is being used in the news media, by celebrities and by organisations to promote events, to share information and to provide quick updates about various issues. By 'tweeting' a sentence or two about a Church website or event, potentially thousands could be pointed back to this information. Twitter is a free social networking tool, yet has the power to disseminate information quickly and efficiently. Like with all social networking engagement, Church entities should reflect carefully before posting on Twitter that their messages reflect Church teaching and Christ-centred principles.

Blogs

The Catholic Church is more and more engaged in the blogosphere, and the official Church recognises the influence of Blogs as a medium. Pope Benedict in 2011 encouraged bloggers to consider the importance of their message to the world as the measure of their success, and not just focus on the number of 'hits' they receive. 'We must be aware that the truth which we long to share does not derive its worth from its "popularity" or from the amount of attention it receives.'

Blogging is a conversational and reflective mode of communicating which is cost-effective and allows people to express their views in a relatively unmoderated forum. A number of priests, religious and lay people within Australia maintain excellent blogs which can be helpful for the promulgation of faith. Once again, Church workers should try to consistently represent the Church in a positive light and communicate evangelically using this medium.

YouTube

YouTube is an online video site which allows individuals and groups to post videos of up to 15 minutes on any topic. The Catholic Church has an extensive presence on YouTube in both official and non-official capacities. Like with all social networking, the use of YouTube or Vimeo can assist in the work of evangelisation and promotion of the activities of the Church. Church entities should ensure that all material posted on YouTube or other video-based sites is in accordance with Church teaching and respects human dignity. Ethical considerations should be applied when uploading content, and explicit or offensive material should be avoided at all times.

The Church's social networking sites

One of the gifts provided through World Youth Day 2008 was the foundation by the Archdiocese of Sydney of the faith-based social networking site, Xt3. While the website is more than simply a social network, it does contain many of the features of sites like Facebook and MySpace. The difference is its commitment to Christ-centred content. Xt3 contains portals for video; catechetical materials; homilies; blogs; sound and video. It also gives opportunities to ask questions of priests or chaplains about faith and life. The above guidelines on appropriate social networking behaviour are, of course, applicable to all social networking sites, including those which are faith-based.

The Digital divide

While the gifts of social networking are vast, it is important to remember in our engagement that the digital world is not exclusive. Social networking should never replace real relationships with people, and particularly in a ministry context efforts should be made to avoid solely digital relationships.

This is also important in the sense of retaining the Church's focus on the poor. The majority of the world still cannot afford a

computer, many have little access to educational possibilities and as such struggle with literacy; or perhaps they live in remote areas with limited access to technology. Hearing others talk about their social networking experiences can be profoundly isolating for those unable to take part.

Pope Benedict XVI's message for the World Day of Communications reiterates this:

'As with every other fruit of human ingenuity, the new communications technologies must be placed at the service of the integral good of the individual and of the whole of humanity. If used wisely, they can contribute to the satisfaction of the desire for meaning, truth and unity which remain the most profound aspirations of each human being.'

Ultimately, while there are many strengths and much to be gained from social networking, it should be just one of a variety of means we might use in our Church organisations to bring about a message of Christ in the world.

Social-Media Guidelines

*Department of Communications
United States Conference of Catholic Bishops
June 2010*

<http://www.usccb.org/about/communications/social-media-guidelines.cfm>

Introduction

These guidelines are offered as a synthesis of best practices. They include material compiled from church entities, for-profit corporations, and non-profit organizations.

In this document, “church personnel” is defined as anyone—priest, deacon, religious, bishop, lay employee, or volunteer—who provides ministry or service or is employed by an entity associated with the Catholic Church.

Guiding Principles

The world of digital communication, with its almost limitless expressive capacity, makes us appreciate all the more Saint Paul’s exclamation: “Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel” (1 Cor 9:16).—Pope Benedict XVI, 44th World Communications Day message (2010)

Social media are the fastest growing form of communication in the United States, especially among youth and young adults. Our Church cannot ignore it, but at the same time we must engage social media in a manner that is safe, responsible, and civil.

As Pope Benedict XVI noted in his message for the 44th World Communications Day (2010), this new form of media “can offer priests and all pastoral workers a wealth of information and content that was difficult to access before, and facilitate forms of collaboration and greater communion in ways that were unthinkable in the past.”

The Church can use social media to encourage respect, dialogue, and honest relationships—in other words, “true friendship” (43rd World Communications Day message [2009]). To do so requires us to approach social media as powerful means of evangelization and to consider the Church’s role in providing a Christian perspective on digital literacy.

Before beginning work on social media guidelines, you may want to read both the 43rd and 44th World Communications Day messages.

The Church and Social Media: An Overview

The online encyclopedia Wikipedia defines social media as “media designed to be disseminated through social interaction, using highly accessible and scalable publishing techniques. Social media use web-based technologies to transform and broadcast media monologues into social media dialogues.”

A longer and perhaps more philosophical definition is offered by Jon Lebkowsky, a longtime social media specialist, on his site, weblogsky.com:

Social Media is a fundamental transformation in the way(s) people find and use information and content, from hard news to light entertainment. It’s an evolution from broadcast delivery of content—content created by a few and distributed to many—to network delivery, where content can be created by anyone and published to everyone, in a context that is “many to many.” Said another way, publication and delivery by professionals to mass audiences has changed—now publication and delivery can be by anyone, professional or not, to niche audiences through networks of many channels. This is because the means of production are broadly accessible and inexpensive.

As a result of all this, attention and mindshare are fragmented, there’s emphasis on relationship, new forms of media are

conversational, and transaction costs for communication approach zero.

Social media offer both opportunities and challenges to Catholic organizations. These can be grouped into three primary categories:

- Visibility
- Community
- Accountability

Visibility

Online social media communities are vast and are growing at a rapid pace. For example, there are more than 400 million active users on Facebook, which is greater than the population of the United States. Given the size and scope of these communities, they offer excellent forums for the Church's visibility and evangelization.

The key question that faces each church organization that decides to engage social media is, How will we engage? Careful consideration should be made to determine the particular strengths of each form of social media (blogs, social networks, text messaging, etc.) and the needs of a ministry, parish, or organization. The strengths should match the needs. For instance, a blog post may not be the most effective way to remind students of an event. However, a mass text message to all students and their parents telling them that the retreat begins at 9 a.m. may be very effective.

Because of the high volume of content and sites, and the dynamics of search engines and computer networking, social media require constant input and monitoring to make the Church's presence effective. To keep members, a social networking site, such as a blog, needs to have new content on a regular basis. In the case of social media, the axiom "build it and they will come" is not applicable. It is important to set internal

expectations regarding how often posts will be made, so that your followers can become accustomed to your schedule.

Community

Social media can be powerful tools for strengthening community, although social media interaction should not be viewed as a substitute for face-to-face gatherings. Social media can support communities in a myriad of ways: connecting people with similar interests, sharing information about in-person events, providing ways for people to engage in dialogue, etc.

A well-considered use of social media has the ultimate goal of encouraging “true friendship” (43rd World Communications Day message [2009]) and of addressing the human longing for meaningful community.

Accountability

Social media provide tools for building community. Membership in communities also requires accountability and responsibility. Users of social media expect site administrators to allow dialogue, to provide information, and to acknowledge mistakes. The explosion of information available to social media consumers has meant that they often only use information from trusted sites or sites recommended by those whom they trust.

While not every demand or inquiry can be met, it is important that creators and site administrators of social media understand how much social media are different from mass media and the expectations of their consumers. Creators and consumers of mass media generally accept their one-way conversations (letters to the editor being the exception). Social media’s emphasis is on the word “social,” with a general blurring of the distinction between creators of content and consumers of content. Many communication experts are describing the adaptation of social media as a paradigm shift in how humans communicate, a

development as important as that of the printing press and the discovery of electronic communication.

Definitions

Definitions provide clarity and a common language. They are even more important in guidelines for social media, since the usage of terms is rapidly evolving.

✓ Web 2.0:

The term “Web 2.0” is commonly associated with Web applications that facilitate interactive information sharing. A Web 2.0 site allows its users to interact with other users, to change website content, to provide reaction to content, to share the site’s content with others, or to filter content being provided by the site creator. This is in contrast with non-interactive websites, where users are limited to the passive viewing of information that is provided to them. * Example: Amazon.com’s inclusion of users’ reviews and offering of recommendations based on the consumer’s past use of the site make it a Web 2.0 site.

✓ Blog:

A blog (a contraction of the term “web log”) is a type of website, usually maintained by an individual, with regular entries of commentary, descriptions of events, or other material such as graphics or video. Entries are commonly displayed in reverse-chronological order. “Blog” can also be used as a verb, meaning to maintain or add content to a blog. * Examples: There are many types of blogs on sites throughout the Internet. They are common for celebrities, writers, journalists, etc. WordPress is one of the more popular tools used to create blogs.

✓ Micro-blog:

This form of multimedia blogging allows users to send brief text updates or to publish micromedia such as photos or audio clips, to be viewed either by anyone or by a restricted group, which can be chosen by the user. These messages can be submitted by a

variety of means, including text messaging, instant messaging, e-mail, digital audio, or through a Web interface. The content of a micro-blog differs from a traditional blog in that it is typically smaller in actual size and aggregate file size. A single entry could consist of a single sentence or fragment, an image, or a ten-second video. * Example: Twitter is a form of micro-blogging in which entries are limited to 140 characters.

✓ Social network:

A social network is a Web 2.0 site that is entirely driven by content of its members. Individuals are allowed flexibility in privacy settings; in posting text, photos, video, links, and other information; and in level of interaction with other members. * Examples: Facebook, LinkedIn, MySpace, Twitter, YouTube, and Flickr are often included in lists of social networking sites, although sometimes YouTube and Flickr are designated as multimedia sharing sites, while Twitter is currently more often designated as a micro-blogging application.

✓ Ministry website:

An Internet website/tool created by employees, clerics, and volunteers for the sole purpose of conducting diocesan/affiliate business.

✓ Personal website:

A social network page, blog, or any Internet website/tool created by employees, clerics, and volunteers primarily to share personal communication with friends and associates.

Guidelines

When developing guidelines for church personnel to use social media, consider including the following elements:

Define appropriate boundaries for communications

These should be in sync with diocesan codes of conduct for other areas, such as the diocese's standards for protection of children

and young people, Internet acceptable use policies, etc. Define what is considered confidential information, verifiable consent, personal identifiable information, contact with a minor, etc. Topics that are in current debate will generate more comments/responses. These include issues in which the Church's teachings are often in contrast to some popular positions (gay rights, abortion, immigration reform, health care reform). In other words, the Church's social justice teachings, including the pro-life aspects of those teachings, often elicit unfavorable comments. Some people determine that those topics will not be engaged with on official sites. Others provide guidance on how to engage in dialogue around these topics. (See "Rules of the Road" below for examples.)

Include examples of Codes of Conduct

that should be posted on social networking sites. Codes of Conduct are for visitors to the site. These codes should always be brief and immediately apparent to visitors. Visitors should also be made aware of the consequences of violations of the Code of Conduct. The Code of Conduct on the USCCB's Facebook site is as follows: "All posts and comments should be marked by Christian charity and respect for the truth. They should be on topic and presume the good will of other posters. Discussion should take place primarily from a faith perspective. No ads please." Always block anyone who does not abide by the Code of Conduct.

Define instructions

Include instructions on how to report, block, etc., on the more popular social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter. This provides guidance for those church personnel who may be entering into social media for the first time.

Provide recommendations on how to deal with difficult “fans.”

Give church personnel permission to trust their instincts on blocking repeat offenders of a site’s Code of Conduct. Argumentative participants can easily change the tone of every post. A good way to determine if they should be blocked is to go to their profiles and browse through the pages that they have “fanned.” Do not allow those unwilling to dialogue to hold your site and its other members hostage. In particular situations, the moderator might determine it is best to ask a member to take a conversation “offline.” These offline conversations can be conducted in person, over the telephone, or through private e-mail. The site moderators should be able to refer to the appropriate resources, such as the pastor, program director, diocesan communication office, etc.

Provide trusted sites for reference, and recommend that site administrators have a thorough knowledge of these sites.

Often a link to the parish, diocesan, USCCB, or Vatican site can provide necessary information, thereby helping redirect the tone and substance of an online conversation.

Remind site administrators they are posting for a broad audience.

Social media are global platforms. Online content is visible to anyone in the world who comes to their sites.

Establishing a Site

Websites or social networking profile pages are the centerpiece of any social media activity. The following are recommended guidelines for the establishment of a site. These can apply to a profile or fan page on a social networking site such as Facebook, a blog, a Twitter account, etc.

- Site administrators should be adults.

- There should be at least two site administrators (preferably more) for each site, to allow rapid response and continuous monitoring of the site.
- Do not use personal sites for diocesan or parish programs. Create separate sites for these.
- Passwords and names of sites should be registered in a central location, and more than one adult should have access to this information.
- Be sure those establishing a site know these key “Rules of the Road”:
 1. Abide by diocesan/parish guidelines.
 2. Know that even personal communication by church personnel reflects the Church. Practice what you preach.
 3. Write in first person. Do not claim to represent the official position of the organization or the teachings of the Church, unless authorized to do so.
 4. Identify yourself. Do not use pseudonyms or the name of the parish, program, etc., as your identity, unless authorized to do so.
 5. Abide by copyright, fair use, and IRS financial disclosure regulations.
 6. Do not divulge confidential information about others. Nothing posted on the Internet is private.
 7. Don't cite others, post photos or videos of them, link to their material, etc., without their approval.
 8. Practice Christian charity.

Social Networking with Minors

Be sure to have permission from a minor's parent or guardian before contacting the minor via social media or before posting pictures, video, and other information that may identify that minor.

Parents must have access to everything provided to their children. For example, parents should be made aware of how

social media are being used, be told how to access the sites, and be given the opportunity to be copied on all material sent to their children via social networking (including text messages). While parents should be provided with the same material as their children, it does not have to be via the same technology (that is, if children receive a reminder via Twitter, parents can receive it in a printed form or by an e-mail list).

Church personnel should be encouraged to save copies of conversations whenever possible, especially those that concern the personal sharing of a teen or young adult. (This may be especially important with text messaging.)

Make everyone aware of the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act which is federal legislation that oversees how websites interact with children under age 13.

Personal Sites

Personal sites of church personnel should also reflect Catholic values. Businesses are cautioning their employees that, while employees have a right to privacy and confidentiality regarding what their employers know about them, an employee's use of social networking—because of its very nature—means he or she relinquishes some privacy and could be construed as representing the company's ethics and values. Likewise, church personnel should be encouraged to understand that they are witnessing to the faith through all of their social networking, whether "public" or "private."

Many employers and church organizations ask their personnel to consider including a disclaimer on their personal sites, especially if employees/church personnel are highly visible in the community and/or post material related to church work/ministry on their personal sites. One example: "The views expressed on this site are mine alone and do not necessarily reflect the views of my employer."

How to Report and Monitor

Ask church personnel to report unofficial sites that carry the diocesan or parish logo to the diocesan communication office or pastor. It is important that the owner (the diocese or the parish) is able to protect its brand and identity.

Inform church personnel whom to contact on the diocesan level (most likely the communication office) if they find misinformation on a site. This is especially important when responding to an incorrect wiki, such as Wikipedia, Masstimes.org, etc.

Have a clear policy on whether diocesan personnel should be expected to respond to defamatory, libelous, or slanderous comments—not original postings, but comments—on a site, such as a blog. Some policies indicate that the diocesan communication office will provide a response to a major news outlet's blog or a popular blogger, but not to every comment on those blogs or to other bloggers.

Consider posting these and similar policies and notices on your organization's social networks.

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*MESSAGE OF THE HOLY FATHER
BENEDICT XVI
FOR THE 42nd WORLD COMMUNICATIONS DAY 2008*

“The Media: at the Crossroads between self-promotion and service: searching for the truth in order to share it with others.”

Dear Brothers and Sisters!

1. The theme of this year’s World Communications Day – “The Media: At the Crossroads between Self-Promotion and Service. Searching for the Truth in order to Share it with Others” – sheds light on the important role of the media in the life of individuals and society. Truly, there is no area of human experience, especially given the vast phenomenon of globalization, in which the media have not become an integral part of interpersonal relations and of social, economic, political and religious development. As I said in my Message for this year’s World Day of Peace (1 January 2008): “The social communications media, in particular, because of their educational potential, have a special responsibility for promoting respect for the family, making clear its expectations and rights, and presenting all its beauty” (No. 5).

2. In view of their meteoric technological evolution, the media have acquired extraordinary potential, while raising new and hitherto unimaginable questions and problems. There is no denying the contribution they can make to the diffusion of news, to knowledge of facts and to the dissemination of information: they have played a decisive part, for example, in the spread of literacy and in socialization, as well as the development of democracy and dialogue among peoples. Without their contribution it would truly be difficult to foster and strengthen understanding between nations, to breathe life into peace

dialogues around the globe, to guarantee the primary good of access to information, while at the same time ensuring the free circulation of ideas, especially those promoting the ideals of solidarity and social justice. Indeed, the media, taken overall, are not only vehicles for spreading ideas: they can and should also be instruments at the service of a world of greater justice and solidarity. Unfortunately, though, they risk being transformed into systems aimed at subjecting humanity to agendas dictated by the dominant interests of the day. This is what happens when communication is used for ideological purposes or for the aggressive advertising of consumer products. While claiming to represent reality, it can tend to legitimize or impose distorted models of personal, family or social life. Moreover, in order to attract listeners and increase the size of audiences, it does not hesitate at times to have recourse to vulgarity and violence, and to overstep the mark. The media can also present and support models of development which serve to increase rather than reduce the technological divide between rich and poor countries.

3. Humanity today is at a crossroads. One could properly apply to the media what I wrote in the Encyclical *Spe Salvi* concerning the ambiguity of progress, which offers new possibilities for good, but at the same time opens up appalling possibilities for evil that formerly did not exist (cf. No. 22). We must ask, therefore, whether it is wise to allow the instruments of social communication to be exploited for indiscriminate “self-promotion” or to end up in the hands of those who use them to manipulate consciences. Should it not be a priority to ensure that they remain at the service of the person and of the common good, and that they foster “man’s ethical formation ... man’s inner growth” (ibid.)? Their extraordinary impact on the lives of individuals and on society is widely acknowledged, yet today it is necessary to stress the radical shift, one might even say the complete change of role, that they are currently undergoing. Today, communication seems increasingly to claim not simply to

represent reality, but to determine it, owing to the power and the force of suggestion that it possesses. It is clear, for example, that in certain situations the media are used not for the proper purpose of disseminating information, but to “create” events. This dangerous change in function has been noted with concern by many Church leaders. Precisely because we are dealing with realities that have a profound effect on all those dimensions of human life (moral, intellectual, religious, relational, affective, cultural) in which the good of the person is at stake, we must stress that not everything that is technically possible is also ethically permissible. Hence, the impact of the communications media on modern life raises unavoidable questions, which require choices and solutions that can no longer be deferred.

4. The role that the means of social communication have acquired in society must now be considered an integral part of the “anthropological” question that is emerging as the key challenge of the third millennium. Just as we see happening in areas such as human life, marriage and the family, and in the great contemporary issues of peace, justice and protection of creation, so too in the sector of social communications there are essential dimensions of the human person and the truth concerning the human person coming into play. When communication loses its ethical underpinning and eludes society’s control, it ends up no longer taking into account the centrality and inviolable dignity of the human person. As a result it risks exercising a negative influence on people’s consciences and choices and definitively conditioning their freedom and their very lives. For this reason it is essential that social communications should assiduously defend the person and fully respect human dignity. Many people now think there is a need, in this sphere, for “info-ethics”, just as we have bioethics in the field of medicine and in scientific research linked to life.

5. The media must avoid becoming spokesmen for economic materialism and ethical relativism, true scourges of our time.

Instead, they can and must contribute to making known the truth about humanity, and defending it against those who tend to deny or destroy it. One might even say that seeking and presenting the truth about humanity constitutes the highest vocation of social communication. Utilizing for this purpose the many refined and engaging techniques that the media have at their disposal is an exciting task, entrusted in the first place to managers and operators in the sector. Yet it is a task which to some degree concerns us all, because we are all consumers and operators of social communications in this era of globalization. The new media – telecommunications and internet in particular – are changing the very face of communication; perhaps this is a valuable opportunity to reshape it, to make more visible, as my venerable predecessor Pope John Paul II said, the essential and indispensable elements of the truth about the human person (cf. Apostolic Letter *The Rapid Development*, 10).

6. Man thirsts for truth, he seeks truth; this fact is illustrated by the attention and the success achieved by so many publications, programmes or quality fiction in which the truth, beauty and greatness of the person, including the religious dimension of the person, are acknowledged and favourably presented. Jesus said: “You will know the truth and the truth will make you free” (Jn 8:32). The truth which makes us free is Christ, because only he can respond fully to the thirst for life and love that is present in the human heart. Those who have encountered him and have enthusiastically welcomed his message experience the irrepressible desire to share and communicate this truth. As Saint John writes, “That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life ... we proclaim also to you, so that you may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. And we are writing this that our joy may be complete” (1 Jn 1:1-3).

Let us ask the Holy Spirit to raise up courageous communicators and authentic witnesses to the truth, faithful to Christ's mandate and enthusiastic for the message of the faith, communicators who will "interpret modern cultural needs, committing themselves to approaching the communications age not as a time of alienation and confusion, but as a valuable time for the quest for the truth and for developing communion between persons and peoples" (John Paul II, Address to the Conference for those working in Communications and Culture, 9 November 2002).

With these wishes, I cordially impart my Blessing to all.

From the Vatican, 24 January 2008,

Feast of Saint Francis de Sales.

BENEDICTUS XVI

*MESSAGE OF THE HOLY FATHER
BENEDICT XVI
FOR THE 43rd WORLD COMMUNICATIONS DAY 2009*

**“New Technologies, New Relationships:
Promoting a culture of respect, dialogue and
friendship.”**

Dear Brothers and Sisters!

In anticipation of the forthcoming World Communications Day, I would like to address to you some reflections on the theme chosen for this year - New Technologies, New Relationships: Promoting a culture of Respect, Dialogue and Friendship. The new digital technologies are, indeed, bringing about fundamental shifts in patterns of communication and human relationships. These changes are particularly evident among those young people who have grown up with the new technologies and are at home in a digital world that often seems quite foreign to those of us who, as adults, have had to learn to understand and appreciate the opportunities it has to offer for communications. In this year's message, I am conscious of those who constitute the so-called digital generation and I would like to share with them, in particular, some ideas concerning the extraordinary potential of the new technologies, if they are used to promote human understanding and solidarity. These technologies are truly a gift to humanity and we must endeavour to ensure that the benefits they offer are put at the service of all human individuals and communities, especially those who are most disadvantaged and vulnerable.

The accessibility of mobile telephones and computers, combined with the global reach and penetration of the internet, has opened up a range of means of communication that permit the almost instantaneous communication of words and images across

enormous distances and to some of the most isolated corners of the world; something that would have been unthinkable for previous generations. Young people, in particular, have grasped the enormous capacity of the new media to foster connectedness, communication and understanding between individuals and communities, and they are turning to them as means of communicating with existing friends, of meeting new friends, of forming communities and networks, of seeking information and news, and of sharing their ideas and opinions. Many benefits flow from this new culture of communication: families are able to maintain contact across great distances; students and researchers have more immediate and easier access to documents, sources and scientific discoveries, hence they can work collaboratively from different locations; moreover, the interactive nature of many of the new media facilitates more dynamic forms of learning and communication, thereby contributing to social progress.

While the speed with which the new technologies have evolved in terms of their efficiency and reliability is rightly a source of wonder, their popularity with users should not surprise us, as they respond to a fundamental desire of people to communicate and to relate to each other. This desire for communication and friendship is rooted in our very nature as human beings and cannot be adequately understood as a response to technical innovations. In the light of the biblical message, it should be seen primarily as a reflection of our participation in the communicative and unifying Love of God, who desires to make of all humanity one family. When we find ourselves drawn towards other people, when we want to know more about them and make ourselves known to them, we are responding to God's call - a call that is imprinted in our nature as beings created in the image and likeness of God, the God of communication and communion.

The desire for connectedness and the instinct for communication that are so obvious in contemporary culture are best understood

as modern manifestations of the basic and enduring propensity of humans to reach beyond themselves and to seek communion with others. In reality, when we open ourselves to others, we are fulfilling our deepest need and becoming more fully human. Loving is, in fact, what we are designed for by our Creator. Naturally, I am not talking about fleeting, shallow relationships, I am talking about the real love that is at the very heart of Jesus' moral teaching: "You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength" and "You must love your neighbour as yourself" (cf. Mk 12:30-31). In this light, reflecting on the significance of the new technologies, it is important to focus not just on their undoubted capacity to foster contact between people, but on the quality of the content that is put into circulation using these means. I would encourage all people of good will who are active in the emerging environment of digital communication to commit themselves to promoting a culture of respect, dialogue and friendship.

Those who are active in the production and dissemination of new media content, therefore, should strive to respect the dignity and worth of the human person. If the new technologies are to serve the good of individuals and of society, all users will avoid the sharing of words and images that are degrading of human beings, that promote hatred and intolerance, that debase the goodness and intimacy of human sexuality or that exploit the weak and vulnerable.

The new technologies have also opened the way for dialogue between people from different countries, cultures and religions. The new digital arena, the so-called cyberspace, allows them to encounter and to know each other's traditions and values. Such encounters, if they are to be fruitful, require honest and appropriate forms of expression together with attentive and respectful listening. The dialogue must be rooted in a genuine and mutual searching for truth if it is to realize its potential to promote growth in understanding and tolerance. Life is not just a

succession of events or experiences: it is a search for the true, the good and the beautiful. It is to this end that we make our choices; it is for this that we exercise our freedom; it is in this - in truth, in goodness, and in beauty - that we find happiness and joy. We must not allow ourselves to be deceived by those who see us merely as consumers in a market of undifferentiated possibilities, where choice itself becomes the good, novelty usurps beauty, and subjective experience displaces truth.

The concept of friendship has enjoyed a renewed prominence in the vocabulary of the new digital social networks that have emerged in the last few years. The concept is one of the noblest achievements of human culture. It is in and through our friendships that we grow and develop as humans. For this reason, true friendship has always been seen as one of the greatest goods any human person can experience. We should be careful, therefore, never to trivialize the concept or the experience of friendship. It would be sad if our desire to sustain and develop on-line friendships were to be at the cost of our availability to engage with our families, our neighbours and those we meet in the daily reality of our places of work, education and recreation. If the desire for virtual connectedness becomes obsessive, it may in fact function to isolate individuals from real social interaction while also disrupting the patterns of rest, silence and reflection that are necessary for healthy human development.

Friendship is a great human good, but it would be emptied of its ultimate value if it were to be understood as an end in itself. Friends should support and encourage each other in developing their gifts and talents and in putting them at the service of the human community. In this context, it is gratifying to note the emergence of new digital networks that seek to promote human solidarity, peace and justice, human rights and respect for human life and the good of creation. These networks can facilitate forms of co-operation between people from different geographical and cultural contexts that enable them to deepen their common

humanity and their sense of shared responsibility for the good of all. We must, therefore, strive to ensure that the digital world, where such networks can be established, is a world that is truly open to all. It would be a tragedy for the future of humanity if the new instruments of communication, which permit the sharing of knowledge and information in a more rapid and effective manner, were not made accessible to those who are already economically and socially marginalized, or if it should contribute only to increasing the gap separating the poor from the new networks that are developing at the service of human socialization and information.

I would like to conclude this message by addressing myself, in particular, to young Catholic believers: to encourage them to bring the witness of their faith to the digital world. Dear Brothers and Sisters, I ask you to introduce into the culture of this new environment of communications and information technology the values on which you have built your lives. In the early life of the Church, the great Apostles and their disciples brought the Good News of Jesus to the Greek and Roman world. Just as, at that time, a fruitful evangelization required that careful attention be given to understanding the culture and customs of those pagan peoples so that the truth of the gospel would touch their hearts and minds, so also today, the proclamation of Christ in the world of new technologies requires a profound knowledge of this world if the technologies are to serve our mission adequately. It falls, in particular, to young people, who have an almost spontaneous affinity for the new means of communication, to take on the responsibility for the evangelization of this “digital continent”. Be sure to announce the Gospel to your contemporaries with enthusiasm. You know their fears and their hopes, their aspirations and their disappointments: the greatest gift you can give to them is to share with them the “Good News” of a God who became man, who suffered, died and rose again to save all people. Human hearts are yearning for a world where love

endures, where gifts are shared, where unity is built, where freedom finds meaning in truth, and where identity is found in respectful communion. Our faith can respond to these expectations: may you become its heralds! The Pope accompanies you with his prayers and his blessing.

From the Vatican, 24 January 2009,
Feast of Saint Francis de Sales.

BENEDICTUS XVI

*MESSAGE OF HIS HOLINESS
POPE BENEDICT XVI
FOR THE 44th WORLD COMMUNICATIONS DAY 2010*

**“The Priest and Pastoral Ministry in a Digital World:
New Media at the Service of the Word”**

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

The theme of this year’s World Communications Day - The Priest and Pastoral Ministry in a Digital World: New Media at the Service of the Word – is meant to coincide with the Church’s celebration of the Year for Priests. It focuses attention on the important and sensitive pastoral area of digital communications, in which priests can discover new possibilities for carrying out their ministry to and for the Word of God. Church communities have always used the modern media for fostering communication, engagement with society, and, increasingly, for encouraging dialogue at a wider level. Yet the recent, explosive growth and greater social impact of these media make them all the more important for a fruitful priestly ministry.

All priests have as their primary duty the proclamation of Jesus Christ, the incarnate Word of God, and the communication of his saving grace in the sacraments. Gathered and called by the Word, the Church is the sign and instrument of the communion that God creates with all people, and every priest is called to build up this communion, in Christ and with Christ. Such is the lofty dignity and beauty of the mission of the priest, which responds in a special way to the challenge raised by the Apostle Paul: “The Scripture says, ‘No one who believes in him will be put to shame ... everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.’ But how can they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how can they believe in him of whom they have not heard? And

how can they hear without someone to preach? And how can people preach unless they are sent? (Rom 10:11, 13-15).

Responding adequately to this challenge amid today's cultural shifts, to which young people are especially sensitive, necessarily involves using new communications technologies. The world of digital communication, with its almost limitless expressive capacity, makes us appreciate all the more Saint Paul's exclamation: "Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel" (1 Cor 9:16) The increased availability of the new technologies demands greater responsibility on the part of those called to proclaim the Word, but it also requires them to become become more focused, efficient and compelling in their efforts. Priests stand at the threshold of a new era: as new technologies create deeper forms of relationship across greater distances, they are called to respond pastorally by putting the media ever more effectively at the service of the Word.

The spread of multimedia communications and its rich "menu of options" might make us think it sufficient simply to be present on the Web, or to see it only as a space to be filled. Yet priests can rightly be expected to be present in the world of digital communications as faithful witnesses to the Gospel, exercising their proper role as leaders of communities which increasingly express themselves with the different "voices" provided by the digital marketplace. Priests are thus challenged to proclaim the Gospel by employing the latest generation of audiovisual resources (images, videos, animated features, blogs, websites) which, alongside traditional means, can open up broad new vistas for dialogue, evangelization and catechesis.

Using new communication technologies, priests can introduce people to the life of the Church and help our contemporaries to discover the face of Christ. They will best achieve this aim if they learn, from the time of their formation, how to use these technologies in a competent and appropriate way, shaped by sound theological insights and reflecting a strong priestly

spirituality grounded in constant dialogue with the Lord. Yet priests present in the world of digital communications should be less notable for their media savvy than for their priestly heart, their closeness to Christ. This will not only enliven their pastoral outreach, but also will give a “soul” to the fabric of communications that makes up the “Web”.

God’s loving care for all people in Christ must be expressed in the digital world not simply as an artifact from the past, or a learned theory, but as something concrete, present and engaging. Our pastoral presence in that world must thus serve to show our contemporaries, especially the many people in our day who experience uncertainty and confusion, “that God is near; that in Christ we all belong to one another” (Benedict XVI, Address to the Roman Curia, 21 December 2009).

Who better than a priest, as a man of God, can develop and put into practice, by his competence in current digital technology, a pastoral outreach capable of making God concretely present in today’s world and presenting the religious wisdom of the past as a treasure which can inspire our efforts to live in the present with dignity while building a better future? Consecrated men and women working in the media have a special responsibility for opening the door to new forms of encounter, maintaining the quality of human interaction, and showing concern for individuals and their genuine spiritual needs. They can thus help the men and women of our digital age to sense the Lord’s presence, to grow in expectation and hope, and to draw near to the Word of God which offers salvation and fosters an integral human development. In this way the Word can traverse the many crossroads created by the intersection of all the different “highways” that form “cyberspace”, and show that God has his rightful place in every age, including our own. Thanks to the new communications media, the Lord can walk the streets of our cities and, stopping before the threshold of our homes and our hearts, say once more: “Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone

hears my voice and opens the door, I will enter his house and dine with him, and he with me” (Rev 3:20).

In my Message last year, I encouraged leaders in the world of communications to promote a culture of respect for the dignity and value of the human person. This is one of the ways in which the Church is called to exercise a “diaconia of culture” on today’s “digital continent”. With the Gospels in our hands and in our hearts, we must reaffirm the need to continue preparing ways that lead to the Word of God, while being at the same time constantly attentive to those who continue to seek; indeed, we should encourage their seeking as a first step of evangelization. A pastoral presence in the world of digital communications, precisely because it brings us into contact with the followers of other religions, non-believers and people of every culture, requires sensitivity to those who do not believe, the disheartened and those who have a deep, unarticulated desire for enduring truth and the absolute. Just as the prophet Isaiah envisioned a house of prayer for all peoples (cf. Is 56:7), can we not see the web as also offering a space – like the “Court of the Gentiles” of the Temple of Jerusalem – for those who have not yet come to know God?

The development of the new technologies and the larger digital world represents a great resource for humanity as a whole and for every individual, and it can act as a stimulus to encounter and dialogue. But this development likewise represents a great opportunity for believers. No door can or should be closed to those who, in the name of the risen Christ, are committed to drawing near to others. To priests in particular the new media offer ever new and far-reaching pastoral possibilities, encouraging them to embody the universality of the Church’s mission, to build a vast and real fellowship, and to testify in today’s world to the new life which comes from hearing the Gospel of Jesus, the eternal Son who came among us for our salvation. At the same time, priests must always bear in mind that

the ultimate fruitfulness of their ministry comes from Christ himself, encountered and listened to in prayer; proclaimed in preaching and lived witness; and known, loved and celebrated in the sacraments, especially the Holy Eucharist and Reconciliation.

To my dear brother priests, then, I renew the invitation to make astute use of the unique possibilities offered by modern communications. May the Lord make all of you enthusiastic heralds of the Gospel in the new “agorà” which the current media are opening up.

With this confidence, I invoke upon you the protection of the Mother of God and of the Holy Curè of Ars and, with affection, I impart to each of you my Apostolic Blessing.

From the Vatican, 24 January 2010,
Feast of Saint Francis de Sales.

BENEDICTUS XVI

*MESSAGE OF HIS HOLINESS
POPE BENEDICT XVI
FOR THE 45th WORLD COMMUNICATIONS DAY 2011*

Truth, Proclamation and Authenticity of Life in the Digital Age

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

On the occasion of the 45th World Day of Social Communications, I would like to share some reflections that are motivated by a phenomenon characteristic of our age: the emergence of the internet as a network for communication. It is an ever more commonly held opinion that, just as the Industrial Revolution in its day brought about a profound transformation in society by the modifications it introduced into the cycles of production and the lives of workers, so today the radical changes taking place in communications are guiding significant cultural and social developments. The new technologies are not only changing the way we communicate, but communication itself, so much so that it could be said that we are living through a period of vast cultural transformation. 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.

New horizons are now open that were until recently unimaginable; they stir our wonder at the possibilities offered by these new media and, at the same time, urgently demand a serious reflection on the significance of communication in the digital age. This is particularly evident when we are confronted with the extraordinary potential of the internet and the complexity of its uses. As with every other fruit of human ingenuity, the new communications technologies must be placed

at the service of the integral good of the individual and of the whole of humanity. If used wisely, they can contribute to the satisfaction of the desire for meaning, truth and unity which remain the most profound aspirations of each human being.

In the digital world, transmitting information increasingly means making it known within a social network where knowledge is shared in the context of personal exchanges. The clear distinction between the producer and consumer of information is relativized and communication appears not only as an exchange of data, but also as a form of sharing. This dynamic has contributed to a new appreciation of communication itself, which is seen first of all as dialogue, exchange, solidarity and the creation of positive relations. On the other hand, this is contrasted with the limits typical of digital communication: the one-sidedness of the interaction, the tendency to communicate only some parts of one's interior world, the risk of constructing a false image of oneself, which can become a form of self-indulgence.

Young people in particular are experiencing this change in communication, with all the anxieties, challenges and creativity typical of those open with enthusiasm and curiosity to new experiences in life. Their ever greater involvement in the public digital forum, created by the so-called social networks, helps to establish new forms of interpersonal relations, influences self-awareness and therefore inevitably poses questions not only of how to act properly, but also about the authenticity of one's own being. Entering cyberspace can be a sign of an authentic search for personal encounters with others, provided that attention is paid to avoiding dangers such as enclosing oneself in a sort of parallel existence, or excessive exposure to the virtual world. In the search for sharing, for "friends", there is the challenge to be authentic and faithful, and not give in to the illusion of constructing an artificial public profile for oneself.

The new technologies allow people to meet each other beyond the confines of space and of their own culture, creating in this way

an entirely new world of potential friendships. This is a great opportunity, but it also requires greater attention to and awareness of possible risks. Who is my “neighbour” in this new world? Does the danger exist that we may be less present to those whom we encounter in our everyday life? Is there a risk of being more distracted because our attention is fragmented and absorbed in a world “other” than the one in which we live? Do we have time to reflect critically on our choices and to foster human relationships which are truly deep and lasting? It is important always to remember that virtual contact cannot and must not take the place of direct human contact with people at every level of our lives.

In the digital age too, everyone is confronted by the need for authenticity and reflection. Besides, the dynamic inherent in the social networks demonstrates that a person is always involved in what he or she communicates. When people exchange information, they are already sharing themselves, their view of the world, their hopes, their ideals. It follows that there exists a Christian way of being present in the digital world: this takes the form of a communication which is honest and open, responsible and respectful of others. To proclaim the Gospel through the new media means not only to insert expressly religious content into different media platforms, but also to witness consistently, in one’s own digital profile and in the way one communicates choices, preferences and judgements that are fully consistent with the Gospel, even when it is not spoken of specifically. Furthermore, it is also true in the digital world that a message cannot be proclaimed without a consistent witness on the part of the one who proclaims it. In these new circumstances and with these new forms of expression, Christians are once again called to offer a response to anyone who asks for a reason for the hope that is within them (cf. 1 Pet 3:15).

The task of witnessing to the Gospel in the digital era calls for everyone to be particularly attentive to the aspects of that

message which can challenge some of the ways of thinking typical of the web. First of all, we must be aware that the truth which 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. The truth of the Gospel is not something to be consumed or used superficially; rather it is a gift that calls for a free response. Even when it is proclaimed in the virtual space of the web, the Gospel demands to be incarnated in the real world and linked to the real faces of our brothers and sisters, those with whom we share our daily lives. Direct human relations always remain fundamental for the transmission of the faith!

I would like then to invite Christians, confidently and with an informed and responsible creativity, to join the network of relationships which the digital era has made possible. This is not simply to satisfy the desire to be present, but because this network is an integral part of human life. The web is contributing to the development of new and more complex intellectual and spiritual horizons, new forms of shared awareness. In this field too we are called to proclaim our faith that Christ is God, the Saviour of humanity and of history, the one in whom all things find their fulfilment (cf. Eph 1:10). The proclamation of the Gospel requires a communication which is at once respectful and sensitive, which stimulates the heart and moves the conscience; one which reflects the example of the risen Jesus when he joined the disciples on the way to Emmaus (cf. Lk 24:13-35). By his approach to them, his dialogue with them, his way of gently drawing forth what was in their heart, they were led gradually to an understanding of the mystery.

In the final analysis, the truth of Christ is the full and authentic response to that human desire for relationship, communion and meaning which is reflected in the immense popularity of social networks. Believers who bear witness to their most profound

convictions greatly help prevent the web from becoming an instrument which depersonalizes people, attempts to manipulate them emotionally or allows those who are powerful to monopolize the opinions of others. On the contrary, believers encourage everyone to keep alive the eternal human questions which testify to our desire for transcendence and our longing for authentic forms of life, truly worthy of being lived. It is precisely this uniquely human spiritual yearning which inspires our quest for truth and for communion and which impels us to communicate with integrity and honesty.

I invite young people above all to make good use of their presence in the digital world. I repeat my invitation to them for the next World Youth Day in Madrid, where the new technologies are contributing greatly to the preparations. Through the intercession of their patron Saint Francis de Sales, I pray that God may grant communications workers the capacity always to carry out their work conscientiously and professionally. To all, I willingly impart my Apostolic Blessing.

From the Vatican, 24 January 2011,
Feast of Saint Francis de Sales

BENEDICTUS XVI

*MESSAGE OF HIS HOLINESS
POPE BENEDICT XVI
FOR THE 46th WORLD COMMUNICATIONS DAY 2012*

Silence and Word: Path of Evangelization

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

As we draw near to World Communications Day 2012, I would like to share with you some reflections concerning an aspect of the human process of communication which, despite its importance, is often overlooked and which, at the present time, it would seem especially necessary to recall. It concerns the relationship between silence and word: two aspects of communication which need to be kept in balance, to alternate and to be integrated with one another if authentic dialogue and deep closeness between people are to be achieved. 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.

Silence is an integral element of communication; in its absence, words rich in content cannot exist. In silence, we are better able to listen to and understand ourselves; ideas come to birth and acquire depth; we understand with greater clarity what it is we want to say and what we expect from others; and we choose how to express ourselves. By remaining silent we allow the other person to speak, to express him or herself; and we avoid being tied simply to our own words and ideas without them being adequately tested. In this way, space is created for mutual listening, and deeper human relationships become possible. It is often in silence, for example, that we observe the most authentic communication taking place between people who are in love: gestures, facial expressions and body language are signs by which they reveal themselves to each other. Joy, anxiety, and

suffering can all be communicated in silence – indeed it provides them with a particularly powerful mode of expression. Silence, then, gives rise to even more active communication, requiring sensitivity and a capacity to listen that often makes manifest the true measure and nature of the relationships involved. When messages and information are plentiful, silence becomes essential if we are to distinguish what is important from what is insignificant or secondary. Deeper reflection helps us to discover the links between events that at first sight seem unconnected, to make evaluations, to analyze messages; this makes it possible to share thoughtful and relevant opinions, giving rise to an authentic body of shared knowledge. For this to happen, it is necessary to develop an appropriate environment, a kind of ‘eco-system’ that maintains a just equilibrium between silence, words, images and sounds.

The process of communication nowadays is largely fuelled by questions in search of answers. Search engines and social networks have become the starting point of communication for many people who are seeking advice, ideas, information and answers. In our time, the internet is becoming ever more a forum for questions and answers – indeed, people today are frequently bombarded with answers to questions they have never asked and to needs of which they were unaware. If we are to recognize and focus upon the truly important questions, then silence is a precious commodity that enables us to exercise proper discernment in the face of the surcharge of stimuli and data that we receive. Amid the complexity and diversity of the world of communications, however, many people find themselves confronted with the ultimate questions of human existence: Who am I? What can I know? What ought I to do? What may I hope? It is important to affirm those who ask these questions, and to open up the possibility of a profound dialogue, by means of words and interchange, but also through the call to silent reflection, something that is often more eloquent than a hasty answer and

permits seekers to reach into the depths of their being and open themselves to the path towards knowledge that God has inscribed in human hearts.

Ultimately, this constant flow of questions demonstrates the restlessness of human beings, ceaselessly searching for truths, of greater or lesser import, that can offer meaning and hope to their lives. Men and women cannot rest content with a superficial and unquestioning exchange of skeptical opinions and experiences of life – all of us are in search of truth and we share this profound yearning today more than ever: “When people exchange information, they are already sharing themselves, their view of the world, their hopes, their ideals” (Message for the 2011 World Day of Communications).

Attention should be paid to the various types of websites, applications and social networks which can help people today to find time for reflection and authentic questioning, as well as making space for silence and occasions for prayer, meditation or sharing of the word of God. In concise phrases, often no longer than a verse from the Bible, profound thoughts can be communicated, as long as those taking part in the conversation do not neglect to cultivate their own inner lives. It is hardly surprising that different religious traditions consider solitude and silence as privileged states which help people to rediscover themselves and that Truth which gives meaning to all things. The God of biblical revelation speaks also without words: “As the Cross of Christ demonstrates, God also speaks by his silence. The silence of God, the experience of the distance of the almighty Father, is a decisive stage in the earthly journey of the Son of God, the incarnate Word ... God’s silence prolongs his earlier words. In these moments of darkness, he speaks through the mystery of his silence” (Verbum Domini, 21). The eloquence of God’s love, lived to the point of the supreme gift, speaks in the silence of the Cross. After Christ’s death there is a great silence over the earth, and on Holy Saturday, when “the King sleeps and

God slept in the flesh and raised up those who were sleeping from the ages” (cf. Office of Readings, Holy Saturday), God’s voice resounds, filled with love for humanity.

If God speaks to us even in silence, we in turn discover in silence the possibility of speaking with God and about God. “We need that silence which becomes contemplation, which introduces us into God’s silence and brings us to the point where the Word, the redeeming Word, is born” (Homily, Eucharistic Celebration with Members of the International Theological Commission, 6 October 2006). In speaking of God’s grandeur, our language will always prove inadequate and must make space for silent contemplation. Out of such contemplation springs forth, with all its inner power, the urgent sense of mission, the compelling obligation “to communicate that which we have seen and heard” so that all may be in communion with God (1 Jn 1:3). Silent contemplation immerses us in the source of that Love who directs us towards our neighbours so that we may feel their suffering and offer them the light of Christ, his message of life and his saving gift of the fullness of love.

In silent contemplation, then, the eternal Word, through whom the world was created, becomes ever more powerfully present and we become aware of the plan of salvation that God is accomplishing throughout our history by word and deed. As the Second Vatican Council reminds us, divine revelation is fulfilled by “deeds and words having an inner unity: the deeds wrought by God in the history of salvation manifest and confirm the teaching and realities signified by the words, while the words proclaim the deeds and clarify the mystery contained in them” (Dei Verbum, 2). This plan of salvation culminates in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, the mediator and the fullness of all revelation. He has made known to us the true face of God the Father and by his Cross and Resurrection has brought us from the slavery of sin and death to the freedom of the children of God. The fundamental question of the meaning of human existence finds

in the mystery of Christ an answer capable of bringing peace to the restless human heart. The Church's mission springs from this mystery; and it is this mystery which impels Christians to become heralds of hope and salvation, witnesses of that love which promotes human dignity and builds justice and peace.

Word and silence: learning to communicate is learning to listen and contemplate as well as speak. This is especially important for those engaged in the task of evangelization: both silence and word are essential elements, integral to the Church's work of communication for the sake of a renewed proclamation of Christ in today's world. To Mary, whose silence "listens to the Word and causes it to blossom" (Private Prayer at the Holy House, Loreto, 1 September 2007), I entrust all the work of evangelization which the Church undertakes through the means of social communication.

From the Vatican, 24 January 2012,
Feast of Saint Francis de Sales.

BENEDICTUS XVI