

Dear readers,

Online social networking services – such as Facebook, bebo, and LinkedIn – are overrunning the domain of human communications. These services especially fascinate the young, and great numbers of them own a Facebook account. Five-hundred million, many of them for example, spend three hours or more each day on Facebook, monitoring their personal profile, connecting with friends, chatting, exchanging news, publicizing the details of their lives, exploring the experiences of others; thus they live out their “friendships.” Other online

services such as Twitter focus on “microblogage” and permit their users to remain in contact everywhere, always, and instantly. The little details of daily life are transmitted by these small messages of 140 letters or less. These “tweets” cause subscribers’ cell-phones to vibrate, and they appear on the followers’ computer screens every moment of the day. The original slogan of Twitter asked, “What are you doing?” – a statement which aptly defines this service as it broadcasts every mundane detail of day-to-day life across the globe.

Yes, these services undeniably open doors to new possibilities of communication and facilitate the sharing of information. Let us, however, focus our attention on the negative aspects of these methods. As these new techniques of electronic communication rapidly develop, one finds himself increasingly at home in the domain of the virtual, the impersonal, and even the inhuman. Young internet surfers, long before they become integrated into society, lose themselves in these imaginary cyber optic networks. They spend their time behind screens and judge themselves by the number of their virtual friends, evaluate their self-worth according to the online social networks of which they are a member. These unfortunate youth glory in the photos which they post online and revel in their “e-peers” reactions: proverbial awards hung on their “e-wall.” At thirteen years of age (the age when children may legally use Facebook), these children should and must start taking their place in real society, thus practicing the arts of communication, learning how to follow adult conversations, deciphering the non-verbal messages of face, body, voice, and general behavior. They then must begin to explain their own ideas, to express their feelings, to assume their position in the family, within a student body, and in the larger world of adults. It is a key moment in their lives when they realize how difficult it can be to speak in front of a large group, how unpleasant it can be to refuse the importunate request of a resolute solicitor, how serious it is to sign for the first time a binding contract, one which obliges prompt and regular payments.

The internet, on the contrary, creates a very different reality as it never presents these developing children with real people. The “e-surfer” never looks into the eyes of the person in front of them, never perceives deception, and contrariwise

never witnesses first-hand the fruit of true friendship: joy. Virtual contact, a mock friendship at best, easily becomes an easy way out, an escape from the difficulties of reality.

Cicero, nearly 2000 years ago, said that the face is a reflection of the soul. This maxim expresses the idea that most of our feelings and dispositions are reflected in our countenance. Emotions of fear, joy, sadness, surprise, and distaste are revealed there in all their complexity. Body-contact also plays an important role in communication. One may touch his neighbor – by accident or intentionally – in different ways. The physical contact may feel pleasant or disagreeable, reassuring or repulsive, erotic or menacing, all according to the type of contact, the other person’s character, and the context of the situation. Physical contact, consequently, often sends very different messages: affection, power, sexual desire, aggression, even love.

Scientific experiments have shown that the efficacy of any message depends 55% on body language, and that 38% of the efficacy of a speech is determined by tone of voice; the content itself only counts for 7%! Sufficient, therefore, is the proof. We cannot overestimate the importance of non-verbal signals in the domain of communication.

Let us now consider this same question from the divine perspective. God, when He wished to make Himself comprehensible to man, assumed a certain face, specific eyes, a voice and body. He became incarnate. His human nature was the chosen instrument through which he proclaimed divine truth. His contemporaries could touch Him, hear His voice, and experience with their own senses God made Man; they thus could understand His good news, the Gospel. In our times we can still approach Him physically through the sacraments, above all in the Eucharist where he is really present.

Christ’s companions, most notably St. Thomas, waived in their faith: “If I do not see in his hands the mark of the nails, and if I do not put my fingers in the place of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.” Only the physical and human reality of Jesus after His resurrection put an end to their doubts. Thomas put his finger into the wounds of Jesus and exclaimed, “My Lord and my God!” Saint John confirmed this principle in his first epistle, stating, “That which we have seen with our eyes, that which we have contemplated and that which our hands have touched, the Word of life, we announce to you, so that you also may be in communion with us, and that our communion may be with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ” (1 John, 1: 1-3).

Online social networking services pose a real danger to true human communication. They destroy the social capacities of man and thus place in peril the fruits of the Incarnation. Is this not a sign of the Antichrist? “For many seducers have gone out into the world, who confess not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh: this is a seducer and an antichrist” (2 John 1: 7).

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