



The Family LifeLine

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Facebook, new media and the Communion of Saints: Some Catholic thoughts

By Nick Chui

It is almost a truism to say that what has been termed “new media” has transformed the way we live, interact and even worship. Don’t be surprised for instance, when you come early for Sunday mass and you see a young (or not so young) person busy scrolling away at his iphone. He might well be praying the liturgy of the hours or reading the Fathers of the Church commenting on the Gospel of the day.

And don’t be surprised too, when you decide to go for Eucharistic adoration and see a young (or perhaps not so young) person having his ears plugged and fiddling with his android. He may well be listening to Gregorian chant or the songs of Taize to help him get in the mood for contemplation. (This story I got from a close friend, who shared that an old devout Chinese auntie came up to him one day in the adoration room, and with a severe look, chided him for having earphones on in front of Jesus.)

Catholics of perhaps an older generation may wonder what all the fuss over these new technologies is about. Some might even wonder if these technologies are a blessing or a curse. Why are

so many people staring into the computer screen for hours on end? And they tell me they are communicating with friends? What’s wrong with face-to-face communication or the old fashioned tele (not hand/i/skype) phone?

Younger Catholics are often active users and consumers of such technology. Some would probably wonder why on earth are their parents (or grandparents) so upset and wary about these things. After all, isn’t Twitter wonderful? You can talk, as the twitter bird will tell you, “to no oneeee and every oneeee”.

Indeed, in my opinion, Facebook and its popularity can only be understood in the light of the doctrine of the communion of saints. The communion of saints, for those who might need a quick recap, is of course something which we Christians profess in the Apostles Creed. In the Catholic tradition, we of course have numerous saints from whom we can ask for their intercession through prayer. These saints are of course in communion with the Triune God and so should we be while on earth (though we are of course still a work in progress).

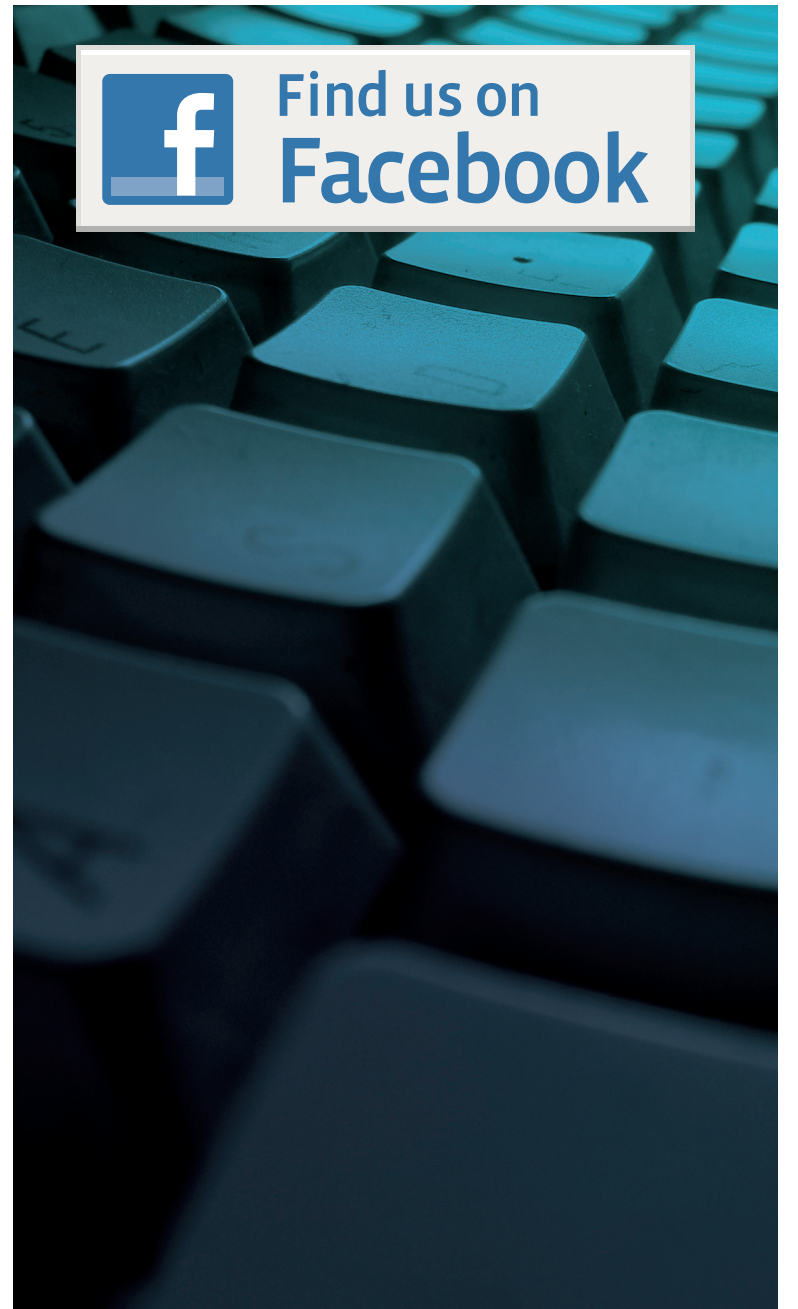
Indeed, if you ever thought that it would seem incredible that you can talk to God, to all the saints and also your friends who are in heaven (or purgatory) all at one go after your life on earth, Facebook shows that it is possible by showing that you can already do this while on earth. (Incidentally I facebooked this thought sometime back and received 14 comments on my wall)

Yet all good Catholics would know, we are not in heaven yet. This is earth and while on earth, there is always, in the words of Jesus “weeds among the wheat” or if you prefer “lights and shadows”.

Facebook is no different. While it is a great way to catch up with friends, make new friends, and also a great way for many people to come together for the cause of justice and peace, it would be foolish not to note the shadows that accompany Facebook users, one of which, in my opinion is of course the danger of preferring a virtual community instead of a face-to-face one. Indeed, the virtual world has its own temptations. Reality is often harsh. In the virtual world, one can “remake” oneself. Indeed, in the words of Savage Garden “I can be a cape crusader, a space invader, and you wouldn’t know the difference, would you?”

Come to think of it, that’s pretty scary.

The other thing about Facebook is that sometimes, for heavy Facebook users, you forget that there are some things which should really not be shared on Facebook but are more appropriate for the one-on-one conversation. This is especially true I think, if you have had a bad day. It is one thing to share that you have a bad day and ask for prayers and support. It is quite another I think, to spell out in great and



graphic detail why you are angry with the boss or colleague in the office. It sure does make reconciling much more difficult.

Also, even good news is sometimes just meant to be shared between a small group of friends. For myself, I do ask myself before I post something, am I saying this because I want to show off or do I want to share the joy I have experienced? Sometimes the line is not so clear but I think we should be at least asking ourselves this question.

Perhaps a lesson from the past might help us in guiding our Facebook usage today. Remember the old pen pal system? That was a way people at great distances attempted to form/cement friendships by writing to each other. Each letter is, of course, greeted with anticipation and pen pals

usually express an interest in meeting face-to-face one day. Indeed, we can apply this to facebook. We can’t be in face-to-face contact with our friends all the time but we can still keep in contact. And the articles you post, notes you write and pictures you share should portray something genuine about you.

Indeed, it would be safe to say that a good pen pal/facebook relationship would mean that the face-to-face encounter is a joyful one.

You will of course hope to discover surprising things about the other, but surely not the shock of false advertising.

In any case, here’s to experiencing in some way, the communion of saints.



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