

Contra Torporem: The Catholic School's Response to Social Media & New Technologiesⁱ

In February 2016, the Samsung Mobile World Congress was held in Barcelona, Spain. A portion of the program included a virtual reality (VR) demonstration in which the audience of attendees donned virtual reality headsets and were treated to an entrée of virtual worlds. If one were to describe the scene, it would not be inappropriate to describe it as one of passivity. Some of the attendees, however (obviously reacting to what they were seeing), were gesticulating with arms outstretched, perhaps giving the impression to a passing observer that this was an unfortunate group of blindfolded people, lost and grasping to find their way. As the demonstration reached its conclusion and attendees took off their mechanical blindfolds, an illumined figure was before them on the stage. It was a surprise visit by none other than the wunderkind founder and CEO of Facebook, Mark Zuckerberg. With confidence, Zuckerberg declared that VR is “the most social platform.” His company has invested millions of dollars in VR technology and he declared to the audience:

Pretty soon we're going to live in a world where everyone has the power to share and experience whole scenes as if you're just there, right there in person. Imagine being able to sit in front of a campfire and hang out with friends anytime you want. Or being able to watch a movie in a private theater with your friends anytime you want. All these things are going to be possible. And that's why Facebook is investing so much early on in virtual reality. So we can hope to deliver these types of social experiences.ⁱⁱ

In October 2017, Zuckerberg doubled down on his project and declared his ambition: “We are setting a goal. We want to get a billion people in virtual reality.” In a statement reminiscent of the ancient serpent, he stated: “We all have limits to our reality, and opening up more of those experiences to all of us is not isolating. It

is freeing.”ⁱⁱⁱ He was, however, criticized in the same month after he published a virtual reality version of himself walking through hurricane-ravaged Puerto Rico. He described how “virtual reality is ‘magical’ as it can virtually transport people to disaster zones.”^{iv}

Contrast Mr. Zuckerberg’s position with that of J.R.R. Tolkien. In a letter to a friend on the myth he created (and no doubt paralleling his view of the modern world), Tolkien articulates for us an alternative view:

By the [word “machine”] I intend all use of external plans or devices (apparatus) instead of development of the inherent inner powers or talents—or even the use of these talents with the corrupted motive of dominating: bulldozing the real world, or coercing other wills. The Machine is our more obvious modern form though more closely related to Magic than is usually recognised....The Enemy in successive forms is always ‘naturally’ concerned with sheer Domination, and so the Lord of magic and machines.^v

Comparing the two perspectives, some larger issues come into focus. Both Tolkien and Zuckerberg agree—even in their nomenclature—that there is a relationship between machines and magic. Where they disagree is on the ultimate meaning and purpose of the machine, and even more so, the magic. Most particularly, the issues of freedom vs. domination come into focus. Are the tools we use—particularly our hand-held machines—the means by which someone else “dominates” us, either for economic, political, or other gain? More to the particular issue of education, do these tools “dominate” us and our students or are they a means by which we can live according to our nature and do the good? Put more simply, do they help or hinder human flourishing? Do they help us develop our talents and our intellect? Do they help us love God and neighbor? Are they an aid to seeking and finding the truth and building up the common good? Or does it dominate us—turning us into individual

“Gollums,” closed in upon ourselves deep in the mountains of our own selfishness and immediate gratification, creating a impenetrable crust—a torpor, a listlessness—impervious to the influence of family, friends, and even God, stripping from us and our children the ability to create friendships?

Now admittedly, I am speaking as a believer to a room full—presumably—of believers. But this is Ann Arbor, and it is certainly not lost on me that most of the population of our very intellectual city may give short shrift to the place of faith as part of one’s intellectual kit bag. Phrased in another way, one might consider these issues thusly: do we prefer a passing mediocrity imposed upon us by our so-called “betters?” Or do we want to consider what it truly means to live a good life, a *real* life? The ancients struggled with these questions and encapsulated it well in the pithy question: *How then shall we live?*

The Role of the Catholic School

The Catholic school has a tremendous and deep tradition from which to draw in order to not only answer these questions, but also to address those issues and scenarios engendered by the advent of these new technologies, these machines. I would submit that it is one of the tasks of the Catholic school to courageously, confidently, intellectually, and charitably to take on this issue. If the Catholic school has the courage to “engage the whole breadth of reason,” ^{vi}as Pope Benedict XVI said, then nothing should escape its consideration—including those new things that impact the very same perennial questions that human persons have been asking since before the Greeks. More than that, the Catholic school by virtue of its incorporation into the Mystical Body of Christ, has wellsprings from which to draw

that defy purely terrestrial solutions; and therefore, the Catholic school is at even a further advantage—it has the very Creator of the heavens and earth in her humble buildings and has supernatural assistance to understand the real world, with all its beauty, its messes and tragedies, and its inhabitants.

Therefore, I would posit that the Catholic school—whether at the elementary, secondary, or collegiate level, has five ways that it can both (1) articulate the proper response to these new technologies and (2) educate not only its students but also its families and communities:

1. Articulate the Nature of Man. As Pope St. John Paul II remarked in his Angelus Address of December 15, 1996: “Christ...reveals man to himself.”^{vii} It is in the centrality of the Mystery of the Incarnation, that man knows both his true nature and dignity and how then he should act. It is because man is made in “image and likeness of God” that he possesses such dignity and worth. From the unborn tiniest human person, to the disabled, to the elderly and infirm, reason tells us that there is something different about this animal than any other on earth. Our faith confirms what our reason tells us and brings us to a terrifying and beautiful realization: that the human person is an immortal being made for eternal life. While this very earth will pass away, the human person will not. This conviction is the basis for not only personal conduct but also evaluating those threats to human life and those things that would inhibit a person reaching his glorious destiny for which this earth is a proving ground. The Catholic school has the intellectual and spiritual resources to assert this truth with conviction and to articulate the spiritual nature of the human person and his ultimate purpose.

2. Provide a Sacramental Vision of the World (i.e., Expound Reality). I began this talk referring to Tolkien for a reason. More than any other modern writer of my experience (except perhaps for G.K. Chesterton and Hilaire Belloc), Tolkien truly had a sacramental vision of the world and it comes through both in his life and in his writing. In a word, he is “no alienated man”—he lived truly a supernatural life in the midst of this very natural world. Yet, he also recognizes that “what you see is NOT what you get.” The Catholic school has the ability and the duty to show our young people that there is something mysterious, dangerous, exciting and even mystical about the world. The trees we see, the air we breathe, the strange creatures that traverse the earth, and the two great lamps that light our skies are something ultimately “other-worldly” and more than that which we simply see with our own eyes. A sacramental vision of the world means simply to see the really real—it means blinking a few times to clear the film of modern prejudices and bad habits off of our eyes so that we can see with clarity what is before us—it is the capacity to see the world as a wonderful creation of a loving God who is intimately sustaining it at every moment, everywhere. It most emphatically does NOT mean putting on a mechanical blindfold compounding our already blurry eyes into something even darker. That mechanical blindfold is far too much like the torpor that attends to being transfixed in that mountain of selfishness; it is even more reminiscent of the condemned man on his way to the gallows.

3. Provide Supernatural Assistance to Live in the World. Life is hard. Suffering happens. [Notice I placed a more appropriate word there than the more common phrase.] The Catholic school is the only place, within the context of a fully

formed academic program, where the spiritual remedies and assistance afforded us by Our Lord may be offered. It is an opportunity for the institution to support and assist parents in the formation of their children and to cultivate a relationship with Our Blessed Lady, one's guardian angels, and the saints. Notice that I didn't say, "cultivate a relationship with God." For that we want more. We want for our children, "union with God." The Second Vatican Council rightly tells us that the Blessed Sacrament is "the source and summit of the Christian life."^{viii} How blessed are Catholic schools to be able to have Mass offered and the most august sacrament of the Eucharist reposed and even exposed! In addition what graces can abound from the frequent offering of the Sacrament of Penance! (It is my personal conviction that this sacrament is so essential to our young people, especially in high school and through the temptations engendered by these new technologies.) When once asked why he became a Catholic, Chesterton gave the best answer I believe possible: "Because it's true and to have my sins forgiven." How blessed will our church and world be with our young people in the state of sanctifying grace. What strength to see the really real, and overcome obstacles of all sorts in their lives. What a pedagogy too—to know that our loving and merciful Father, while the very definition of justice, always takes us back when we admit our mistakes. What empathy and compassion for others this can teach our young people. This is an antidote to the proclivity to gossip, have the last word, and otherwise degrade people online or through texting, etc. Such a sacramental and devotional life can strengthen the living out of the virtues.

4. Provide Times of Silence. Something that is required for intellectual and spiritual formation is silence. There are precious few places today where we can find it. If I may be so bold and perhaps controversial, I'm not so sure that the Church is doing such a great job of cultivating this today. Like the 24-hour news cycle, it seems that even our parishes and schools are constantly "on." Walking into Mass can often time sound like a cacophony. While the desire to be welcoming is a laudable goal and desire to engage the talents of musicians and choirs is to be praised, it seems as if there are missed opportunities to teach our young people the value and necessity of silence. It is in silence that we come into being in our mother's womb; oftentimes it is in silence that we breathe our last breath; in silence, we can listen to God; in silence, do we pray; and in silence, can we reflect and get in touch with our deepest thoughts and yearnings. The building of long term memory and the proper setting for serious and extended reading is silence. It is a tragedy how squirmy we are nowadays that even a few moments of silence are to us excruciating. We are constantly grabbing our phones, checking Facebook or Twitter, mindlessly scrolling to see what Sally made for dinner, seeing Betsy's latest complaint of being overwhelmed at changing a diaharrea-laden infant, or absolutely having to get in a devastatingly witty comment on the feed of a popular Jesuit from New York. The Catholic school can assist parents by providing times of silence for serious attention and study and can help teach self-mastery with one's time. Will it be painful for both teachers and students alike—certainly. Will it be worth it? Will we have helped our students breathe the fresh air of this good and beautiful world given to us by God? Yes. And it will be worth it.

5. Cultivate Authentic Friendship. I think it fitting to end my cursory remarks this morning with this last and essential way that the Catholic school can help parents in light of these new machines and technologies. No one but Our Blessed Lord has ever given a more satisfactory answer to the meaning of life. The aim and meaning of each one of our lives is love. We enter the world as a result of love, through the embrace of a man and woman vowed to each other for life; providing for the very product of their love a safe and stable environment—the family. Even if our natural parents were not in love or did not provide us a stable and safe family in which to grow up, we are not the product of some random clashing of matter. We are here for a reason. We are sons and daughters of a loving God. In a statement that would scandalize the Greek philosophers and the wise of this world, the Creator of heaven and earth tells us—“I call you friend.” This is not a pixelated unreality; this is not a friend that is one of convenience, with whom one can sit around an imaginary campfire on a headset or who you can de-friend at the click of a button. He is the friend *par excellence*; the one who shows us what it means to love; the one who knows us individually and loves us individually; the one who will call us out if we are being a jerk, and who may even not save us from pain, if only we throw ourselves upon him more readily. A Catholic school should model this friendship—first with teachers who are intentionally committed to Christ and His Church, second in the opportunities that it provides to its students, and third in the way that it helps its students understand their God-given dignity, which means, particularly, their freedom. As teachers, we parents and faculty are always “on.” Not in the sense that the tech geniuses would want, but in the sense of modeling

how to live and through making real friends, not virtual ones. Books don't convert, friends do; and to be a friend, one must be free.

Conclusion

These are just a few rough and rapid reflections on how Catholic education can address and provide an effort to solving our current technological issues. I must close these remarks, however, by noting that it is not simply an intellectual exercise of nodding and agreeing to make this happen. Parents, teachers, and administrators must keep these responsibilities at the forefront of their efforts in providing Catholic education. Anything less would be a disservice to the souls entrusted to our care. The Catholic school cannot and must not be a tool or means of domination, but must be the exponent of reality helping students and families live in the freedom of the sons and daughters of God.

ⁱ John M. DeJak, J.D. *Address given at "Life! Posted: Social Media & Its Impact on the Modern Family." March 10, 2018. This half-day conference was the inaugural effort of the Familiaris Consortio Lecture Series sponsored by Father Gabriel Richard High School in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Co-sponsored by Ave Maria Radio, Emmaus Health, ArborWoman, and the Notre Dame Club of Ann Arbor.*

ⁱⁱ Edward C. Baig, "Mark Zuckerberg: Virtual Reality can become the most social platform." *USA Today*, February 22, 2016.
<https://www.usatoday.com/story/tech/columnist/baig/2016/02/21/mark-zuckerberg-vr-can-become-most-social-platform/80706338/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Dean Takahashi, "Mark Zuckerberg: We want to get 1 billion people in virtual reality." *Venturebeat.com*, October 11, 2017.
<https://venturebeat.com/2017/10/11/mark-zuckerberg-we-want-to-get-1-billion-people-in-virtual-reality/>

^{iv} Charlie Nash, "Mark Zuckerberg Wants "To Get A Billion People in Virtual Reality."" *Breitbart.com*, October 13, 2017.
<http://www.breitbart.com/tech/2017/10/13/mark-zuckerberg-wants-get-billion-people-virtual-reality/>

v J.R.R.Tolkien, "Letter to Milton Waldman (1951)," in Humphrey Carpenter (ed.), *Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1981.

vi Benedict XVI, Address: "Faith, Reason and The University—Memories and Reflections." University of Regensburg, September 12, 2006.
https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2006/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20060912_university-regensburg.html

vii John Paul II, Angelus Address, "Christ Reveals Man to Himself." December 15, 1996. <https://www.ewtn.com/library/PAPALDOC/JP961215.HTM>

viii Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, 11 (November 21, 1964).
http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html