

Introduction

You slide into the cacophony as easily as you slide your thumb across the screen of your phone. Standing in the checkout line. Stuck at a long red light. As you prepare to turn off the bedside lamp at night. And, without even thinking about it, you're suddenly in a sea of pings and dings, tweets and posts, "likes" and hashtags.

That last sentence would not have made sense to you fifteen years ago, and—given the pace at which technology is changing—in another fifteen minutes it might not make sense again. But at this moment in time it does, or you wouldn't have picked up this book. At this moment in time you are swimming in the world of social media.¹

And you know something about how amazing it is. How connected it makes you feel to people you would never otherwise be able to keep in contact with. How easy it now is to get the pulse of a group or make plans with family. How many times it brings a smile to your face or a word of inspiration when you most need it in your day. At times it has felt *more* than amazing. It has felt vital. It has been a link to sanity in the midst of the

Covid-19 crisis or the fastest way to get information about loved ones after a natural disaster.

But chances are you also know something about how mean-spirited and deceitful social media can be. You need look no further than your Twitter feed, where your uncle has once again retweeted a “news” story that is anything but. Or the stream of ad hominem insults pooling in the comments section of YouTube. Or—let’s be honest—the quick thumbs-up you gave the article your friend posted on Facebook. You never actually read the article and have no idea whether it is worthy or not, but she often likes your posts and you thought the headline sounded good.

Social media today makes the Wild West of the past look like a child’s sandbox. It’s chaotic, perplexing, and hard to tell who is calling the shots. People behave in this territory unlike the way they behave at home . . . or *is* this how they actually behave at home and we just never knew? It almost makes you want to abandon social media entirely. To retreat into a cabin in the peaceful woods, maybe to a time before the internet was ever a thing. (Did I hear someone say “television”?)

But then there is this passage in the Gospel of Matthew where Jesus challenges us to be salt and light *in the world* (Matthew 5:13-16). And a conversation Christ had with Nicodemus where he reminded Nicodemus that God’s love *for the world* was so great that he came to dwell within it (John 3:16). In the Christian tradition, social media is what we might call “mission territory”—a place scarcely known to us in which much is unfamiliar and easily misunderstood, but a place where we are

asked nevertheless to practice our faith. In his address for World Communications Day 2009, Pope Benedict called social media the new “digital continent” that we Christians are to enter with courage, knowing that our presence there can help shape the landscape of this still-new frontier.²

The vastness of the continent alone intimidates. Facebook, the largest social networking site, currently has 2.6 billion monthly users—222 million of whom live in the United States. A range of other platforms (e.g., Instagram, TikTok, Twitter, Pinterest, LinkedIn) serve niche populations and, in some cases, are growing so rapidly they have the potential to overtake Facebook’s prominence in the United States in coming years.³

It is hard to guesstimate how many social media users self-identify as Christians. But, globally, it is surely less than a quarter. At our best, we show up in this space like the leaven Jesus talks about in Matthew 13:33—that teaspoon of yeast that affects the whole dough in a wildly disproportionate way. So often, though, it seems as if the contagion is working in the opposite direction. Christians on social media seem to be absorbing the meanness and deceit of the digital continent rather than transforming it. Our ways of pinging and dinging, tweeting and posting look a lot like those who have no relationship with Christ. Our online lives show no point of connection with Gospel values. Indeed, even in our discussion of faith-based topics (liturgical or doctrinal issues, social justice concerns, church news) we mirror all the sarcasm, reactivity, and wild swings that characterize a drunken bar brawl. We need to figure out ways to align *what* we believe about the God of Jesus Christ (God is Trinitarian Communion; God is Truth; God has become incarnate)

with *how* we talk to one another. This book is an effort to do just that.

Social media is still a new form of communication in the history of humanity. (Facebook debuted in 2004. Twitter in 2006. Instagram in 2010. TikTok in 2017.) But Christian reflection on the purposes and practices of communication is not new. We could say that it began when the evangelist John penned the opening of his gospel—“In the beginning was the Word” (John 1:1)—and has been ongoing ever since. In the Catholic tradition, in particular, much of that recent reflection has found form in the papal addresses offered in advance of World Communications Day each year on the feast of St. Francis de Sales, the patron saint of writers. These addresses evidence one way Christian communities globally are trying to make sense of how to engage new media in light of faith.

In this book, I propose eight habits for Christians on social media emerging from the recent World Communications Day addresses of popes Benedict XVI and Francis, and suggest concrete ways to practice these behaviors in your own social media usage. At the end of the book, you’ll be asked to sign on to these eight Christian habits. You’ll also be asked to share the messages of this book to one other person and invite them to read it and sign on as well, becoming your accountability partner in this endeavor. One by one, two by two, in small, personal ways, we can transform the landscape of this new digital continent and make of it a place that God can call home.

1

#Clarify_Your_Purpose

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. . . . 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.

—Pope Benedict XVI, World Communications Day 2009

Have you ever caught yourself scrolling on your phone and had the fleeting thought, *What am I doing? And why?*

For me, there's a short answer to that question. Typically, I am a bit bored waiting for the next thing on my calendar, but don't have the time or mental energy to start anything substantial. I have a couple of minutes to kill. And in the immediate, it's an honest answer. But why do I even have social media accounts

to begin with? Hmm. It wasn't because I was thinking, *I have lots of time to waste. Let's see what more I could fill it up with.*

Rather, I think most of us—myself included—would say we got involved in social media because we want to be connected with friends and family, with people we no longer see all the time, with the wider world. We want to pass on information and learn about the things that affect us. We enjoy feeling we have a voice in the conversations of our time, and maybe can even have a bit of influence on those conversations. For some of us, there are additional economic, political, or philanthropic interests. We use social media to promote products, services, and causes that we value or that are tied to our livelihood.

Although it sounds a little strange to name aloud these underlying purposes, we should know that these are the same reasons why *any* form of communication exists. Linguists suspect that the earliest humans developed sign language to pass on information and work to achieve common goals. Humans adopted oral speech around 150,000 years ago, perhaps to free their hands for carrying and working with tools at the same time.¹ Around 5,500 years ago, our ancestors developed written language to expand the sharing of information across time. A little more than 2,500 years ago, the Persian emperor Cyrus the Great launched the first postal service to make possible the regular sharing of information across distances. Social media is simply another step in the long history of humans trying to connect more and more with one another.

God as Communion

As Christians, we understand this ongoing drive to connect is part of a larger divine plan. We believe that God is Trinity—a network of connection so tightly woven that God is three and one at the same time. God is divine “communion.” And we believe God wants to share that Trinitarian life—by calling us always into community or the divine communion. In the opening pages of Genesis, we hear God say, “It is not good for the man to be alone” (Gn 2:18). God wants us to be in relationship with others and to become community with one another because that’s how we learn what we need to share in God’s own life.

Now brace yourself because this next idea is not an easy one to grasp, but it is important: *Communication is what makes community possible is what makes communion possible.* Sit with that for a moment and let it sink in, because that is what Pope Benedict wants to emphasize in the quote that begins this chapter. From a Christian point of view, the purpose of our words—expressed by way of gesture or speech, etched in stone or typed on a keyboard—is to create meaningful relationship with others, so that healthy community will emerge. And it is community that will help us realize God’s plan for us.

The story of Babel from the book of Genesis gives us an example of what it looks like when this connection breaks down: Once upon a time there was a people who thought they could force their way into heaven by building a tower tall enough to knock on God’s door. God halted their plan by confusing their communication, which fragmented and scattered their community. The story of Pentecost from the book of the Acts of the

Apostles gives us an example of what it looks like when this connection is restored: In the time after the Resurrection, there were people of many different languages who couldn't understand one another, but the Spirit swept through the city, enabling them to understand the words being spoken so that a new community made up of every nation could form. Communication, community, and communion with God cannot be separated from one another.

So, the fact that we are attracted to social media in those spare moments during our day (and maybe even more than that) is a sign of a deep and holy longing wired within us by God *for God*. Who'd have thought? Then, why does our experience online often look so much more like Babel than Pentecost?

Where Things Go Awry

Part of what contributes to the Babel-like nature of social media at present may be simply the newness of the medium. Our ancestors surely faced similar struggles when shifting from use of hand gestures to speech, or speech to written word. It took centuries, not years, to go from hammering the number of barley bundles on clay tablets to the evolution of an alphabet that could hold Sappho's poetry.

Many of our old aides to understanding do not work in social media: We can't read others' body language in the same way we can when talking in person or even on a video chat. We can't pick up the tone of voice behind a comment. It's easy to lose threads of conversation in the asynchronous back-and-forth. Without punctuation, hastily typed responses can come across

sharper than we mean. Emojis . . . well, let's just leave that as a statement unto itself: emojis. All of which is to say that many of our struggles can be attributed to adjusting to what the current platforms can and cannot do in terms of helping us communicate with one another. For example, most of us know that Twitter is great for sharing news and not so great for facilitating deep and meaningful conversation on controversial issues. Over time, we'll figure out new norms and expectations that will make the platforms work for us better. We just aren't there yet.

But some of what plagues our communication on social media is what plagues all human communication. We *do* want relationship and community, but that's not all we want. We also want to be right. We want to be esteemed. We want to be funny and smart, attractive and influential. And even when we suffer doubt that we actually *are* these things, we still would like others to think of us that way.

These desires, like the desire for relationship and community, have always been with us, and they also are not bad. The problem is that social media fans these desires in powerful ways that can put them increasingly at odds with healthy relationship and community. Social media offers endless possibilities to project (or at least, attempt to project) a consistently funny, smart, attractive, popular, righteous digital self—and to do so in a very public way. At the same time, in the hidden space of our minds and hearts, social media offers endless possibilities to compare our real selves to others' digital selves.

When the selves projected online aren't the selves that we really are, the relationships we create online end up not being the relationships we think they are, and the online "community"

that develops doesn't do for us what community is meant to do. Extensive engagement of social media has come to be associated with the following:

- FOMO (fear of missing out), a persistent sense of not being included
- lower self-esteem and sense of well-being in general
- increased depression and social anxiety, especially in youth
- poorer physical health
- lower reported life-satisfaction rating
- decreased face-to-face socialization with others
- decreased socialization with others outside one's own echo chamber
- lowered levels of compassion and empathy for others
- decreased civic/political engagement²

None of the above bode well for moving us in the direction of the life of communion God dreams for us.

So how do we reorient ourselves in the direction of Pentecost?

AN EXERCISE: WRITING A SOCIAL MEDIA PURPOSE STATEMENT

Writing a mission statement can sound grandiose and *sooo* 1988. It is not as if, for most of us, the transformation of the digital continent is our primary work in life. But when you think about engaging social media as a Christian, it's good to at least get clear