**TECHNOLOGY**

**How it affects our spirituality**

**Part One**

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Much of my material has come from an article written by Friar Jason Welle OFM, which was published in *The Cord* magazine.

Mono was on the internet all day…He’d type in addresses, then stop and delete, hating himself because the computer could not hate him instead. The non-judgmental nature of technology, if technology could have a nature – that struck him as unfair. *Joshua Cohen, “Emission” in “Four New Messages”*

I would like to reflect with you on an omnipresent aspect of Australian life that believers do not often discuss with much coherence: Technology. What I have to say also could be applied, in many instances, to television as well. More specifically, I hope to bring some wisdom from our Franciscan tradition to bear on the prevalence and use of modern **communications technology**. Rapid developments in this field have immense consequences for the spiritual lives of members of the Franciscan Family and those with whom and among whom we minister.

**The Internet**

Most of the writings in recent years have dealt mainly with **effective ways to use the internet and social media as means of evangelization**. The internet has provided a means for many more people with the means of making their voices heard and lessened the significance of some traditional avenues of religious authority. For example, I have noticed that many people don’t read much more than the newspaper because they can find out most of the news from television. Also, much religious discourse on the internet occurs in an unhealthy and unchristian manner, increasing polarization and enmity in Church and society. So, firstly, **Franciscans must find ways to proclaim the Gospel in the digital sphere in a spirit of love, humility and civility**.

Secondly, the ever increasing **challenge of addiction to the internet** – particularly to online pornography – prompts reflection from believers, particularly ministers of the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Pope Francis has remarked on this in some of his talks.

Thirdly, members of the Franciscan family predictably rehash well-patterned debates about poverty, wondering **how much gadgetry can we accumulate in keeping with our commitment to simple living?**  For the future of evangelization, much depends upon the answers to these questions. While I will not focus on these questions now, but I shall come back to them from the point of view of how technology affects people’s spiritual lives today.

It is obvious that **technology has transformed the Australian social landscape in a very short time.** Less than twenty years ago, mobile phones were functionally invisible – not with regard to their size, but with regard to how the few people who had them used them. Today when I take the bus or train into the city a full three-quarters or more of riders travel dissolved into their phones or some type of tablet device or i-pod. More than half of these would have earbuds plugged in, cooly deaf to my wails of alarm that their purses are on fire. Wherever you go it is the same story. I was absolutely amazed when I went back to PNG in 2010 to find practically every second person in Aitape in West Sepik Province – one of the poorest places in PNG – had a mobile phone. Mobile phones there are quite cheap but the owner has to buy a sim-card and keep refilling it to keep it going. But, even here in Australia, I have seen students send a text message to the person sitting next to them!

In 2012, a professor at Harvard Business School released a book *Sleeping with Your Smartphone.* Please do not be confused by the title: although some columnists have mused about emotional attachment to their gadgets, this book does not chronicle obsessive Mac users but **focuses on the reality of business people who are wired in 24/7**. In the business world, it has become normal to check one’s phone before leaving bed. Before kissing one’s husband, or brushing one’s teeth, email has been checked. Before turning out the light at night, checking for messages, if not sending a couple, is the norm. One sleeps an arm’s length from a device that may buzz or vibrate during the night, a device calling for immediate accountability and response. Many business people, quite literally, sleep with their i-phones. **But it has been shown scientifically that you can disconnect and become more productive in the process.** You can become more productive and at the same time have a team of workers individually feeling more satisfied.

One may not be a spiritual master to recognize **the benefits of disconnection**. Some business people pay large sums of money to “get away from it all” from time to time. Franciscans enjoy the grace of a rich tradition spanning eight centuries. Many great sisters and friars before me have taken weeks, months, or years off. The Church and the Franciscan charism remain with us. No member needs to be wired, connected, reachable, in the loop twenty-four hours of every day. The People of God and the Holy Spirit can function without me. That’s a good problem to have. It’s a blessing to realise.

Whether in the business world or in the Church, **much of this desire to connect derives from a mentality of scarcity.** I assume that there is not enough wisdom for guidance in the world, so I have to offer mine. There aren’t too many clients available, so I have to be waiting by the phone if I want to get one. Time flies, so if I’m not ready at just the proper moment, the opportunity might pass me by. The question arises: Is God gratuitous? Is God generous? Will God still provide for me even if I don’t take this call at midnight? Do I believe that God provides in abundance, or is God stingy?

**The core of the Franciscan experience of God lies in God’s generosity**. Our God is the God who turns five loaves and two fish into food for five thousand. The fragments from the meal filled twelve wicker baskets. Our God is the God who never allowed Francis and his brother to go without. God gives every good gift in excessive measure, shaken down and flowing over. For this reason, Francis spoke so much about God’s goodness, which pointed Bonaventure to the axiom: “Goodness diffuses itself”. Pope Francis also pointed this out in his Apostolic Letter *The Joy of the Gospel.* Goodness, by its nature, spreads out. God is gratuitous. I don’t need to walk with the assumption that so much depends on me because in reality it depends upon God. Rather than cling to immediate connection, a Franciscan must live with open hands.

**Facebook** Switching to another aspect, I would like to refer to a magazine, called *The Atlantic*. The cover ran, ***“Is Facebook Making Us Lonely?”***by Stephen Marche. (For those who may not know, *Facebook* is very popular means of social communication. It has a language of its own which could puzzle the uninitiated. It has spread throughout the world and provides a cheaper way to keep in contact with others either in writing or by voice mail.) The novelist, Stephen Marche, opens with an eerie story of the death of Yvette Vickers, a former *Playboy* playmate and horror movie actress found dead in her apartment. News of her death went viral because she was found mummified, next to a heater that was still running, and no one knew how long she had been dead. No one had seen her for the better part of a year until a neighbour finally broke into her apartment and found the room lit up by Yvette’s still-running computer, its dull glow permeating the empty space.

It seems silly to suggest that **our use of the internet could be making us lonely**. After all, the internet is a tool that increases connections with people. Don’t you agree? I can email friends and family and not have to wait for snail mail delivery. Why pay for stamps when email is free? And why wait days or weeks for a reply when email enables one right now? And why spurn the chance to keep up with persons I love and to meet people who share my interests when it’s so quick and easy, just a few clicks away?

Marche’s point was basically this: **most of us use the internet to create connections that are broader but shallower.** “We are living in an isolation that would have been unimaginable to our ancestors, and yet we have never been more accessible…. In a world consumed by ever more novel modes of socializing, we have less and less actual society. We live in an accelerating contradiction: the more connected we become, the lonelier we are.” The symbol for this is, of course, *Facebook,* which now has over one billion users. Marche uses the final scene of *The Social Network* to drive home his point. *Facebook* founder, Mark Zuckerberg, atop his astounding rise to success, sits alone, staring at a screen and wondering if his ex-girlfriend will accept his friend request, desperately clicking “refresh”. He endures a moment of super-connected loneliness.

Some psychologists have begun to speak openly about **an epidemic of loneliness** in this country, and there’s no magic pill to cure it. Marriage helps but only if your spouse is a true confidant. Belief in God doesn’t always help, for it depends on the kind of God you believe in. Studies consistently show that social interaction matters, and by that, I mean quality social connections. How many true personal confidants do you have? Marche reports a 1985 study documenting that the average American had 2.94 personal confidants. By 2004, it declined to 2.08. Basically, that’s moving from three friends you really trust down to two: a recipe for loneliness. Some have been able to cope by adding therapists or marriage counsellors or life coaches or perhaps all of the above, but in the grand scheme, this amounts to outsourcing the hard work of caring about each other. Please don’t think that I’m merely waxing nostalgic; this is not a matter of wanting the good old days. It’s a public health crisis. For Marche, “the question of the future is this: Is *Facebook* part of the separating or part of the congregating; is it a huddling-together for warmth or a shuffling away in pain?

Now, to be sure, the internet is a complicated thing. People use the internet in general and they use *Facebook* in particular in many different ways. Several of them correlate to loneliness but correlation is not causation. I am not saying that *Facebook* makes you lonely, nor did Marche. Technology is not a personal malevolent force encroaching inch by inch on what had been my completely fulfilled and satisfying life. What I am observing is this: **Franciscans live in a world of lonely people and have traditionally claimed that our life is about fraternity, brotherhood and sisterhood. We live in a world where real connections are slipping away and we have a mission to bring people together.** This mission does not pertain to an hour on Sunday morning, but to ways that allow God’s children to experience that they belong. This mission involves our life together somehow showing people that if you take your earbuds out and plug into each other – at least every once in a while – you’ll have a more peaceful life.