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Interior Quiet in the Digital Age

Faced with all the "noise" of the new technologies, we need to foster the interior quiet that enables us to hear the voice of the Holy Spirit in our soul. A new article on Christian life.

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The new technologies have increased the volume of constantly available information, and we no longer are surprised to receive news from faraway places in real-time. Being informed about what is happening

all over the world is becoming progressively easier. But this rapid supply of facts brings with it new challenges, especially how to manage correctly so much information from so many different sources.

The growing amount of information available makes it important for each of us to cultivate a reflective attitude, with the ability to better discern the data that is truly worthwhile. At times this is difficult because “the speed with which information is communicated exceeds our capacity for reflection and judgment, and this does not make for more balanced and proper forms of self-expression.”[1] Moreover, since a wide variety of different stimuli may demand our attention (text messages, photos, music, etc.), we face the risk of getting used to responding to them immediately, and set aside the activity we were intending to carry out.

Silence too is part of the process of communication. It opens up moments of reflection that enable us to absorb what we have perceived and to give an appropriate response. "Ideas come to birth and acquire depth; we understand with greater clarity what it is we want to say and what we expect from others; and we choose how to express ourselves." [2]

Silence plays a very important role in Christian life, since it is a prerequisite for fostering the interior quiet that allows us to hear the voice of the Holy Spirit and to second his motions. St. Josemaría related silence to fruitfulness and effectiveness. [3]

And Pope Francis asked people to pray that "the men and women of our time, often overwhelmed by the noise around them, may rediscover the value of silence and know how to listen to God and their brothers and sisters." [4] How can we achieve this

interior quiet in an environment shaped by the new technologies?

The virtue of temperance: an ally

St. Josemaría refers to an experience we can easily relate to: “My affairs buzz around in my head at the most inopportune moments,’ you say. That is why I have recommended that you try to establish some times for interior silence, and to guard your external and internal senses.”[5] To attain the interior recollection that allows us to put our attention into the work at hand, and thus be able to sanctify it, we need to guard our senses. And this applies especially to the use of the electronic media, which like all material goods should be used in moderation.

The virtue of temperance is an ally in preserving our inner freedom when we enter the digital world.

“Temperance is self-mastery,”[6] since it places order in our use of

these instruments and directs our actions to the good. It leads us to use objects correctly, giving them their true value in accord with our dignity as children of God.

To make right choices in our use of electronic devices and services, also when these are free, we need to consider not only their appeal or utility, but also whether they are in keeping with a temperate lifestyle. Will this help me make better use of my time, or will it simply be a source of distractions? Do the additional features justify another purchase, or could I continue to make do with what I already have?

The ideal of holiness entails going beyond what is merely licit (*can I do this?*), to asking: *will this bring me closer to God?* St. Paul's words to the Corinthians are very enlightening: "*All things are lawful for me,*" but not *all things are helpful*. "*All things are*

lawful for me," but I will not be enslaved by anything.[7] This affirmation of self-control on the part of the Apostle takes on new relevance in our day and age when we consider some computer products or services which, by ensuring an immediate or relatively quick "reward," encourage repeated use. Learning how to limit their use will help prevent a fretful and nervous attitude, or even a form of addiction. St. Josemaría's brief piece of advice can be very useful here: "Get used to saying No." [8] And he urged us to focus this struggle in a positive way: "For this inner victory fosters peace in our hearts, and the peace we each bring to our homes, and the peace we bring to society and to the whole world." [9]

Our use of the new technology will depend on our particular circumstances and needs. In this area each of us, helped by others'

advice, needs to find our own measure. An important question we always need to ask is: are we being moderate? Emails, for example, can be useful to stay close to a friend, but if they become so numerous that they entail constant interruptions in our work or study, we would probably be falling into frivolity and wasting time. If this were to happen, self-mastery will help us to overcome our impatience and to leave the answer for later, so we can devote ourselves to a task requiring concentration, or simply pay attention to the person we are talking with.

Certain attitudes can help us to be temperate in this area. For example, limiting Internet access to specific times, deciding in advance the number of times a day we will check social media or look at emails, disconnecting electronic devices at night, avoiding their use during

meals and when greater recollection is called for, such as during the days of a spiritual retreat. We should access the Internet only at appropriate times and places, so that we don't end up surfing the web without a specific purpose, and thus run the risk of coming upon sites that offend a Christian, or are at least a waste of time.

The deep conviction that our highest aspirations go beyond the momentary satisfaction a *click* on the web can bring, helps us to strive with greater effort to live the virtue of temperance. Through this virtue a strong personality is forged and "life then takes on again shades and tones which intemperance had tended to blur. We find ourselves able to care for the needs of others, to share what is ours with everyone, to devote our energies to great causes." [10]

Value of study

The habit of study, which directs the desire for knowledge to higher goals, is usually seen as being related to temperance. St. Thomas Aquinas defines the virtue of *studiositas* as a “certain keenness of interest in seeking knowledge of things,”[11] which requires overcoming comfort-seeking and laziness. The more intensely we apply our mind to something in an ordered way, the more eager we are to learn and to know.

The eagerness for knowledge is enriched when it is directed to the service of others, and contributes to loving the world with a clean heart. Naturally, we are eager to keep up with cultural and social changes around us, since we want to direct them to God. But this is quite different from a restless concern for what is happening in the world, with a curiosity shown, for example, in the desire to be informed about

everything and not wanting to miss a single thing. This disordered attitude would eventually lead to superficiality, intellectual dispersion, difficulty in staying close to God, and a tepid apostolic zeal.

The new technologies, since they widen the available sources of information, are a valuable aid in carrying out academic research, choosing a site for family vacations, etc. However, the desire for knowledge can fall prey to many disorders. For example, by setting aside an obligatory task or study project and taking up another “less profitable study,”[12] such as checking the latest news or replying to an email.

The disordered curiosity that St. Thomas characterized as a “wandering restlessness of the spirit”[13] can lead to a sadness of heart, to a soul that is weighed down

by its failure to respond to its vocation, which requires the effort to draw close to God and serve those around us. This listlessness of soul, sometimes termed “acedia,” is compatible with agitation in one's mind and body, a reflection of internal unrest. In contrast, the habit of study gives us energy when it is time to work and to build relationships with others. It helps us to make good use of our time and even to find delight in activities that require great mental effort.

Protecting times of silence

Temperance smoothes the path to holiness since it creates the interior order that allows us to focus our intellect and will on the task at hand. “Do you really want to be a saint? Carry out the little duty of each moment: do what you ought and put yourself into what you are doing.”[14] To receive divine grace,

to grow in holiness, we need to immerse ourselves in each activity where our sanctity is forged.

Do the new technologies foster superficiality? It depends on the way they are used. Nevertheless, we have to be on guard against dissipation: "You slake your senses and faculties at whatever puddle you meet on the way. And then you experience the results: unsettled purpose, scattered attention, deadened will, and aroused concupiscence."[15]

Obviously, when we yield to dissipation through the inordinate use of the phone or Internet, our life of prayer encounters serious obstacles. "We children of God have to be contemplatives: people who, in the midst of the noise of the crowd, know how to find silence of soul in a lasting conversation with our Lord."[16]

St. Josemaría wrote that “silence is the doorkeeper of the interior life,”[17] and he encouraged the faithful living in the middle of the world to seek moments of more intense recollection, compatible with hard work. He gave special importance to preparing very well for the Mass. In an environment permeated by new technologies, Christians need to find time and space to draw close to God, where their senses and imagination, their mind and will are as recollected as possible. Like the prophet Elijah, we discover the Lord not in the noisy environment around us, but in the *whisper of a gentle breeze*. [18]

The spirit of recollection that opens up space to dialogue with Christ requires setting aside for a while other activities that demand our attention. Prayer requires disconnecting from whatever might distract us, often doing so even

physically: disabling message alerts on a device, closing programs or even turning it off. The moment has come to turn our eyes to God and to leave the rest in his hands.

Moreover, silence leads us to be attentive to others and reinforces fraternity, enabling us to recognize “people who need help, charity and love.”[19] In an age when we have available technological means that spur us to fill our whole day with new activities and noise, it is good to foster silence in and around us. In his reflections on the role of the media in today's culture, Pope Francis invited us to “recover a certain sense of deliberateness and calm. This calls for time and the ability to be silent and to listen . . . If we are genuinely attentive to listening to others, we will learn to look at the world with different eyes and come to appreciate the richness of human experience as manifested

in different cultures and traditions." [20] The effort to foster a personal attitude of listening and to seek space for silence opens us up to others, and in a special way to the action of God in our souls and in the world.

[1] Pope Francis, Message for the 48th World Communications Day: *Communication at the Service of an Authentic Culture of Encounter*, 24 January 2014.

[2] Benedict XVI, Message for the 46th World Communications Day, 24 January 2012.

[3] Cf. St. Josemaria, *Furrow*, nos. 300 and 530.

[4] Pope Francis, General intention for the apostolate of prayer for September 2013.

[5] St. Josemaria, *Furrow*, no. 670.

[6] St. Josemaria, *Friends of God*, no. 84.

[7] *1 Cor* 6:12.

[8] St. Josemaria, *The Way*, no. 5.

[9] St. Josemaria, Notes taken in a get together, 28 October 1972.

[10] St. Josemaria, *Friends of God*, no. 84.

[11] St. Thomas Aquinas, *S. Th.* II-II, q. 166, a. 2 ad 3.

[12] *Ibid.* II-II, q. 167, a. 1 c.

[13] St. Thomas, *De Malo*, q. 11, a. 4.

[14] St. Josemaria, *The Way*, no. 815.

[15] *Ibid.*, no. 375.

[16] St. Josemaria, *The Forge*, no. 738.

[17] St. Josemaria, *The Way*, no. 281.

[18] 1 Kgs 19:12.

[19] St. Josemaria, *Conversations*, no. 96.

[20] Pope Francis, Message for the 48th World Communications Day, 24 January 2014.

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