Opinion
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With the arrival of the new social media app Threads by Meta (the parent company of Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp), a lot of Twitter users are actively discerning the future of their engagement with the platform that tech mogul Elon Musk purchased for $44 billion last fall.

As recently as a year ago, it would have been unthinkable that another tech company, even one as large and wealthy as Meta or Google, could pose a legitimate challenge to Twitter, although some small companies have tried. But with Musk's seemingly impulsive purchase of Twitter and what has been described as a series of terrible decisions and actions by its new owner, the once-important and relevant platform has devolved into a glitchy, unfriendly and increasingly unappealing digital space.

I am among the millions of Twitter users who have basically had enough. And I'm not sure whether I want to stay, go somewhere else, or leave social media altogether.

My experience over the last few months on Twitter echoes the experiences of the New York Times journalists Natalie Kitroeff and Mike Isaac who, in a recent episode of The Daily, discuss how disappointing and negative the context on Twitter has become: Trolls and bad-faith voices proliferate, policies pressuring users to monetize the platform have soured the organic spirit of dialogue, and personnel cuts and poor administrative decisions have affected the fundamental quality of the service.

Last year, months ahead of Musk's purchase of Twitter, I gave up all my social media accounts for Lent. And as I shared in these pages, it was a generally good experience and one that continues to have an impact on my relationship to Twitter and other platforms. I am still reflecting on how engaged I want to be and whether it is even worth it to stay on such platforms.

> 'Who is my neighbor?' In the digital age, those we encounter online are included as much as the wounded man on the side of the road in the parable is in Jesus' time.
>
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With Threads seeking to supplant Twitter, I find myself at another crossroads wondering whether it is worth it to jump ship from one to the other, or just walk

away from it all.

For this reason, I returned this week to a document issued in May by the Vatican Dicastery for Communication titled "Towards Full Presence: A Pastoral Reflection on Engagement with Social Media." It is, in my opinion, one of the better and more useful documents published by a Vatican dicastery in some time.

From the outset, the document makes clear that we are living in an age when most people will not be able to completely avoid the "digitization" of our societies.

The opening paragraph notes: "Advancements in technology have made new kinds of human interactions possible. In fact, the question is no longer whether to engage with the digital world, but how."

This question of "how" to engage in what Pope Benedict XVI called the "digital continent" or what this document calls the "digital highways" goes right to the heart of what many people are struggling with at this moment. This document is a helpful examination of conscience, a handy tool that many people of faith might draw from to assist them in their own reflection on *how* to proceed with engaging social media at this moment in our shared history.

Organized into four parts, the document provides poignant observations and questions for reflecting on what it means to be a Christian in a digital world and on social media today. Clearly taking its guiding inspiration from Pope Francis' 2020 encyclical letter *Fratelli Tutti*, the Dicastery for Communication draws on the parable of the good Samaritan to frame the text.

The first part focuses on some of the pitfalls and challenges that confront us in this digital age, including future threats that are only beginning to be spotted on the horizon, such as artificial intelligence.

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>
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Rather than offering pedantic lectures that oversimplify the complex realities we all live and move in today, the document acknowledges the intricate and complicated

landscape in a realistic manner. Among the pitfalls highlighted are the increasing division and polarization that arise on social media because of echo chambers of our choosing, algorithms designed to keep us on the platforms, and triggers intended to amplify anger and resentment among groups.

The conclusion of this section includes three excellent questions for consideration:

> How can we co-create healthier online experiences where people can engage in conversations and overcome disagreements with a spirit of mutual listening?
>
> How can we empower communities to find ways to overcome divisions and promote dialogue and respect in social media platforms?
>
> How can we restore the online environment to the place that it can and should be: a place of sharing, collaborating, and belonging, based on mutual trust?

The second section invites us to move beyond merely recognizing the challenges before us and the capitalistically driven algorithms and other technologies that increase the dangers we experience today, toward becoming people of authentic encounter.

Alluding to the parable of the good Samaritan, the document explains: "The parable can inspire social media relationships because it illustrates the possibility of a profoundly meaningful encounter between two complete strangers."

Encountering strangers, whether in person or online, is not a bad thing nor is it something we should avoid. But *how* we encounter them is the key, as the parable of the good Samaritan famously explores.

The document challenges us to engage on social media in ways that are deeper, more reflective, more attentive and kinder than we are often inclined to be. Instead of dismissing, ignoring or even attacking the unknown "other" or stranger online, do we try to recognize them as our siblings in the world?

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The aim of this section can be summarized by the simple question posed to Jesus in the Gospel: "Who is my neighbor?" In the digital age, those we encounter online are included as much as the wounded man on the side of the road in the parable is in Jesus' time.

The third section focuses on the next step in this process of Christian engagement online, which moves from authentic encounter with the stranger and seeks to build a genuine community of beloved individuals. This begins with connections forged on digital platforms, but must move back into the embodied, physical world. We might ask ourselves how what we do and say online connects with or relates to the way we are in the so-called "real world."

There is also a deeply eucharistic dimension to this section, as the authors of the document remind us that, as Christians, we are called to fellowship at the table with one another, just as Jesus did in his own earthly ministry. You cannot simply "live online" but must also live with one another in community in the flesh.

As the document states, "Embodiment is important for Christians. The Word of God became incarnate in a body, he suffered and died with his body, and he rose again in the Resurrection in his body."

Finally, the document suggests some ways we might cultivate a particular style of community that we are called to build. Precisely as Christians, we are called to be a community of love, a community of narrative, a community that heals, and a community that bears witness to the God of Jesus Christ we profess to believe in and follow.

While simply stated, this is particularly challenging in an age marked by such polarization and by means of media that often foster individualism, selfishness, greed, animosity and bad faith.

As for me, I'm still not sure what my long-term relationship to social media is. But for as long as I continue to travel along those "digital highways," I will find this document a useful source of reflection and discernment.

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