Opinion
NCR Voices



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Having looked at some of the problems posed by social media, how do we, as a Catholic Church, overcome them? How do we create a culture that is more humane than the culture of social media?

Catholic education, from the pulpit to parochial schools to colleges and universities, must grapple with the need to form believers capable of resisting the pathologies of social media. In a recent book review at Commonweal, Eugene McCarraher wrote: "As higher education, from the Ivies to state universities, becomes more and more a vocational school for tech and finance capital, the moral coordinates of undergraduates are increasingly avarice and instrumentality." How do we provide a compelling alternative set of moral coordinates, without which taking on social media, or any other problematic reality, becomes impossible?

In his commentary on the First Letter of John, St. Augustine writes:

> "And we have seen and are witnesses" [1 John 1:2]. Perhaps some of the brethren who are not acquainted with the Greek do not know what the word "*witnesses*" is in Greek: and yet it is a term much used by all, and had in religious reverence; for what in our tongue we call "*witnesses*," in Greek are "*martyrs*." Now where is the man that has not heard of martyrs, or where the Christian in whose mouth the name of martyrs dwells not every day and would that it so dwelt in the heart also, that we should imitate the sufferings of the martyrs, not persecute them with our cups! Well then, "*We have seen and are witnesses*," is as much as to say, We have seen and are martyrs. For it was for bearing witness of that which they had seen, and bearing witness of that which they had heard from them who had seen, that, while their testimony itself displeased the men against whom it was delivered, the martyrs suffered all that they did suffer.

Social media, with its echo chambers, creates a desire for "allies" not for "martyrs." The social media influencer wants "likes," not suffering. And the best way to get "likes," to become an influencer, is to say something that is more extreme or more exhibitionistic than others.



St. Augustine is depicted as bishop of the North African Diocese of Hippo. He lived in the years 354-430 and is considered a church father and doctor of the church. (OSV News file photo)

The impulses that drive social media — self-assertion, instantaneous affirmation from the like-minded, harsh judgment of others, exaggeration, vulgarity — are the very things which invite schism. Again, we turn to Augustine's commentary on 1 John:

> Behold, you have the Church throughout the whole world; do not follow false justifiers who in truth are cutters off. Be in that mountain which has filled the whole earth: because "*Christ is the propitiation for our sins; not only ours, but also the sins of the whole world,*" which He has bought with His blood.

The phrase "cutters off" aptly describes those heresy hunters who excel on social media, does it not?

Part of the problem is that we constrict our understanding of the verb "to communicate" to formal statements. We parse the statements from the U.S. bishops' conference. Is it strong enough? If the last few months demonstrate anything, it is that public statements from our bishops' conference just blend in with all the other statements of special interest groups. They change little. Yes, it is important to be on the record, but the times in which we live need more than that.

A wise pastor told me recently that a church that is rooted in the dogma of the Incarnation must communicate in a way that is incarnate, by being present to people in their lives. If the way we Christians live our lives is not authentic, if we do not behave like those who truly believe that the incarnation, passion, death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus changed our own lives and the history of the entire human race, nothing we say will, or should be, convincing to others. St. Paul VI's wonderful observation in *Evangelii Nuntiandi* resonates with the spirit of Augustine's commentaries cited above: "Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses."

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Back in 2015, Paulist Fr. Bruce Nieli published an important essay at U.S. Catholic in which he called for a return of Catholic Action, the movement in the 20th century to bring the Gospel into the social life of Catholics and non-Catholics alike. I shall be returning to that theme again soon. But, for today, I would like to cite one quote from Peter Maurin, cofounder of the Catholic Worker Movement, that Nieli cited:

> Writing about the Catholic Church, a radical writer says: "Rome will have to do more than to play a waiting game; she will have to use some of the dynamite inherent in her message." To blow the dynamite of a message is the only way to make the message dynamic. If the Catholic Church is not today the dominant social dynamic force, it is because Catholic scholars have taken the dynamite of the church, have wrapped it up in nice phraseology, placed it in an hermetic container and sat on the lid. It is about time to blow the lid off so the Catholic Church may again become the dominant social dynamic force.

Do we still even perceive "the dynamite inherent in her message"? When the Catholic Church speaks to the world, when it communicates, that communication must always be drawn from the paschal mystery, and be seen to be so drawn. The world does not need Catholics to say other things. It needs us to draw all things into the divine narrative, the kerygma, of the Gospels. I sometimes taunt verbose bishops that if they wish to speak on some aspect of public life and cannot, on a single page of paper, write out how what they want to say is rooted in the empty tomb, they should sit down and let others say it.

These are the thoughts that should guide us as we think about how to use, and to not use, social media and all media. Let social media point people away from itself, to those places where we can find and strengthen our communion with the Lord and with one another, where we develop habits of holiness and solidarity. Let social media be used to bring us closer to people in their daily lives, in their families and their workplaces. When social media becomes toxic, step away from it. The church should be present in that social media space, as it should be present anywhere and everywhere. But be wary. If we reduce the Gospel to a mere product among many in a consumer-driven social media landscape, we can only provide a counter-witness to the Gospel.

Related: Did Satan send us social media?