



# WORLD COMMUNICATIONS DAY

Homily: Fr Dominic Howarth

THE CHURCH OF OUR MOST HOLY REDEEMER AND ST THOMAS MORE, CHELSEA, 23 MAY 2011

**A few weeks ago I was at a friend's house for breakfast. His son, Max, sat on his knee, looked up at him with a cheeky, broad smile, and said, "Dad, how do you change the password on the computer?" He knew exactly what he was asking – I'd seen him on the computer the night before, playing a simulation game, and he was as natural there as he was in the garden, playing football. Max is four and a half years old.**

At the start of his message for World Communications Day the Pope says, "New horizons are now open that were until recently unimaginable; they stir our wonder at the possibilities offered by this new media and at the same time urgently demand a serious reflection on the significance of communication in the digital age." That is clearly profoundly true; throughout the Middle East in those heady weeks of late February and early March, the "Arab Spring" happened in no small way because of facebook and twitter and other social networks. Closer to home, in the secondary school in the parish of Basildon, where I serve, I know that more children have facebook accounts than will go home each night to their two natural parents.

Tonight's first reading shows us that we readily idolize what is new and remarkable. Paul and Barnabas have cured a paralytic and the crowd want to make them into gods. Facebook has connected many hundreds of millions of people; Twitter gives the possibility for four thousand tweets a second to be recorded on the day of the Royal Wedding. If we are not very careful these become our modern idols, the modern gods. The Pope says that the times we are living through are like the industrial revolution in terms of their impact. He is right, and there is a further moral dimension about access and leadership. To participate in the industrial revolution you needed the resource to develop or control the means of production. To participate in social media you just need access to a computer. In the industrial revolution bad machines broke or were uneconomic to run. In social media bad ideas can easily have as much air time as good ones, can quickly gain status and followers.

We believe that we are created with a Divine Spark within us; that God breathed life into us. We have a timeless truth to offer the world; the truth of inclusive, generous, self sacrificing, everlasting love. The truth of Jesus Christ. Where social media lacks a moral compass, the distinctive and wonderful Christian contribution can precisely be to provide a framework to evaluate ideas and contributions, to provide content, values and challenge. The Pope exhorts us to do this: "join the network of relationships the digital era has made possible," he says. And "proclaim our faith that Christ is God, the saviour of humanity and history." It is good just to pause with that for a moment. When we use digital media, is that what we do?

People might ask, so how do we do it? The word that leaps out from the Pope's message is "authentic." In just over two pages the Pope uses that word six times. When the Pope came to Britain last year I met a parishioner at Sunday morning Mass who said, "This is the first time I have been out for three days, Father. I started to watch on Thursday and I just couldn't stop." They were right – it was electrifying – and the key to it was the Pope's own authenticity.

The beginning of authenticity is prayer. We saw that on the Papal Visit; it was clear that prayer was at the heart of it all. It was not just that he prayed, and encouraged others to pray, it was where he prayed. With schoolchildren on a field in Twickenham; at the tomb of St Edward the Confessor; at airports and in a

seminary. The Pope showed prayer woven into life. The most striking moment of prayer came in the three minutes of absolute silence in the centre of Hyde Park. The broadcasters broadcast silence; the picture was of the monstrosity. The Pope knelt. And in the silence, there is no doubt that God spoke. To bring prayer authentically to the digital era is such an opportunity – where else are so many millions so profoundly reached – and yet there is also such a challenge in allowing the stillness of prayer to infuse the noise of social media.

Authenticity also means speaking difficult truths. The Pope prayed with survivors of abuse. He spoke publicly of deep sorrow, shame and humiliation because of child abuse, and of a desire for healing and reconciliation. This was not the only difficult truth he faced. He challenged politicians, in the wonderful setting of Westminster Hall; “Where is the ethical foundation for political choices to be found?” he asked, offering the solution that “Religion is not a problem for legislators to solve, but a vital contributor to the national conversation.” In all of this, there was a sense of deeply facing what was broken; deeply reaching into hurts and fractures to find profound truths. In our parishes we see brokenness every day – fractured and fragmented lives. The Pope showed us – and Christ shows us – that authentic responses can be rooted precisely in places where we are wounded, broken, suffering. If we start there, we start with a deep humility and kindness. Can that be ever more a distinctive feature of the Catholic input to digital media?

Blessed through prayer. Broken. It is very significant that the Pope chooses the scriptural reference of the Road to Emmaus within the message for World Communications Day. “Jesus took the bread and said the blessing; then he broke it and handed it to them. And their eyes were opened and they recognised him.” Tonight we are here to celebrate the Eucharist, the source and summit of living faith, the heart of living authentically - here, and out there, and online.

To celebrate the Eucharist shows us that brokenness is part of the story, but not the end of it. At Emmaus their hearts burned within them and they rushed to tell others the good news. In tonight’s Gospel we hear of the Holy Spirit, the Advocate. In Christ’s life, and in this Easter season, we are infused by Resurrection. And so too the Papal Visit was a visit where joyful smiles lit the way. Blessed by prayer, and both offering and facing difficult truths, we take the next steps of outpouring grace. In his encounter with schoolchildren at Twickenham the Pope suggested that in front of him were “Saints of the future.” At its best our faith is full of joy – the little bit of tartan round the Pope’s shoulders on his drive through Edinburgh set the tone for some of that. And then on the steps of Westminster Cathedral a young man from East London hugged Pope Benedict accompanied by the radiant cheers of thousands of young people and onlookers. I had the astonishing privilege of being just a few feet away. I witnessed Paschal and Pope Benedict speak to the world, and yet in that same moment speak personally to each other, eye to eye, face to face.

The Eucharist is a real, tangible encounter with Christ. The power of the Eucharist, the reason for setting it as the true icon of authentic communication, is that we see Christ, hold Christ, intimately commune with Christ. In deepening our understanding of social media, in providing a moral compass and an authentic encounter, the most profound truth that we can offer is that the virtual will never be – can never be – the real. Digital media blurs that distinction. As Catholics in the media, we bring a remarkable reality to the virtual world. My friend’s four year old boy, Max, the children from my school who go home to facebook but not their natural parents, those who are responsible for 55 million tweets a day, they all need the reality we offer. And what an opportunity – for we need the insights they offer, these digital natives in this new era. Youth ministry has never been more pivotal – we have the opportunity to pass on the timeless truths of faith in a new way, and the “saints of the future” are the very ones to do it, if we only give them the catechesis, the resources and the chance.

How can we summarise it? How do we put into just a few words the essence of the reality with which we want to infuse the virtual, reality which is challenging, personal, intimate, loving, full of grace, hope, and eternal truth. Thankfully we already have the answer: a hundred years before Blackberry Messaging Cardinal Newman gave us the apposite phrase that summarises every Eucharistic encounter, every authentic encounter. Some time tonight or tomorrow you will be creating your next newspaper column, piece for broadcast, blog or tweet. As you do, and always, let it be infused with the same deep truth and reality that infuses our Eucharist tonight, the deep truth and reality of the moment where “heart speaks unto heart.”