

The Importance of Fellowship

A couple of weeks ago, I met a friend for dinner and at a nearby table a family sat down. It was hard not to notice how one of the children had on a set of headphones hooked up to a tablet, and the other child also had a tablet. The kids were about 5 years of age.

Now, there's nothing wrong with electronic tablets. I'm using a laptop computer to write this article and technology is engrained in my life. Waiting for dinner I'll check my phone too. But seeing this (and this wasn't the first time I've seen it) it couldn't help but make me wonder if technology is taking over our lives. Maybe mom and dad wanted to have a conversation and the kids play some games while waiting for dinner to arrive. But meals by their very nature are social events. For instance every day, a number of our staff have lunch together and share conversation, and next week people will be enjoying a fabulous chicken dinner but hopefully also sharing some fellowship and conversation too.

As for me, I'm on my phone constantly making moves on Words With Friends, checking social media, getting news, checking sports scores and checking email. But I also try to remind myself technology is no substitute for real people; an actual conversation face-to-face; or spending time with people we care about.

One thing we all need to look at is the role technology plays in our lives.

According to an article "Could You Be Addicted to Technology" in *Psychology Today* by Dr. Shainna Ali, Ph.D., LMHC, some questions to consider are:

Have you noticed an increase in how often you use your device?

Have you felt guilty about how often you use your device?

Do you experience an urge to use your device?

When you are using your device, do you experience lift in your mood?

When you are using your device, do you experience a thrill?

When unable to use your device do you experience discomfort?

Have you noticed times in which it seems as though time was lost while you were in the zone using your device?

Dr. Ali notes that constant use of technology has now become normalized; "The toddler tinkering with a tablet, the teen locked away in their room tied to their computer, and the adult buried in their phone at a social engagement are just a few examples of ordinary use." I'm not a psychologist, but "ordinary" in describing these things is a little disconcerting. I don't see it too often at church, but I read about a priest in Spain who installed phone jamming equipment at his parish because things got so bad. (Thankfully not needed at Saint Joe's).

And it's not just phones of course; some become addicted to computers, and it's more common now for adults to play video games along with children and teens. These can

be sources of entertainment, but if a person is playing hour after hour of video games rather than interacting with others, or going outside, it can become an addiction.

Contrast this to what goes on at the Harvest Festival next week. To be sure, technology is involved in its planning. But, by and large, what you'll see next Friday and Saturday are people having real conversations over dinner; people talking to one another at bingo or while having a beer, people dancing to a band. Humans talking to one another, face-to-face. That's a good thing.

In the Gospel this week, from Luke 16: 19-31, we hear the story of the rich man and Lazarus; the rich man ends up in hell, and Lazarus in heaven. But the problem wasn't the money; rather the problem is the rich man steps over Lazarus literally each day as he's in front of his house, and never opens his eyes to see his needs to help him. His money has made him blind. Money can do that to us too, but so too can other things in our life, both tangible and intangible.

Technology is great, but as we prepare to celebrate the Harvest Festival next weekend, maybe we can take a page from the experience and be reminded of how important our connections to one another are, and strive to build them throughout the year.

So by all means, continue to use the smart phones, the Internet and play video games if that's your thing. But just remember, they are no substitute for time spent with one another, meaning we all need to look at how much time we spend with our gadgets, and the impact technology has on our families and our lives. Look at how much time is spent with computer gaming and video games; how much you are able to have a family dinner and talk to one another; how often you use the smart phone to text and tweet when you are at dinner; and if you are having a conversation with someone, maybe look them in the eye and listen to them rather than looking at the phone in between sentences. Obviously too, make sure you aren't using technology for immoral actions; if it is an occasion to sin, turn off the computer and put it away, or keep it in public spaces and only use it there. And parents, most of us survived just fine too without cell phones, so don't be afraid to be a "meanie" by setting boundaries on cell phone use, and check that phone regularly because for as great as technology is, it can really cause problems for young and old when people venture to places they shouldn't go online or misuse cell phone cameras.

Growing up when going out with my parents to a restaurant, I'd play kids menu games while waiting for food to arrive too, not too different from what the kids were doing on the tablet. But once the food arrived, we'd talk, and we'd do more of that as a family too not just on special occasions. This Harvest Festival is a way for our parishioners to get to know one another better, to share some laughs and stories and build bridges in ways modern technology will never be able to do. So let's strive to make that a way of life with our families and friends too, remembering that the perfect "app" for deepening our connection with one another is the gift of our time and attention, something God in His wisdom pre-loaded into our souls when He created us.