



3rd Order SSPX

Letter to Members: District of Australia & New Zealand



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Phone: (03) 5629 1045/0488211664

Email: jordiestephens@hotmail.com

Virtuous Reality: Part II

Dear Postulants and Professed members,

In the last letter we acknowledged that our increasingly virtual world easily drives a wedge between us and our neighbour. The treatment was restricted to our interaction with one single neighbour, refraining from venturing into the world of massive social networking. This was deliberate, and for two reasons. Firstly, it is unlikely that a significant portion of you are involved in the sort of large-scale social networking wherein so many people live and breathe today. Secondly, my own non-existence in that world of virtual society utterly disqualifies me from any serious comment about its dangers. Let us not pronounce upon things about which we are ignorant.

Having looked at just a few ways wherein my relationship with my neighbour is affected by the screen, let us now turn to Him Who is the very reason I must love my neighbour at all: Our Divine Lord. How might the world of phones, movies and internet affect my relationship with God?

Have you ever found yourself doing a 'quick' internet search at say, 3pm, and then realizing that it is 'suddenly' 4pm? Like the rapid and almost miraculous passing of time experienced in moments of ecstatic joy, something akin to this can happen in front of the screen. An important word in that sentence is 'ecstatic'.

A common thread in all uses of the word 'ecstasy' is this: a loss or diminution in perceiving our body's successive movements. From a Greek word meaning 'standing outside oneself', the person in ecstasy loses track of, or is actually removed from, the sequence of before-and-after movements of their body. Some of the Saints experienced this. Something similar is also experienced by souls in the Church Triumphant and Suffering who await the return of the body which clothed them here on earth. Granted, they still experience successive acts of mind and will, but without their body they are 'standing outside themselves' until the General Judgment.

Given my intended audience here¹, it is this loss of time when using the internet that probably constitutes the biggest threat to our relationship with our Saviour. While there are certainly many, many wonderful helps to our Faith found on the web, all too often we find ourselves immersed in a succession of skipplings from one photo or article to another, opening up link within link within link...while the minutes and even hours tick by without our knowing it. Let us be honest and admit that we have often finished such endless clickings having to guiltily confess 'Oh dear, that was a complete waste of time!'

Can this be avoided? For Catholics who have little love of prayer and/or study, this will be extremely difficult to avoid. But if, like many of you, we are accustomed to applying our mind and heart to 'invisibles' for prolonged periods in the form of prayer and study, the enchanting but shallow delights offered on the internet will not hold us for long. The regular and remembered joys of mind and heart found in these noble activities will constantly offer a convincing contrast to the pleasures of the screen. However, if these uplifting activities are not regular we will forget the substantial joys they gave and settle for the cheap joys of the screen.

¹ An audience composed of young men with minimal prayer lives, for example, would be warned against dangers threatening purity.

The cultivation of prayer and study have been treated in other letters, so here let us confine ourselves to this question: 'How can I avoid extended internet adventures having a value indistinguishable from zero?' A couple of things come to mind.

Firstly, let us not even go on the internet unless we first have a specific purpose in mind: to transfer money, to buy a book, to check my emails. I know this is easier said than done, and we have all spent hours looking in shops with no particular purpose in mind: 'I just want to see what's here!' But shop-surfing is not at all the same as internet-surfing. In the former case (besides the fact that we are looking at, touching and smelling real objects) other people in the shop often see what we are doing, thus keeping our activity somewhat within socially acceptable boundaries. No such safeguards exist when browsing the internet alone. Secondly, there are only so many objects within a real store, whereas the internet keeps items and ideas beyond human reckoning. The items in a shop may enchant us for an hour, but the internet might enchant us all day.

Secondly, when possible let us choose a working environment that does not have internet with a full-size screen² within reach. No matter how disciplined we are, it can be nigh impossible to resist 'just quickly looking up something up' if it is only a hand movement away. Over the years I have many times been tempted to look something up at my school desk while doing my daily spiritual reading. I succumbed on numerous occasions, and doubtless my time with God suffered. Years ago I made the decision to return from school when the students finish, to continue my work back in my room at the priory where no large screen with the internet is easily available. The dangerous thing which must be sought out with effort is far less dangerous than if easily accessible.

Lastly, let us cultivate the habit of using it only when another person is around, or at least in an open room with someone else in the house somewhere. I understand that often this is simply impossible, and perhaps for many of you the temptation to endless internet searches is simply not a problem, even when alone.

As an aside, what about doing my pious reading (and intermittent prayers excited therein) using a Kindle or even the internet itself? Am I allowed morally? Yes, there is no sin in doing so (although the Kindle would be superior to reading online due to the constant temptation in the latter case to go to another e-book or even a website). That being said, please forgive the following brief reflection about regularly reading from a screen instead of a real book.

Given the ever-increasing artificiality of our age already, from movies to microwaves, it might be hoped that at least reading a book might be spared the invasion of the virtual. Reading a book is one of the most distinctly human activities we can do, and one of the highest forms of true leisure. Besides the confusion of essences reading from a Kindle (or any screen) involves³, I would argue firstly that the rubrics of reading a real book (E.g. turning paper pages) are actually essential for beings like us composed of body and soul.

The human experience of reading a book is far more than just understanding the words. We Catholics are familiar with the notion of Liturgy. I would like to take the word 'liturgy' here in a wide sense of 'any regular bodily ritual accompanying our striving toward what is higher'. Reading is something high indeed, and there is a 'liturgical' aspect to it, a set of ceremonies and bodily movements that may not be as disposable as some think. Turning pages, smelling them, feeling their texture, feeling the book's weight, making and unmaking creases, etc., are just a few of the rubrics of reading. For example, it is not at all the same experience to read a well-worn and well-thumbed book as opposed to the same text on a screen. The latter has no 'history', whereas the former is a sort of archaeological artefact whose material qualities affect in no small way the reading experience. Let us take every possible opportunity to interact with permanent essences rather than fluid and shifting ones.

Clearly this has not at all been an exhaustive treatment of how the screen threatens our prayer life. But whatever may have been the encroachments of this powerful tool upon our union with Christ, let us rest assured that He daily provides us with the graces to counteract them. Even if we fail now and again, a heavenly pick-me-up of actual grace will always be close at hand to put us back on our feet. The dangers of the screen are no more impervious to God's grace or beyond His providence than anything else.

May this sage and comforting advice of King Solomon give us all courage to continue: "A righteous man falls seven times, *and rises again*" (Proverbs 24:16).

In the Sacred Heart of Jesus, through the Immaculate Heart of Mary,

Fr Jordie Stephens

Spiritual Director of the Third Order of SSPX for Australia



² Spending obscene amounts of time surfing the internet on a small phone is less likely due to the more awkward navigation skills needed, especially for the older generation.

³E.g. a Kindle can 'choose' to be a Bible one day and a comic book the next, thus destabilizing the mind's need for perceiving permanent essences.