



## 3<sup>rd</sup> 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 I

Dear Postulants and Professed members,

For those of you faithfully keeping the 3<sup>rd</sup> Order Rule, your life should be one of continual growth in virtue. Not that you will necessarily feel it to be so. The joy and facility accompanying the operation of any deep and practised virtue is only won by repeated acts that may feel altogether unvirtuous. We all know what it is like to feel as if we were 'faking it', such can be the repulsion attached to certain good acts before a virtue is established. Stubborn elements in our temperament combined with bad past habits can make our good moral choices feel unreal.

But they are not. We must take heart in the fact that, despite the difficulties, good acts and the virtues they build render us more real than any other activity. Virtue is to our soul what gardening is to a backyard. Just as pruning and manuring lead to increased backyard beauty and productivity, so it is for the human soul. Is not the well-ordered garden more real than the unkempt one? Likewise, the virtuous soul is more real than the unvirtuous and neglected one. To the extent that we grow in virtue we grow in reality. A Saint is more solid and real than a sinner, because he has more of God in him, more of Reality. To commit even a venial sin is to become less real, more wraith-like and see-through.

One of the dangers in our pursuit of this 'virtuous reality' is the proliferation of 'virtual reality'. Whether we like it or not, many of us are more-or-less firmly ensconced in what we might term 'Screen World'. Even for those of us blessed enough to avoid it for most of our day, its alluring knock continually begs entrance at the door of our soul. It is all too frequently beckoning in the background: 'Come and look!'

Each new environment presents us with the opportunity to practise different virtues. For example, the virtues demanded when we are by ourselves at our desk will be quite different from those required when we are entertaining guests in the dining room. Likewise the virtues demanded in a church are quite different from those called for at a football game.

So also with the omnipresent screen. Although we may often come away from it feeling somewhat less human, it is still an occasion for virtue just as any other conscious activity. In fact, it is precisely because of its 'virtual' nature (I.e. its powerful imitation of reality) that we need to arm ourselves with virtue all the more in its use.

I have written in a past letter<sup>1</sup> about the power of the screen over one's eyes and its presentation of woman. This month I will examine how the screen poses challenges for the maintenance of 'virtuous reality' *when communicating*

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<sup>1</sup> December 2014

with our neighbour. There seem to be at least two common contexts wherein 'Screen World' threatens fraternal charity. The first regards our remote relations with our neighbour, the second our proximate relations.

**Remote:** We Christians should be preeminent in responding to greetings. Since our neighbour is created in God's own image, acknowledging their mere presence is a good act done to Christ Himself. When our neighbour goes even further such as by smiling, saying hello or even asking us a question, the need for us to respond is more urgent.

Have you ever sent an email or SMS to a specific person and received no response or acknowledgement, although you were quite sure they received it? More importantly, have *you* ever failed to send a reply out of laziness or to avoid a difficult or awkward situation that should have been faced? I said 'to a *specific person*' for a reason. If we have received an email as part of a group ('Dear Friend'), it is less likely that we need to respond. But if I am the sole addressee, then I should at least acknowledge receipt. It is embarrassing for all involved when a sender has to later ask the intended recipient 'Did you get my email/SMS?' If someone has gone to the trouble of initiating a conversation with us, it is common courtesy to at least confirm receipt of their message. Granted, often we cannot and perhaps should not reply immediately, but we should still immediately acknowledge the sender. In fact, there will usually be a direct proportion between our need for time to respond and the eagerness of the sender to have the receipt of his message acknowledged. Now not all messages are from conscious senders. Thus if a computer has generated the message ('Dear Valued Customer'), since there is here no conscious intent involved we need not necessarily respond.

Another element that needs to be considered is whether the message we receive is the first initiated by that person or merely the last ball hit over the net after a rally of back-and-forth messages. For example, if we send a message saying 'I deposited that money into your account yesterday' and the recipient replies with 'Thank you very much', we need not have scruples if we do not reply 'You're welcome!'

Let us then make the following rule regarding the receipt of emails or SMS's: *All consciously initiated individual messages should be replied to immediately.* The 'consciously' rules out computer-generated messages, 'initiated' rules out messages that are one of a series not necessitating a response, and 'individual' rules out group messages where numerous people receive the identical email or SMS.

**Proximate:** In the second category our neighbour is not remote and far away but right here beside us, in the room or the café. We have them to ourselves. Or do we?

We have all had the embarrassing experience of talking animatedly with someone face-to-face when suddenly their phone starts ringing. Did you ever feel like the proverbial shag on a rock when your interlocutor started a new conversation on their phone while you awkwardly looked on? Unless there is some real need (E.g. awaiting a call for an airport pickup) we should not have our phones turned on when speaking with our neighbour. I am not referring to persons we meet and talk to at random (E.g. people we happen to meet in the school or church car park). I mean those with whom we have made a special 'date' to have a chat or a catch-up.

And if we really have to talk on the phone when meeting someone, we should keep it short. Excessive laughing (let alone joking) should be avoided. Why? The very nature of laughter and jocularly sends the message to our companion that we are willing to interrupt them for trivial reasons. Besides, the lack of urgency it betrays tells our companion 'This person's conversation is as good as or better than yours. I am thus in no hurry to get off this call'.

If we have the internet on our phone, similar principles apply regarding the usage thereof in the presence of our companion. Once again, any use of it which is not absolutely necessary sends a similar message as that of the phone conversation: 'Talking with you is not my priority'.

In the next letter we will look at how the screen endangers virtue regarding to our duties to God.

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

