

A low-tech Lent?

by L_Brent_Bozell

Lent is a season of sacrifice and repentance. Most commonly, the discussion of Lenten commitments revolves around our obesity problem, sounding like a recommitment to already dissolved New Year's resolutions about a better diet or more exercise. Sometimes, we can sound like we're more focused on Jenny Craig than Jesus Christ.

Christians are supposed to concentrate on denying themselves in some smaller way that resembles the sacrifice of the Savior's death on the cross. This is a part of religion that can easily be caricatured by the cultural elite. The search for self-loathing and mortification easily transforms into the psychosis of Silas the albino monk/murderer of "The DaVinci Code."

Just as pizza sales must soar during football season, they probably plummet during Lent. That and sweets and soda — these are the regular Lenten sacrifices at the Bozell household.

But the Catholic bishops of Italy asked their flock for a more contemporary challenge: Give up text messaging, social networking websites and computer games in the weeks before Easter. They're asking believers to put down the iPhones and iPods and give up the hours on Facebook, at least on Fridays. In effect, bishops want believers to come out of their electronic caves and interact in a simpler, more direct way.

The request is unprecedented and evolved from Pope Benedict XVI's recent warning to the young not to substitute "virtual friendship" for real human relationships. On his YouTube site — find your flock where they gather! — the Holy Father warned "obsessive" use of mobile phones or computers "may isolate individuals from real social interaction while also disrupting the patterns of rest, silence and reflection that are necessary for healthy human development."

People whose fingers are Super-glued to their electronic devices — as in people who call their BlackBerry a "CrackBerry" — sometimes don't realize how incredibly boorish they are, playing with their gadgets while talking to others in person. Reporting on the Italian bishops' challenge, the London Times recounted that even Pope Benedict has experienced the distractions of obsessive texting. President Nicholas Sarkozy of France was flagged by many for rudeness for checking his mobile device for text messages during a personal audience with the pontiff.

It's a good idea in Italy and not a bad idea in America, either. Today there are dozens of Facebook groups focused on giving up the social networking site for Lent. It was very much the rage among American college students last year, meant to "reclaim their analog lives" from digital diversions.

How addicting are the social-networking sites? The Pew Research Center reported that nearly half of all 18-to-24 year olds visit such sites at least daily, compared to just 13 percent of Internet users overall. But a significant portion of their parents have also been hooked, finding on Facebook an ongoing reunion with high-school or college classmates or an online platform to gossip with the neighbors.

Just like sweets and soda, electronic communication isn't sinful in itself. Gian Maria Vian, editor of L'Osservatore Romano, the Vatican newspaper, insisted that text messages were "by their nature a neutral tool, neither good nor bad in themselves. It depends how they are used. If text messages are a proper way of communicating, I don't see why we should deprive ourselves of them on Good Friday or any other day." But just like too much sweets or soda, we can partake in electronic-messaging excess.

Expert pundits in Rome told the London Times they were pessimistic that young adults would listen to their bishops and take the headphones out of their ears and their face out of Facebook. Giving up electronic toys "is hardly living in the desert in camel-hair clothing and munching on locusts like John the Baptist.

But thinking through the habits of our high-tech lives should make us wonder if we're too absorbed in ourselves, or worse, too absorbed in a popular culture that demands we bathe ourselves in sensory overload, demanding an ever greater "fix" of sensation "sex, violence or music filled with rage. A message that we might try better and calmer "patterns of rest, silence and reflection" might not be an invitation to the desert. It may be the oasis in the desert that we really need.

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