

EMBRACING TECHNOLOGY IN TIMES OF NECESSITY AND CHANGE

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From quarantines to stay-at-home orders, isolation is a challenge for those who meet regularly in fraternities and participate in parish and community activities. Secular Franciscans are in the world, working and playing among people all the time, so it is no surprise that during a time in which people must avoid contact with each other brothers and sisters may feel apprehensive. While fraternity meetings are the equivalent of a monastery for the brothers and sisters of penance, the Secular Franciscan Order is not cloistered. It operates beyond monasteries.

In spite of drastic measures resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, today's situation is not debilitating. The Order should not allow this crisis to curb meetings and actions. Digital communication platforms like Zoom, FaceTime, Google Hangouts, and even conference calling connect people in ways almost as closely as in-person gatherings. Social platforms like Facebook and Instagram present evangelization opportunities for Secular Franciscans and all the faithful. Websites share schedules, formation materials, prayers, and inspiring words.

Fear precludes many from using these technologies. It is human nature to fear the unknown, and that fear is prominent when it comes to digital media. If Secular Franciscans are driven only by fear of basic communication technology as it emerges, obsolescence will surely come next—and soon. Websites, social media presence, and communication technology are vital to the success of any organization—especially one that is expected to preach the Gospel at all times. These platforms are key when traditional face-to-face interactions are not possible, and optimal supplements even when in-person contact is permitted.

Fear notwithstanding, human beings communicate digitally. Remaining relevant means adapting and embracing the way the faithful communicate.

The Catholic Church has a long history of embracing communication technology. From

being among the first to abandon scrolls in favor of the codex to Fr. Gabriel Richard publishing the first Catholic newspaper in the United States in 1802 to St. Maximilian Kolbe using magazines and radio to combat Nazi propaganda in Poland and Japan during World War II, the Church has been a pioneer in communicating with people in the way they want to be reached. Kolbe said, “If Jesus or St. Francis were alive today, they would use modern communication technology to reach the people.”

Email was first introduced in the 1970s, videoconferencing in the 1980s, so today's modern technology is not really new at all. There are just new, better platforms that deliver that technology to more people today than 30 years ago.

Jesus tells us “Be not afraid.” St. Clare said, “Go forth without fear.” The Minister General of the Secular Franciscan Order, Tibor Kauser, OFS, wrote in his Easter message, “Do not be afraid of using contemporary instruments and tools. Share your feelings, your experiences with each other,” he wrote. “Make phone calls, write e-mails, short messages, organize videoconferences.”

Once fear is overcome and the realization of a technological society sets in, the instruments available abound. Fraternity meetings and community prayer are easily conducted via Zoom and Google Hangouts. These videoconferencing services offer brothers and sisters the opportunity to see each other while meeting. It is the next best option to meeting in person, and the best option when in-person meetings are not possible. Facebook is an opportunity to evangelize, sharing scripture quotes, images (those not protected by copyright), and even links to the written word on fraternity websites. Blogging on websites can supplement formation for the fraternity, the region, and the nation. It puts more content available to be used and shared.

Technology created by man can be used for the greater glory of God as we face unprecedented times.