

The worldwide web: opportunities and pitfalls

# Nothing substitutes seeing in person

Pope Francis

*Ekklesia is publishing here excerpts of Pope Francis' clear, and extraordinarily insightful, message for the 55th World Communications Day, held on May 16, 2021.*

The internet, with its countless social media expressions, can increase the capacity for reporting and sharing, with many more eyes on the world and a constant flood of images and testimonies. Digital technology gives us the possibility of timely first-hand information that is often quite useful. We can think of certain emergency situations where the internet was the first to report the news and communicate official notices. It is a powerful tool, which demands that all of us be responsible as users and consumers. Potentially we can all become witnesses to events that otherwise would be overlooked by the traditional media, offer a contribution to society and highlight more stories, including positive ones. Thanks to the internet we have the opportunity to report what we see, what is taking place before our eyes, and to share it with others.

At the same time, the risk of misinformation being spread on social media has become evident to everyone. We have known for some time that news and even images can be easily manipulated, for any number of reasons, at times simply for sheer narcissism. Being critical in this regard is not about demonizing the internet, but is rather an incentive to greater discernment and responsibility for contents both sent and received. All of us are responsible for the communications we make, for the information we share, for the control that we can exert over fake news by exposing it. All of us are to be witnesses of the truth: to go, to see and to share.

In communications, nothing can ever completely replace seeing things in person. Some things can only be learned through first-hand experience. We do not communicate merely with words, but with our eyes, the tone of our voice and our gestures. Jesus' attractiveness to those who met him depended on the truth of his preaching; yet the effectiveness of what he said was inseparable from how he looked at others, from how he acted towards them, and even from his silence. The disciples not only listened to his words; they watched him speak. Indeed in him – the incarnate Logos – the Word took on a face; the invisible God let himself be seen, heard and touched, as John himself tells us (*cf.* 1 Jn 1:1-3). The word is

effective only if it is “seen”, only if it engages us in experience, in dialogue. For this reason, the invitation to “come and see” was, and continues to be, essential.

[...] The Good News of the Gospel spread throughout the world as a result of person-to-person, heart-to-heart encounters with men and women who accepted the invitation to “come and see”, and were struck by the “surplus” of humanity that shone through the gaze, the speech and the gestures of those who bore witness to Jesus Christ.

[...] So too, the Gospel comes alive in our own day, whenever we accept the compelling witness of people whose lives have been changed by their encounter with Jesus. For two millennia, a chain of such encounters has communicated the attractiveness of the Christian adventure. The challenge that awaits us, then, is to communicate by encountering people, where they are and as they are.