

Smart phones and the death of conversation

If a few decades ago you had turned on the television and found yourself watching some drama in which the entire human race walked around utterly engrossed in the little slabs of metal and glass they held in their hands, you would have assumed it was some sort of science-fiction nightmare in which aliens had taken over the world. You would have called it fantasy; we have come to recognise it as normality. Psychologists and social scientists are beginning to realise that since the first iPhone in 2007 unleashed an unstoppable flood of smartphones, human culture has begun to change. For many of us, our smartphone is now a fundamental part of our existence. We check it immediately on waking and before closing our eyes at night. We use it to email, communicate by text, take photographs, read maps and engage in Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp and whatever the latest cult app is. From our smartphone comes our music, advice for living, directions for driving, appointments and, increasingly, much of our life. Smartphones have woven themselves inextricably into who we are and how we live. We cannot imagine life without one. While the usefulness of smartphones is beyond question, you don't have to look hard to start to suspect that there may be a price to pay. Reading books has clearly suffered: anyone with any time on their hands now simply engages with a smartphone. Equally, many people now struggle to handle silence: they are never alone with their thoughts, or, it seems do they want to be. Few people now seem able to sit quietly staring into space or gazing at nature without succumbing to an irresistible urge to check the phone or take a selfie.

One particular aspect of concern is the impact of smartphones on conversation. We've all seen the classic and sad manifestation of this: the young couple sitting in a restaurant deeply engrossed, not with each other but with their phones. But the problem occurs more widely. How many of us have tried to have a serious discussion with someone and failed because they seemed more interested in checking their phone? This erosion of conversation is important because it is surely one of the things that makes us human.

I want to suggest that while smartphones give us communication — and do so very well — they do not allow us to take part in conversation in any real sense. Think for a moment about what a traditional, old-fashioned, flesh-and-blood conversation involves. It's not just words: there are silences, hesitant exploratory phrases, eye contact, facial expressions, laughter, hand gestures and possibly even physical touches of reassurance or encouragement.

The fact that there is no technological intermediate means that such conversations are spontaneous. They can spread free and wide, bouncing one moment into a joke, sliding the next into some subtle expression of regret or even be coming one of those silences that says more than words. In an authentic conversation, unconstrained by technology, there can be a richness that gives rise to both empathy and intimacy. Indeed, real conversations can be dangerous you can easily find yourself saying more than you meant to say. Is the fact that you stay in control one of the strongest attractions of smartphone communication? Smartphone communication promises us so much more yet, in reality, delivers so much less. We end up with a pale shadow of a real conversation, the equivalent of junk food for the mind.

There is, I think, a clear perspective on all this. We were made by God to communicate in the deepest and richest possible way. Famously, John's Gospel in the Bible begins "*In the beginning was the Word*" (1:1). We know that the Word is Jesus, however, historically, some renderings of that phrase have been "In the beginning was the conversation." There is some truth in that. The Christian belief that God is a Trinity – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – is that, from eternity, there was conversation within God. Before the universe was created, at the heart of the eternal God, there was conversation. At the creation of man, God said, "*Let Us make man in Our image, in Our likeness*" (Gen. 1:26).

To be made in God's image is to be made for conversation. We can go further. In the second chapter of Genesis we read that God decided that it was 'not good' for man to be alone and so created woman for him. We have been endlessly preoccupied with what that means in terms of sexuality but we should not ignore the implication that we were meant not for isolation but for conversation.

There are many rules and guidelines we could come up with for not letting smartphones dominate our life. Ultimately, however, they boil down to the key idea that we must always put direct conversation above digital communication. Short of an outright emergency, conversation with flesh and blood human beings around us should always take priority over any form of smartphone communication with those at the distance.

The truly scary thing about the global smartphone epidemic is not merely that we are losing the richness of conversation, but that we may be losing the very ability to achieve it. Having a serious conversation face to face rather than tapping away at the screen is far better, and more likely to achieve something. Unless we take care to guard our use of technology in general, and smartphones in particular, the fear is that in the end we shall become nothing more than zombies talking to each other via a screen, showing no emotion whatsoever, and that is not helpful in our walk together as brothers and sisters of the Lord.