

## Real Presence Amid the Shallows: Eucharist and Friendship in a Digital Age

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*This article contends that Christ's eucharistic offer of friendship, and the habits of attentiveness such real presence demands, must shape the church's mission in a digital milieu that tends to shallow attention and relationships. It makes this argument in dialogue principally with the theology of Bernard Lonergan and the pontificate of Pope Francis, while aided by the cultural commentary of Nicholas Carr, Sherry Turkle, and Marshall McLuhan. First, I consider how Lonergan's focus on human knowing and choosing anticipates the recent turn in the Catholic magisterium under Pope Francis that considers the formative effects of digital communication technologies. Second, I show how Lonergan's account of bias helps explain the shallowing effects of these technologies, for both cognition and community. Third, inspired by Lonergan and Pope Francis, I propose how practices of friendship—informed by Christ's own friendship extended through Eucharistic presence—can foster habits of real presence able to counter the shallows of our digital age.*

**Keywords:** Eucharist, digital technology, Lonergan, Pope Francis, Carr, Turkle, friendship, real presence, McLuhan, liturgy

**I**N the spring of 2020, I taught TH 282, “Christian Faith and Technology.” It was the first time that my institution offered the class. The course drew inspiration from the animated discussion that arose from my students whenever I mentioned social media, smartphones, or the like. TH 282 did not disappoint; students exhibited their fascination with the topic through penetrating questions and stimulating conversations. Students often stayed after class curious to hear more from their classmates and share their own ideas. Their passion and self-motivation matched no other class that I have taught. Our shared interests produced a genuine learning community.

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Midway through the semester, the course screeched to a halt. At 3:29 pm on March 12, 2020, after much rumor and speculation, the campus community received an email from our college president: campus was to be immediately closed as a precaution against the rapidly spreading COVID-19 virus. After a few days of mad scramble, my class on technology found a new setting: online. Neither a conversation, now posted on discussion boards, nor an essay, now sent through email, failed to reference our new virtual reality. Students' interest in the course material only intensified, even if a screen now mediated their passion. The spontaneous conversations after class ceased. Many students wondered if this would be the "new normal."

Bernard Lonergan calls for theology "to operate on the level of our day."<sup>1</sup> Theology must "mediate between a cultural matrix and the significance and role of a religion in that matrix."<sup>2</sup> Both the interests of young adults and the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic magnify the pressing need for theological engagements with digital communication technologies—technologies like smartphones, laptops, and social media that process and relay information online. Lonergan's work complements burgeoning efforts to grasp the opportunities and challenges set forth by these technologies from a theological perspective. Guided by Lonergan and in response to the exigencies described above, this article contends that Christ's eucharistic offer of friendship, and the habits of attentiveness such real presence demands, must guide the church's mission in a digital milieu that tends to shallow attention and relationships.

The article proceeds in three parts. First, I consider how Lonergan's focus on human knowing and choosing anticipates the recent turn in the Catholic magisterium under Pope Francis that considers how technologies shape human knowing and choosing. Second, in light of this shared focus, I show how Lonergan's account of bias helps explain the often shallowing effects of digital social technologies, for both cognition and community. Third, in light of this diagnosis and inspired by both Pope Francis and Lonergan (with the help of Thomas Aquinas), I propose how practices of friendship—informed by Christ's own friendship extended through eucharistic presence—can foster habits of real presence able to counter the shallowing predilections of our digital age. This ministry of eucharistic friendship and real presence can guide the church's mission in a way that operates on the level of our digital day and that mediates Christ's redemption in our digital matrix.

<sup>1</sup> Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), 367.

<sup>2</sup> Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, ix.

### A Turn to the Medium

Catholic magisterial engagement with communication technologies began during the 1930s. The codification of laws in the United States like the Hays Code and the establishment of groups like its U.S. Catholic analogue, The Legion of Decency, strived to ensure that the developing cinema industry would be used for good in the content it portrayed. This question of “right use” marked Catholic treatments of communication technologies thereafter. The first encyclical devoted entirely to the topic, Pope Pius XI’s 1936 *Vigilanti Cura*, affirmed the work of groups like The Legion of Decency for ensuring that cinema is “an influence for good morals, an educator” rather than a “school of corruption” that creates “misunderstanding.”<sup>3</sup> Subsequent treatments followed suit, nuancing how exactly these technologies could be rightly used and share virtuous content.

While questions about censorship subsided, broader admonitions to use communication technologies for these moral purposes grew. These good possibilities revealed the theological potential of such technologies, a sentiment evident both before and after the Second Vatican Council. In his 1957 encyclical *Miranda Prorsus*, Pius XII declared such technologies to be gifts from God in the ways that they can spread the gospel.<sup>4</sup> The Second Vatican Council’s decree on social communication, *Inter Mirifica*, for the most part continued this trajectory.<sup>5</sup> In its 1971 instruction *Communio et Progressio*, the recently rebranded Pontifical Commission for Social Communication waxed poetic about how the self-revealing connection promised by communication technologies can anticipate the self-giving triune unity wherein the human race finds salvation.<sup>6</sup> Similar appraisals accompanied the advent of the World Wide Web. As the Pontifical Commission for Social Communication stated in its 2002 *Ethics in Internet*: “The Internet is being put to many good uses now, with the promise of many more, but much harm also can be done by its improper

<sup>3</sup> Pope Pius XI, *Vigilanti Cura*, (June 29, 1936), [https://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_p-xi\\_enc\\_29061936\\_vigilanti-cura.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xi_enc_29061936_vigilanti-cura.html), I and II.

<sup>4</sup> Pope Pius XII, *Miranda Prorsus*, (September 8, 1957), [https://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_p-xii\\_enc\\_08091957\\_miranda-prorsus.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xii_enc_08091957_miranda-prorsus.html), introduction.

<sup>5</sup> Second Vatican Council, *Inter Mirifica*, (December 4, 1963), [https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_decree\\_19631204\\_inter-mirifica\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19631204_inter-mirifica_en.html).

<sup>6</sup> Pontifical Commission for Social Communication, *Communio et Progressio*, (May 23, 1971), [https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/pccs/documents/rc\\_pc\\_pccs\\_doc\\_23051971\\_communio\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/pccs/documents/rc_pc_pccs_doc_23051971_communio_en.html), §10–13.

use.”<sup>7</sup> Just like cinema seventy years prior, the internet represents yet another technological means that can be used for good or ill.

While these magisterial treatments of communication technologies challenge their users to employ those technologies for the good, they fail to engage questions raised by such technologies in their full depth. As James Caccamo submits, they presuppose an instrumentalist account of technology that considers communication technologies as neutral tools whose morality depends on the intentions and actions of their users. Questions of right content and right use preoccupy these magisterial texts. They largely fail to engage more determinist accounts of technology that consider how technologies themselves shape human knowing and action, for better or for worse.<sup>8</sup> This approach, popularized by cultural critic (and Catholic convert) Marshall McLuhan, examines these deeper formative influences. In the 1960s, McLuhan coined his now-famous phrase, “the medium is the message,” to capture how various technological media reconfigured and determined processes of thought and social arrangements beyond the intentions of their users and apart from the content they conveyed.<sup>9</sup> Questions concerning the determinative character of communication technologies have only intensified with the arrival of the internet and its expansion into every area of life, as the next section of this article will show. An adequate theological engagement with digital communication technologies thus must engage not simply questions of right use but, even more fundamentally, the cognitive and social effects of the online medium itself.

In focusing on these latter questions, the pontificate of Pope Francis has ushered in a new epoch of Catholic magisterial reflection on technology in general and, by extension, digital communication technologies.<sup>10</sup> Prior to his election as pope, Jorge Bergoglio witnessed firsthand the creeping incursion

<sup>7</sup> Pontifical Commission for Social Communication, *Ethics in Internet*, (February 22, 2002), [https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/pccs/documents/rc\\_pc\\_pccs\\_doc\\_20020228\\_ethics-internet\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/pccs/documents/rc_pc_pccs_doc_20020228_ethics-internet_en.html), §2.

<sup>8</sup> James F. Caccamo, “The Message on the Media: Seventy Years of Catholic Social Teaching on Social Communication,” *Josephinum Journal of Theology* 15, no. 2 (2008): 390–426, at 424–25; much of the preceding timeline is indebted to Caccamo’s article. One, though underdeveloped, exception to this instrumentalist tendency can be found in *Ethics in Internet*, 13.

<sup>9</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1964), 7. McLuhan criticized the Catholic magisterium for its failure to recognize this dynamic; see, for example, Marshall McLuhan, *Letters of Marshall McLuhan*, ed. Matie Molinaro, Corinne McLuhan, and William Toye (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987), 362, 371, 386, 492–93.

<sup>10</sup> In their extended theological reflections on the ambivalence of technology, the writings of Pope Benedict XVI signaled something of a transition toward this shift;

of Western technocracy into his homeland of Argentina. In his doctoral work, Bergoglio studied the writings of Romano Guardini, whose concern about the dislocation fostered by industrialization portended questions raised by Bergoglio's own Latin American experience.<sup>11</sup> Above all, Francis connects contemporary technologies with contemporary social injustices. As made clear in *Laudato Si'*, Francis's assessment of the ecological crisis—and the cries of the earth and the poor that mark it—brings focus to structural questions of technology. The ecological crisis typifies how contemporary technologies have radically altered humans' relationship to nature, to self, and to the rest of humanity.

By necessity then, Francis's analysis of contemporary technologies explores their formative effects. In *Laudato Si'*, Francis examines the “technocratic paradigm” and its attendant problems. He begins by expressing his appreciation for the legitimate achievements of various technologies and hopes that they might be used in the service of the common good.<sup>12</sup> At the same time, he goes on to admit that “many problems of today's world stem from the tendency, at times unconscious, to make the method and aims of science and technology an epistemological paradigm which shapes the lives of individuals and the workings of society,” and thus “we have to accept that technological products are not neutral, for they create a framework which ends up conditioning lifestyles and shaping social possibilities.”<sup>13</sup> “Technology,” he stresses, “tends to absorb everything into its ironclad logic,” and so it “tends to dominate economic and political life.”<sup>14</sup> Moving beyond a primary focus on questions of use (though he still admits the value of such considerations), Francis acknowledges here how certain contemporary technologies reshape human living, both cognitively and socially, in non-neutral ways. As suggested in *Laudato Si'*, the very use of these technologies presumes control and fosters fragmentation.<sup>15</sup> The prevalence of tyrannical anthropocentrism and its long-ranging effects illustrate the imperializing tendencies of technology.<sup>16</sup>

see, for example, Pope Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, (June 29, 2009), [https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_enc\\_20090629\\_caritas-in-veritate.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20090629_caritas-in-veritate.html), §68–77.

<sup>11</sup> See Massimo Borghesi, *The Mind of Pope Francis: Jorge Mario Bergoglio's Intellectual Journey*, trans. Barry Hudock (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2018), 131–42.

<sup>12</sup> Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, (May 24, 2015), [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150524\\_encyclica-laudato-si.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_encyclica-laudato-si.html), §102–03.

<sup>13</sup> Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, §107.

<sup>14</sup> Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, §108–09.

<sup>15</sup> Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, §110.

<sup>16</sup> See Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, §68, §122–23. This critique of the technocratic paradigm, as applied to digital technologies, has remained a consistent one; see, for instance,

Francis avers that the very nature of these technologies determines those who use them, not only intensifying the cries of the earth and the poor but rendering people deaf to them. The medium is indeed the message, and so it is the medium that warrants primary attention in caring for our common home.

This type of structural assessment emerges in Francis's engagement with digital communication technologies in *Laudato Si'* and elsewhere. In *Laudato Si'*, while acknowledging the "exciting possibilities" of online media, Pope Francis also rues how the influence of such technologies "can stop people from learning how to live wisely, to think deeply and to love generously," at times "shield[ing] us from direct contact with the pain, the fears and the joys of others and the complexity of their personal experiences."<sup>17</sup> The digital medium has both cognitive and social consequences, consequences that will be explored at greater length in the next section. Francis's attentiveness to such formative effects also makes him especially concerned with how digital communication technologies shape younger populations. In *Christus Vivit*, for instance, Francis states:

The digital environment is characteristic of the contemporary world. Broad swathes of humanity are immersed in it in an ordinary and continuous manner. It is no longer merely a question of "using" instruments of communication, but of living in a highly digitalized culture that has had a profound impact on ideas of time and space, on our self-understanding, our understanding of others and the world, and our ability to communicate, learn, be informed and enter into relationship with others. An approach to reality that privileges images over listening and reading has influenced the way people learn and the development of their critical sense.<sup>18</sup>

As he does in *Laudato Si'*, Francis highlights questions concerning the formative impact of these technologies over questions of their right use. Such judgments grow from Francis's identification of the technocratic paradigm in *Laudato Si'*. These passages begin to specify how digital communication technologies foster an epistemological paradigm that conditions lifestyles and shapes social possibilities.

Pope Francis, "Address to the Faculty of Information Technology and Bionics of the Catholic University Péter Pázmány (Budapest)," (April 30, 2023), <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2023/april/documents/20230430-ungheria-cultura.html>.

<sup>17</sup> Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, §47.

<sup>18</sup> Pope Francis, *Christus Vivit*, (March 25, 2019), [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20190325\\_christus-vivit.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20190325_christus-vivit.html), §86, citing the Synod Preparatory Document (21).

Whereas previous magisterial treatments of communication technologies largely ignored these more fundamental questions, Pope Francis pushes theological treatments of these technologies to consider first and foremost the effects of technology as a formative medium and, by extension, the persons being formed. Any question of right use follows from the more fundamental recognition of how contemporary technologies shape the way people think and interact. “Fundamental theology today,” writes Albert Borgmann, “must be a theology of technology, the successor to medieval natural theology.”<sup>19</sup> Like traditional natural theology, contemporary fundamental theology needs to plumb the depths of our digital milieu in which we dwell and through which we think and interact so as to discern the drama of sin and grace within it.

The work of Bernard Lonergan equips theologians for this task of studying the roots of our contemporary experience. For him, theology must attend to human beings in their concrete thinking and operating. Lonergan’s famous book *Insight*, for instance, peers beneath everyday experience and invites readers both to a penetrating self-examination of one’s own knowing and to a welcoming ownership of the wonder that constitutes being human.<sup>20</sup> His *Method in Theology* peers beneath theological reflection by making explicit the thought processes and methodological choices of the theologians who do the reflecting, “for theologians have always had minds and always have used them.”<sup>21</sup> In both cases, the recognition of the cognition common to all can highlight how that cognition is formed, such as through various technologies.

Theological reflection should accordingly operate on this fundamental level of human intentionality. Lonergan spoke of theological reflection on the “third stage of meaning.”<sup>22</sup> By stages of meaning, Lonergan refers to different epistemological lenses through which one approaches the world. Whereas a first stage of meaning focuses on practical realities of common sense and a second stage of meaning focuses on theoretical questions of explanation, this third stage attends to the processes of knowing and choosing common to each. Whereas knowing and choosing within the first stage is practical and unreflective, and whereas knowing and choosing within the second stage is abstract and formal, knowing and choosing on this third stage affords not only the possibility of distinguishing between these two stages but also the possibility of a self-reflective praxis that can guide knowing and choosing within the

<sup>19</sup> Albert Borgmann, *Power Failure: Christianity in the Culture of Technology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2003), 81.

<sup>20</sup> See Bernard J. F. Lonergan, “Insight Revisited,” in *A Second Collection*, ed. William F. J. Ryan and Bernard J. Tyrrell (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1974), 269.

<sup>21</sup> Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 24.

<sup>22</sup> Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 120, 289.

prior two stages. Theology on the third stage of meaning directs itself toward this realm of interiority. It addresses the experiencing, understanding, judging, and deciding that constitutes being human and sustains all of human living, from practical endeavors like gardening to rarefied endeavors like calculus. Because human knowing and doing always happen within human history, adverting to this level of interiority also necessarily involves one's relationships with others and one's contributions to world history.<sup>23</sup> Theology on the third stage of meaning generates self-reflection that is never simply for oneself.

Theology on this level discerns how divine revelation heals and guides human knowing and choosing. As Lonergan understands it, "Divine revelation is God's entry and his taking part in man's making of man. It is God's claim to have a say in the aims and purposes, the direction and development of human lives, human societies, human cultures, human history."<sup>24</sup> Theology performed on the third stage of meaning articulates how Christianity, as a "way" (cf. John 14:6), affords the possibility of redemptive, self-reflective praxis amid the promise of creativity and the threat of evil. It expresses the *metanoia* demanded by the kingdom of God, the "change of mind" that reflects God's love and justice embodied in Christ (Mark 1:15). It aspires to articulate how God's taking part in history converts human knowing and choosing, both individually and communally, naming the triune God in whom "we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28). By attending to the dimensions of being human that lie beneath everyday living, theology guides this discerning wisdom.

Pope Francis's call to examine the formative effects of digital communication technologies can be understood as a demand for a theological engagement with those technologies along the third stage of meaning. Inasmuch as digital communication technologies effect a paradigm that shapes human knowing and choosing, theological reflection must examine these formative influences and those being formed. Theological reflection on the third stage of meaning acknowledges that any practical question of right use (which belongs on the first stage, which is the stage of common sense practicality) must attend first to the more fundamental question of how these technologies reconfigure human cognition and social interactions. This recognition, as a type of fundamental theology, allows for a clearer discernment of how what God has done in Christ has a radical say in the aims and purposes of our present, digital moment. The work of Lonergan is especially suited for this charge inasmuch

<sup>23</sup> Recent explications of a "fourth stage of meaning" aim to expand on this point. See John Dadosky, "Is There a Fourth Stage of Meaning?" *Heythrop Journal* 51 (2010): 768–80.

<sup>24</sup> Bernard J. F. Lonergan, "Theology in Its New Context," in *A Second Collection*, 62.



as Lonergan draws attention to the minds being formed by various technologies.<sup>25</sup> In light of recent magisterial movements to consider the technological medium, Lonergan supplies the conceptual framework that attends to the very medium of digital communication technologies so as to secure wise use.

### Digital Communication Technologies and Bias

Inspired by Marshall McLuhan, a growing amount of literature has documented the formative effects of digital communication technologies. Nicholas Carr, for instance, considers how these technologies influence cognition in particular. With a background in literature, Carr rose to fame for his 2008 *Atlantic* article, “Is Google Making Us Stupid?,” in the ways it named these effects.<sup>26</sup> Likewise, Sherry Turkle, Abby Rockefeller Mauzé Professor of the Social Studies of Science and Technology at MIT, has written several books on the social effects of these technologies.<sup>27</sup> Not only did Carr and Turkle serve as readings in my course, so too have they become part of an emerging canon for engagements with digital technology in general.<sup>28</sup> What follows reads the work of Carr and Turkle in tandem with that of Lonergan, especially his account of bias. Given that Lonergan died before widespread access to digital technologies, Carr and Turkle’s work can concretize Lonergan’s thought, ensuring it remains on the level of our times. Lonergan’s systematic analysis of human intentionality on the third stage of meaning, meanwhile, can integrate the work of Carr and Turkle into a coherent account of the heightened possibilities of bias in a digital age.

For Lonergan, the human person is a restless wonderer, and human authenticity consists in surrendering oneself to the eros of the human spirit. “Deep within us all,” he observes, “emergent when the noise of other appetites is stilled, there is a drive to know, to understand, to see why, to discover the reason, to find the cause, to explain.”<sup>29</sup> People by nature yearn to know

<sup>25</sup> In fact, Marshall McLuhan once noted that he found “much sense in Bern[ard] Lonergan’s *Insight*” (McLuhan, *Letters of Marshall McLuhan*, 251).

<sup>26</sup> Nicholas Carr, “Is Google Making Us Stupid?,” *The Atlantic*, (July/August 2008), <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2008/07/is-google-making-us-stupid/306868/>.

<sup>27</sup> See Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (New York: Basic Books, 2011), ix–xvii.

<sup>28</sup> See, for example, Patrick Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018), 91–109.

<sup>29</sup> Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding, Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan* (CWL) 3, ed. Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), 28.

“everything about everything,” manifest in the insatiable curiosity of a child or the questions that silently guide everyday human living, from wondering what that sound is underneath my car’s hood to discerning what role I am to play in the world.<sup>30</sup> This questioning arises from human experience, revealing a rich world of meaning beyond mere experiencing. Questions of understanding seek the intelligibility of experience. Questions of judgment seek the truthfulness of understandings. Questions of decision ascertain the practical demands set forth by judgments of truth. At each level of questioning, one is led toward a world that transcends one’s immediate confines: to understand the meaning of something not immediately apparent to the senses, to judge the truth of something that goes beyond personal opinion, and to make value judgments beyond one’s immediate satisfactions. The “slow, if not bloody entrance” of this knowledge requires a certain asceticism, a stilling of the noise of all other appetites.<sup>31</sup>

All questions and all tendencies toward transcendence point toward (though do not demand) an ultimate source of intelligibility, truth, and goodness named in that mysterious word, God.<sup>32</sup> For Lonergan, as for Augustine, the human heart is restless until it rests in God; the human person is by nature ecstatic, propelled by wonder to surrender him- or herself to this ultimate meaning. To be most authentically human then, one must “be attentive” in experience, “be intelligent” in understanding, “be rational” in judgment, and “be responsible” in decision—imperatives that Lonergan christens “transcendental.”<sup>33</sup> Obedience to these demands of authenticity necessarily redounds beyond oneself to touch the delicate web of meaning that is history. Self-transcendence entails moral responsibility, a commitment to the good for the self, the other, and for the universe. Surrendering oneself to the eros of the human spirit thus sets the conditions for genuine progress in history. Far from being a rigid system, Lonergan’s project invites people to behold the mystery of existence and, consequently, to submit themselves to the insatiable wonder to which existence gives rise. It stands as an invitation to be attentive, to still other appetites so as to reawaken one’s unrestricted desire to know. Through this asceticism can one rediscover a world replete with meaning that transcends

<sup>30</sup> Lonergan, *Insight*, 372–76; and Bernard J. F. Lonergan, “Christ as Subject: A Reply,” in *Collection*, CWL 4, ed. Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988), 176–77.

<sup>31</sup> Lonergan, *Insight*, 209.

<sup>32</sup> Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 101–03.

<sup>33</sup> Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 302.

the narrow confines of one's own existence and opens up to the "Love that moves the Sun and the other stars."<sup>34</sup>

Still, various obstacles threaten this contemplative charge, cage this insatiability, and dissolve this prophetic call toward self-transcendence. The presence of what Lonergan calls "bias" contracts human intentionality to settle for something less than the pursuit of intelligibility, truth, and goodness itself. "The truncated subject," Lonergan laments, "not only does not know himself but also is unaware of his ignorance and so, in one way or another, concludes that what he does not know does not exist."<sup>35</sup> Practicality and one's immediate desires, rather than God and the good of the world order, can egoistically skew the criteria of the meaningful, the true, and the good. In contrast to a thirst for understanding, so too can there be a "flight from understanding" that disregards the self-transcending quality of the human spirit. One can evade the challenges set forth by genuine insight, ensconcing one in the safety and comfort of one's own immediacy and biases.<sup>36</sup> Such biased tendencies name the "missing the mark" that characterizes sin (*hamartia*) and leads to pernicious imbroglios of decline. Indeed, Lonergan's portrayal of the human spirit's restlessness contrasts starkly with how the world actually seems to appear, from apathy toward learning to the attractiveness of ideological silos.

If authenticity in part depends on being attentive as well as appropriating the insatiability of the human spirit by stilling all other appetites, then bias emerges when other desires swamp and distract from this primordial desire and undermine human attentiveness. For Lonergan, an excessive concern "with the present, the immediate, the palpable" can come to distort human knowing and choosing, truncating the summons of other relevant insights and questions that surpass the present, the immediate, and the palpable.<sup>37</sup> Human intentionality in this guise "fails to pivot from the initial and preliminary motivation provided by desires and fears to the self-abnegation involved in allowing complete free play to intelligent inquiry."<sup>38</sup> It is to opt for the easy and cacophonous shallows of immediacy rather than the still depths and taxing asceticism of authenticity. It is to fail to be genuinely attentive to the world and the demands it places upon one's knowing and doing.

Nicholas Carr captures how digital communication technologies can distort human knowing and choosing in these shallowing ways. Naming the experience of many, Carr recounts his struggles, if not inability, to think deeply

<sup>34</sup> Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy, Paradiso, Canto XXXIII*, 145.

<sup>35</sup> Bernard J. F. Lonergan, "The Subject," in *A Second Collection*, 64.

<sup>36</sup> Lonergan, *Insight*, 215.

<sup>37</sup> Lonergan, *Insight*, 245.

<sup>38</sup> Lonergan, *Insight*, 245–46.

and process information carefully in a way that was not the case previously. While novels, for instance, once engrossed him for hours, now he confesses his struggle to comprehend a blog post, settling for headlines instead. “Once I was a scuba diver in the sea of words,” he confesses, “now I zip along the surface like a guy on a Jet Ski.”<sup>39</sup> Inspired by the work of McLuhan, Carr posits that the very medium of the internet has reshaped the way people think, shallowing attention and subverting the stillness that, as Lonergan tendered, the emergent drive to know requires. Some might very well see this shift as a positive gain.<sup>40</sup> At the very least, Carr marshals a bevy of scientific and social evidence to establish it as a fact. As a 2020 afterword confirms, the proliferation of smartphones and the imperialism of social media have only exacerbated this attentional erosion since the original 2010 publication of *The Shallows*.<sup>41</sup>

The fluidity of knowing in part explains this experience. Against the static epistemology of Baroque scholasticism, Lonergan stresses that knowing is dynamic, cyclic, and self-correcting; experiencing, understanding, judging, and deciding determines future experiencing, understanding, judging, and deciding.<sup>42</sup> Authenticity sets the conditions for future authenticity; bias sets the conditions for more bias. In his work, Carr invokes the field of neuroplasticity, which studies the malleability and adaptability of cognition. In so doing, Carr mines the recurring processes that lie beneath human consciousness, pattern human experiencing, and thus filter human knowing.<sup>43</sup> The repeated stimulation of certain synaptic links strengthens and multiplies them, while the failure to activate certain synaptic links weakens and dissolves them. Neuroplasticity belies any form of mental determinism; at the same time, neuroplasticity illustrates the calcifying tendencies of mental habits. Once a particular synaptic link emerges, it tends to perpetuate itself by chemically inclining people to keep exercising it. Batting practice, for instance, sharpens a batter’s eye to different pitches and improves a batter’s swing through

<sup>39</sup> Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010), 7.

<sup>40</sup> See, for example, N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Think: Digital Media and Contemporary Technogenesis* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

<sup>41</sup> See Nicholas Carr, “Afterword to the Second Edition,” in *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains*, 2nd ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2020), 225–38. All other citations of *The Shallows* refer to the first edition (which follows the same pagination as the second edition, with the exception of the afterword).

<sup>42</sup> Lonergan, *Insight*, 197–98; and Bernard J. F. Lonergan, “The Future of Thomism,” in *A Second Collection*, 43–53.

<sup>43</sup> Carr, *The Shallows*, 27. Lonergan too plumbs the psychic depths of cognition; see Lonergan, *Insight*, 210–31. See also Robert M. Doran, *Psychic Conversion and Theological Foundations* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1981).

repetition, making it eventually feel like second nature. Conversely, facing a pitch in a game will feel unnatural if one has neglected batting practice. Similarly, an excessive reliance on GPS will eventually weaken one's sense of direction or particular knowledge of a local area.

As the last example implies, the malleability of knowing explains how digital communication technologies can rewire synaptic links and habits of thought. Feedback from these technologies is immediate and stimulates sight, hearing, and feeling. Whether in the form of a Google search or a click, these technologies encourage and reward more and more Google searches and clicks that promise more and more immediate responses that satisfy the mental hunger of users. By design, though it need not be this way, such instant gratification and positive reinforcement is literally addicting.<sup>44</sup> Few actions feel more gratifying than emptying an inbox or clicking on a red Facebook or Instagram notification, few experiences more tantalizing than a phone vibrating or the chirp that signals a new tweet. The close association of personal identity with the Web and social media only amplifies the experience. The production of more sellable user data from more clicks only amplifies the corporate promotion of distraction. Given the brain's plasticity, such stimulation and reward strengthen those parts of the brain devoted to speedily processing information, biasing it toward the immediate.<sup>45</sup> Those parts of the brain devoted to deep concentration, meanwhile, tend to languish.

It is in this way that digital communication technologies remold cognition, as the formation and dissolution of these respective mental habits determine how one approaches the world at large. These technologies diminish the stillness that authentic knowing requires, instead swamping one with the

<sup>44</sup> See Adam Alter, *Irresistible: The Rise of Addictive Technology and the Business of Keeping Us Hooked* (New York: Penguin Press, 2017). As Pope Benedict XVI suggests, this positive reinforcement feeds the *eros* of the human spirit: "Ultimately, this constant flow of questions [and information] demonstrates the restlessness of human beings, ceaselessly searching for truths, of greater or lesser import, that can offer meaning and hope to their lives" ("Message for the 46th World Communications Day," (May 20, 2012), [https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/messages/communications/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_mes\\_20120124\\_46th-world-communications-day.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/messages/communications/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20120124_46th-world-communications-day.html)).

<sup>45</sup> See Carr, *The Shallows*, 142. Carr references numerous scientific and psychological studies in making these claims; for example, G. W. Small, T. D. Moody, P. Siddarth, and S. Y. Bookheimer, "Your Brain on Google: Patterns of Cerebral Activation during Internet Searching," *American Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry* 17, no. 2 (February 2009): 116–26; Steven C. Rockwell and Loy A. Singleton, "The Effect of the Modality of Streaming Multimedia on Information Acquisition," *Media Psychology* 9 (2007): 179–91; and Eyal Ophir, Clifford Nass, and Anthony D. Wagner, "Cognitive Control in Media Multitaskers," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 106, no. 37 (September 2009): 15,583–87.

bells and whistles of hyperstimulation that vie for human attention. By overwhelming working memory, the sheer amount of information shared through these technologies also tends to dilute habits of attentiveness like reading, replacing them instead with habits of scanning like browsing.<sup>46</sup> “The Net seizes our attention,” states Carr, “only to scatter it.”<sup>47</sup> The failure to be attentive, as Lonergan intimated, likewise comes to distort other dimensions of knowing. The information overload of the internet reduces the understanding of data to the seeing and consuming of disjointed stimuli, and the rapidity of these technologies shunts the time and patience needed to discern the intelligible unities between disparate points of data.<sup>48</sup> These conditions, as the internet-enabled proliferation of “fake news” illustrates, muddy the possibility of right judgments of truth. That is, these conditions bias the subject toward the immediacy of stimulating data and away from the unrestricted scope of attentive understanding, judgment, and decision.

Changes in human knowing cannot but reconfigure human relationships. For Lonergan, developments in the human subject necessarily impact that to which he or she relates, and vice versa, in a recurring fashion.<sup>49</sup> On the one hand, personal authenticity conditions and is conditioned by communal authenticity. Attentive understanding, for instance, fosters empathetic relationships, and, conversely, empathetic relationships deepen attentive understanding. On the other hand, suggests Lonergan, inauthenticity sets the conditions for further inauthenticity, resulting in various forms of communal biases. In the words of Sherry Turkle, drawing on countless interviews with the old and especially with the young, “Technology disrupts this virtuous circle. . . . Afraid of being alone, we struggle *to pay attention to ourselves*. And what suffers is our ability *to pay attention to each other*. If we can’t find our own center, we lose confidence in what we have to offer others. Or you can work the circle the other way: we struggle *to pay attention to each other*, and what suffers is our ability *to know ourselves*.”<sup>50</sup> Those forces that tend

<sup>46</sup> As Carr notes, “There’s nothing wrong with browsing and scanning, or even power-browsing and power-scanning. . . . What is different and troubling is that skimming is becoming our dominant mode of reading. Once a means to an end, a way to identify information for deeper study, scanning is becoming an end in itself—our preferred way of gathering and making sense of information of all sorts” (138).

<sup>47</sup> Carr, *The Shallows*, 118.

<sup>48</sup> See Carr, *The Shallows*, 125. Lonergan views this extroverted notion of understanding—as “taking a good look at the ‘real’ that is ‘already out there now’”—as the fundamental mistake of modern epistemology (*Insight*, 437).

<sup>49</sup> Lonergan, *Insight*, 232.

<sup>50</sup> Sherry Turkle, *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age* (New York: Penguin Press, 2015), 10; emphasis added.

to disrupt attentiveness—such as digital communication technologies—risk threatening genuine empathy. Turkle here names the social consequences of the attentional deficit identified by Carr. Distracted and shallow thinking leads to distracted and shallow relationships and vice versa. Inattentiveness breeds inattentiveness.

Frequently, though not always, the result is mere connection bereft of the challenges of empathy. Whereas genuine relationships require attention, demand vulnerability, and entail unpredictability, these technologies ostensibly promise to smooth this friction. Behind this apparent frictionlessness, as Antón Barba-Kay has recently defined it, is the privileging of choice and the possibility of control: a given digital technology “maximizes the exercise of my will by minimizing the contexts in which I have to compromise on my preferences with others.”<sup>51</sup> Texts can be edited, friends can be blocked, and awkward silences can be avoided. The complexity of human interaction can be domesticated by a tweet, a Snapchat, or an emoji. In the presence of strangers and friends alike, phones can offer “security blankets” that shield from the pains of small talk.<sup>52</sup> Above all, these technologies can replace the physical human encounter that invites and cultivates empathetic presence. Turkle cites a study that reported a 40 percent decrease in empathy among college students soon after the release of the iPhone.<sup>53</sup> The gravitational pull of a phone can obscure the eye contact that asks for one’s presence. A tidal wave of notifications or the catastrophic emphases of a 24/7 news cycle can drown out the *cri de cœur* of the friend, the child, or the aging parent in front of oneself. The rapid processing of the Web can sap the patience needed for listening to another, promising its user the possibility to be anywhere else besides one’s present place. If genuine empathy requires a type of deep and attentive understanding that goes beyond the liking of a Facebook or Instagram post, more often than not, these technologies subvert such a habit. Paralleling the biases that truncate human knowing, Lonergan speaks of an “individual bias” wherein the immediacy of

<sup>51</sup> Antón Barba-Kay, *A Web of Our Own Making: The Nature of Digital Formation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), 182. As Barba-Kay writes elsewhere, “To the extent that I associate with others in the online mode, I am in a position from which I may retreat, refrain, abstract myself at any point. There are no (or few) strings attached, the setting puts little pressure on the shape of my own desires. This is just what convenience is, what endows our online experience with such a compelling sense of our own empowered individuality” (*A Web of Our Own Making*, 102).

<sup>52</sup> Turkle, *Reclaiming Conversation*, 152–53.

<sup>53</sup> Turkle, *Reclaiming Conversation*, 21, 170–71; see Sara Konrath, Edward H. O’Brien, and Courtney Hsing, “Changes in Dispositional Empathy in American College Students over Time: A Meta-Analysis,” *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 15, no. 2 (May 2011): 180–98.

one's own needs eclipses the broader responsibilities of communal living.<sup>54</sup> Attention becomes self-directed rather than self-transcendent. Inasmuch as digital communication technologies scatter one's self, human empathy atrophies and human relationships deteriorate.

In the same way that these technologies shallow the attentional depth of human knowing and human empathy on an interpersonal level, so too can they shallow the attentional depth that fruitful political engagement requires. Turkle contrasts the relatively "friction-free" world of the internet with politics "on the ground" in which "there is never a simple fix, only friction, complexity and history."<sup>55</sup> Twitter neuters the complexity of real political discourse to a 280-character soundbite. The political burns caught on YouTube prove far more entertaining than the tediousness of a local town hall. Hashtag activism, while useful for raising general social awareness, risks reducing political activism to a "share" or a paltry donation, rather than a call to a challenging face-to-face conversation involving nuance and necessitating compromise. The migration of politics to the Web can easily bypass those in-the-flesh conversations, borne out of attentive listening and inevitably full of friction, that establish the "strong ties" of understanding needed for enduring political change.<sup>56</sup> For the sake of clicks, the algorithms that guide communication technologies amplify those with whom people agree and quiet those with whom they disagree.<sup>57</sup> This ecosystem promotes what Lonergan refers to as "group bias," wherein allegiance to a particular tribe renders one blind to the genuine insights that another group can offer for collective understanding, judgment, and decision.<sup>58</sup> Digital communication technologies, insofar as they have a tendency to diminish the possibility of attending to the

<sup>54</sup> Lonergan, *Insight*, 244–47.

<sup>55</sup> Turkle, *Reclaiming Conversation*, 293.

<sup>56</sup> Turkle, *Reclaiming Conversation*, 298; Turkle refers here to Malcom Gladwell, "Small Change: Why the Revolution Will Not Be Tweeted," *New Yorker*, (October 4, 2010), <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2010/10/04/small-change-malcolm-gladwell>. This is not to say that there is no friction online; the vitriol found on platforms like Twitter confirms as much. In contrast to the friction that characterizes in-person interactions, however, one can opt out of that friction by choice. Moreover, it is precisely because these online interactions are removed from corporal friction (and the empathy that such friction naturally generates) that that vitriol can become all the more strident. See Barba-Kay, *A Web of Our Own Making*, 122–23.

<sup>57</sup> See Sinan Aral, *The Hype Machine: How Social Media Disrupts Our Elections, Our Economy, and Our Health—and How We Must Adapt* (New York: Currency, 2020); and Ben Sasse, *Them: Why We Hate Each Other—and How to Heal* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2018), 105–30.

<sup>58</sup> Lonergan, *Insight*, 247–50.



complexity of the other, exacerbate this polarization. From a gridlocked legislature, to hostility on social media, to downright violence, we live with the results.

So too can cultural vehicles extend this general attentional deficit. As an example, Turkle notes how schools, in a legitimate desire for student engagement, frequently accommodate students' use of digital communication technologies, promoting the "hyper-attention" of frenetic multi-tasking and normalizing the ubiquity of screens and devices.<sup>59</sup> Classrooms as a result can strive for entertaining stimulation, hoping to curtail those moments of slowness or silence that might lose the interest of a student more accustomed to the hyperactivity of his or her phone. In the form perhaps of replacing uneven in-person discussion with easy-to-edit online discussion, such a classroom climate avoids the friction of learning: dead-ends and false alleys inviting wisdom, silences and pauses pregnant with insight, the concentration and attention foundational to understanding.<sup>60</sup> Learning in this frictionless guise mirrors the technocratic dynamics of search engines—the input of data and the quick production of crisp, preferably quantifiable, output ripe for absorption into AI large language models. Education, instead of offering space for the stilling of other appetites that unleashes the eros of wonder, can form scattered student minds trapped in the shallows of immediacy. Demands for frantic efficiency and constant production in academia make today's university no exception.<sup>61</sup> While cultural meanings and values should ensure human flourishing, they can instead normalize a myopic inattentiveness that discourages human authenticity for the sake of immediate gratification; Lonergan calls it "general bias."<sup>62</sup> While the cultural pillar that is education classically aims for liberation, it can instead perpetuate the ensnaring cognitive biases named by Carr, forming distracted minds for a distracted society.

These cognitive, interpersonal, political, and cultural distortions all sustain one another in a vicious cycle. Underlying each is an epistemological

<sup>59</sup> Turkle, *Reclaiming Conversation*, 217–21; Turkle expresses skepticism at Katherine Hayles's conviction that schools should primarily foster hyper attention at the expense of deep attention (see N. Katherine Hayles, "Hyper and Deep Attention," *Profession* [2007]: 187–99). Turkle does not reject the importance of hyper attention per se; instead, she underscores the need for students to cultivate an "attentional pluralism" fluent in both hyper and deep attention. See also Mary E. Hess, "Learning with Digital Technologies: Privileging Persons over Machines," *Journal of Moral Theology* 4, no. 1 (January 2015): 131–50.

<sup>60</sup> Turkle, *Reclaiming Conversation*, 240–44.

<sup>61</sup> See Maggie Berg and Barbara K. Seeber, *The Slow Professor: Challenging the Culture of Speed in the Academy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017), 1–15.

<sup>62</sup> Lonergan, *Insight*, 250–51.

distortion that biases knowing toward the immediate and truncates the unrestricted drive to know. It does so by distracting from the attentive stillness that allows for intelligent understanding, true judgment, and responsible decision. Precisely because this bias manifests itself in so many different forms, to escape this cycle appears Sisyphean, both neurologically and societally; technological determinism names this reality. That powerful commercial interests of the new “attention economy” prey off distracted minds and depend on rapid outputs to harvest user data only tightens the squeeze of the cycle.<sup>63</sup> The effects of the cycle and its ironclad logic are clear. Abstracted from the in-person and the present while beguiled by the simulacrum of communion, the generation now called “iGen”—my students—report unprecedented levels of loneliness and anxiety, and yet the pressures of social relevance make an alternative seem impossible.<sup>64</sup> Numbed by information overload and disburdened of real-world friction, the world succumbs to what Pope Francis names a “globalization of indifference” that renders people inattentive to the cries of the earth and the cries of the poor.<sup>65</sup> As he submits, “When we allow ourselves to be caught up in superficial information, instant communication and virtual reality, we can waste precious time and become indifferent to the suffering flesh of our brothers and sisters.”<sup>66</sup> At the same time, as made evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, the predominant solution to social exigencies often seems to be more and improved technology. The problem runs deeper than, but certainly includes, the proper use of certain technologies. Lonergan’s reflection on the third stage of meaning, read in tandem with contemporary commentators like Carr and Turkle, illustrates how the very medium of today’s digital communication technologies reshapes and determines knowing and, by extension, society. In their current form, these technologies tend to shallow the deep stillness and attentiveness—indeed, presence—that roots human

<sup>63</sup> “Google,” Carr remarks, “is in the business of distraction” (*The Shallows*, 157). See Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2019); and Tim Wu, *The Attention Merchants: The Epic Scramble to Get Inside Our Heads* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2016).

<sup>64</sup> See Jean M. Twenge, *iGen: Why Today’s Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy—and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood—and What That Means for the Rest of Us* (New York: Atria Books, 2017), 49–118.

<sup>65</sup> Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, (November 24, 2013), [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20131124\\_evangelii-gaudium.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html), §54.

<sup>66</sup> Pope Francis, *Gaudete et Exsultate*, (April 9, 2018), [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20180319\\_gaudete-et-exsultate.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20180319_gaudete-et-exsultate.html), §108.

authenticity and community.<sup>67</sup> Theology done on the third stage of meaning must offer a response.

### Friendship as Real Presence

To articulate the nature of Christian redemption, Lonergan develops a theology of history. One of the prime achievements of the Lonergan project is its serious attention to the dynamism of history.<sup>68</sup> In developing what he calls an “emergently probable” worldview, Lonergan acknowledges the integrity of statistical reasoning in a way that more determinist projects—both theological and non-theological—cannot.<sup>69</sup> Statistical investigations consider general tendencies of particular occurrences. By nature, they assume that such tendencies are not inevitable. They assume exceptions. To employ Lonergan’s worldview then is to recognize that the shallowing effects of the Web on cognition and community are statistically likely but not always the case. Carr and Turkle name statistical tendencies, not determinative necessities. Even the very name of bias connotes an inclination rather than a certainty.

To admit this contingency allows for the possibility of hope. Lonergan rejects all forms of determinism, whether scientific, economic, or, presumably, technological.<sup>70</sup> The transcendent orientation of the human spirit, while shaped by biology and history, can never be reduced to either, just as biology cannot be reduced to chemistry.<sup>71</sup> Lonergan’s distinction between “essential” and “effective” freedom explains how.<sup>72</sup> People are essentially free insofar as they have the capacity to pursue, choose, and act upon the true and the good.

<sup>67</sup> This same focus on attention (and the possibility of its shallowing) in the most recent magisterial treatment of digital technologies; see Dicastery for Communication, *Towards Full Presence: A Pastoral Reflection on Engagement with Social Media*, (May 28, 2023), [https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/dpc/documents/20230528\\_dpc-verso-piena-presenza\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/dpc/documents/20230528_dpc-verso-piena-presenza_en.html), §25–40.

<sup>68</sup> See Lonergan, “The Future of Thomism,” 49–53.

<sup>69</sup> Lonergan, *Insight*, 128–38.

<sup>70</sup> See Bernard J. F. Lonergan, “The Transition from a Classicist Worldview to Historical Mindedness,” in *A Second Collection*, 9.

<sup>71</sup> As introduced earlier, key to this assertion is Lonergan’s formulation of “emergent probability,” a worldview that highlights the dynamic, intelligible contingency of world process unfolding toward ever-increasing complexity. This metaphysic admits that reality is stratified: lower, simpler levels of being set the conditions for the potential emergence of higher, more complex levels of being irreducible to those lower levels. Applied to anthropology, the transcendent drive of the human spirit cannot be explained or determined exclusively by physics, chemistry, biology, or neurology. See Lonergan, *Insight*, 144–51, 644.

<sup>72</sup> See Lonergan, *Insight*, 643–47; see also Joseph A. Komonchak, *Foundations in Ecclesiology*, Lonergan Workshop (Boston, MA: Boston College, 1995), 111–20.

However, the degree of their effective freedom is always shaped by the concrete conditions—whether biological or historical—of their lives. For freedom to be effective, the capacity for the true and good needs to be won within, not despite, these conditions. Such influences are neither good nor evil in and of themselves. Those historical and biological conditions that mediate bias, however, pose a particular problem for the possibility of effective freedom. In its tendency toward the immediate and practical, bias erodes the farsighted and patient willingness needed to win this freedom, blinds people to its pernicious presence, and renders people morally impotent (cf. Rom 7:15). Sin, the steadfast attachment to one's own egoism and the refusal to surrender oneself to the God who is always greater, becomes practically inevitable.<sup>73</sup> Thus, with technological determinists, Lonergan admits not only the formative impact of forces like digital communication technologies on human living, but also how such forces can entrap users and degrade human dignity. At the same time, against these voices, it is also clear that this formation does not necessarily mean total determination for Lonergan. His emergently probable worldview ensures that hope. To affirm the existence of freedom implies a hope for liberation from the dehumanizing effects of bias, the seeming determinism of decline, and the seduction of sin. If it is to endure, this hope does not rest in sheer willpower, given the inertia of bias. Instead, moral impotence points to a supernatural solution that, while incorporating human nature, goes beyond human nature and frees one from bias to pursue truth and goodness and, so, to glorify God.<sup>74</sup> Redemptive praxis involves the recovery of effective freedom amid the conditions that inevitably surround and form people. Somehow rejecting all forms of digital technology is not an adequate option. Theological reflection for a digital age must presume a redemptive solution that can be discerned on the level of our day, one that can be lived within the shell of the digital world.

Help comes from Pope Francis himself and his most recent social encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti*. If *Laudato Si'* names the technocratic malaise, then *Fratelli Tutti* proffers a solution: friendship. Subtitled “On Fraternity and Social Friendship,” *Fratelli Tutti* calls for a “new vision of fraternity and social friendship that will not remain at the level of words”—that is, a vision of friendship anchored in the concrete.<sup>75</sup> This call, according to the encyclical, can counter

<sup>73</sup> Lonergan, *Insight*, 714.

<sup>74</sup> Lonergan, *Insight*, 655–56, 715–18; and Bernard J. F. Lonergan, “Healing and Creating in History,” in *A Third Collection: Papers by Bernard J. F. Lonergan, S.J.*, ed. Frederick E. Crowe (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1985), 100–109.

<sup>75</sup> Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, (October 3, 2020), [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20201003\\_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html), §6. This theme of friendship also plays a focusing role in *Christus Vivit*, §150–57.

a variety of forces that threaten genuine community, whether xenophobia, violence, or, indeed, the dominance of digital communication technologies. These technologies, Francis observes, “lack the physical gestures, facial expressions, moments of silence, body language and even the smells, the trembling of hands, the blushes and perspiration that speak to us and are a part of human communication”; they fail to promote “the slow and gradual cultivation of friendships, stable interaction or the building of a consensus that matures over time.”<sup>76</sup> It is friendship rooted primarily in the concrete, not the virtual, that can address the shallows of the technocratic paradigm. This tantalizing claim lies at the heart of the redeeming message of mercy that marks Francis’s pontificate.

Friendship also informs Lonergan’s soteriological project. A closer consideration of his account can provide theological depth for Francis’s claim as well as show how friendship reverses the biases characteristic of our digital age. In a 1958 text, commonly referred to as *De Bono et Malo*, Lonergan addresses Anselm’s famous question, “*Cur Deus Homo?*”<sup>77</sup> The text represents Lonergan’s most mature soteriological reflection. Whereas Anselm answers the question with “to satisfy for the price of sin,” Lonergan answers the question with “*for the orderly communication of God’s friendship to his enemies.*”<sup>78</sup> Lonergan’s provocative claim holds scriptural warrant. Jesus scandalized many with his willingness to befriend the unclean (e.g., Matt 11:19), and he interpreted his death as an act of self-giving friendship for those whom he loved, commanding them to follow suit (John 15:12-15). In this way, Lonergan suggests, might people be elevated into the perichoretic friendship that is the Trinity, “in which the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit necessarily and eternally will divine good to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit.”<sup>79</sup> If revelation is a matter of God’s entering of “man’s making of man,” then that entrance takes the shape of friendship.<sup>80</sup> As a theological category

<sup>76</sup> Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, §43.

<sup>77</sup> Bernard J. F. Lonergan, “The Redemption: A Supplement,” in *The Redemption*, CWL 9, eds. Robert M. Doran, H. Daniel Monsour, and Jeremy D. Wilkins, trans. Michael G. Shields (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018), 265–643. The unpublished, though circulated, text was meant to supplement Lonergan’s Christological manual, *De Verbo Incarnato*. On the background of this text, see Frederick E. Crowe, *Christ and History: The Christology of Bernard Lonergan from 1935 to 1982* (Ottawa: Novalis Press, 2005), 99–125.

<sup>78</sup> Lonergan, “The Redemption,” 631; italics original.

<sup>79</sup> Lonergan, “The Redemption,” 631.

<sup>80</sup> See Second Vatican Council, *Dei Verbum*, (November 18, 1965), [https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19651118\\_dei-verbum\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651118_dei-verbum_en.html), §2: “Through this revelation, therefore, the invisible God (see Col.

understood within the third stage of meaning, this Christocentric friendship determines the redemptive, self-reflective praxis that can reverse the shallows of bias.

Friendship with God effects the self-transcendence that distinguishes human authenticity. In the act of friendship that is the Incarnation, God bridged the ontologically unbridgeable, enabling human beings to become partakers in the divine nature (2 Pet 1:4).<sup>81</sup> This same character marks the human response to the divine initiative. In Christ, the self-diffusive ecstasy of God and the self-transcendent ecstasy of the human person meet. If friendship is a matter of willing the good of another for his or her own sake, friendship with God draws one out of oneself such that one lives no longer for oneself but for another with love. As Pope Francis once put it, in encountering “God’s love, which blossoms into an enriching friendship, we are liberated from our narrowness and self-absorption.”<sup>82</sup> That is, God’s offer of friendship in Christ evokes the dynamic “being in love” that, for Lonergan, marks religious conversion: “Being in love with God is being in love without limitations or qualifications or conditions or reservations.”<sup>83</sup> God’s loving friendship liberates the human spirit away from the shallows of egoistic bias and toward the depths of self-giving love, a conversion patterned by the cross.

Friendship with God shapes one’s perception of and actions in the world. Who one befriends determines what he or she values, in a manner so profound that the friend truly becomes another self. To be a friend of God means to care about what God cares about, to allow one’s entire being to be determined by the values of the kingdom of God summed up in Christ, such that one can say with Paul, “I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me” (Gal 2:19-20). Lonergan describes this Christologically—determined existence as living “in Christ Jesus as subject,” “where the hand of the Lord ceases to be hidden,” and “being in love with God can be as full and dominant, as overwhelming and as lasting, an

1:15, 1 Tim. 1:17) out of the abundance of His love speaks to men as friends (see Ex. 33:11; John 15:14-15) and lives among them (see Bar. 3:38), so that He may invite and take them into fellowship with Himself.”

<sup>81</sup> See Sandra M. Schneiders, *Written That You May Believe: Encountering Jesus in the Fourth Gospel* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1999), 166-74.

<sup>82</sup> Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 8.

<sup>83</sup> Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 105-06. See also Ligita Ryliskytė, “Conversion: Falling into Friendship Like No Other,” *Theological Studies* 81, no. 2 (2020): 370-93, at 371-73. I concur with Ryliskytė’s judgment to read God’s offer of friendship as a “special theological category” that specifies religious conversion; on “special theological categories,” see Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 285-91.

experience as human love.”<sup>84</sup> Friendship with God “dismantles and abolishes the horizon in which our knowing and choosing went on and it sets up a new horizon in which the love of God will transvalue our values and the eyes of that love will transform our knowing.”<sup>85</sup> This friendship enflames hearts—“Were not our hearts burning within us?” (Luke 24:32)—and comes to determine all of who one is. That is, this friendship perfects human deciding, judging, understanding, and experiencing through the love of Christ.

So too does friendship with God beckon one to imitate God’s own offer of friendship toward others. Friendship with another not only determines how one views and acts within the world, so too does it determine who else one befriends. Lonergan refers to “the principle of the diffusion of friendship,” which conveys how “a friend loves his friend’s friends” and even “loving one’s enemies for the sake of one’s friends.”<sup>86</sup> Through Christ, the God who “makes his sun rise on the evil and the good” (Matt 5:45) extends friendship to all humanity, and so friends of God are called to the same agapic love, expanding those biased horizons that filter love through self-interest. In a particular way, throughout the biblical narrative, God attends to and befriends the poor, the outcast, and the ignored (Luke 4:18-19), and so too must this preferentiality be a fruit of living in Christ as subject. At the same time, the principle of diffusion of friendship can be extended even further. Not only does it entail befriending *who* God befriends, so too—if this friendship is to determine one’s deciding, judging, understanding, and experiencing in a self-transcending manner—does it entail befriending *how* God befriends. It is no accident that, in Christ, God commonly befriends through meals (see, e.g., Matt 11:19), for it is at his last meal that Christ describes his mission as an extension of friendship in a definitive and moving fashion (John 15).

Friendship with God thus takes a eucharistic shape. Lonergan taught several classes and penned several pieces on the Eucharist in the 1940s. The writings remain underdeveloped, and Lonergan never fully integrated them into his broader theological corpus, including his later *De Bono et Malo*. Some help comes from Thomas Aquinas; after all, Lonergan’s theology of friendship is clearly indebted to Aquinas’s own description of grace as friendship.<sup>87</sup>

<sup>84</sup> Bernard J. F. Lonergan, “*Existenz and Aggiornamento*,” *Collection*, CWL 4, ed. Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988), 231. See also Bernard J. F. Lonergan, “The Mediation of Christ in Prayer,” in *Philosophical and Theological Papers 1958-1964*, CWL 6, eds. Robert C. Croken, Frederick E. Crowe, and Robert M. Doran (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), 179.

<sup>85</sup> Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 106.

<sup>86</sup> Lonergan, “The Redemption,” 635.

<sup>87</sup> See, for example, Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* II-I, q. 65, art. 5; and *ST* II-II, q. 23, art. 1.

In a way that coheres with Lonergan's theological trajectory, Aquinas also uses the category of friendship to speak about the Eucharist. Although Aquinas employs technical language of transubstantiation to refer to Christ's real presence in the eucharistic species, in a more fundamental way does he describe this presence—and, more clearly, Christ's real presence in the ecclesial body—through the category of friendship. Christ's eucharistic presence is fitting, says Aquinas, because:

This belongs to Christ's love, out of which for our salvation He assumed a true body of our nature. And because it is the special feature of friendship to live together with friends, as the Philosopher says (*Ethic.* ix), He promises us His bodily presence as a reward, saying (Matthew 24:28): "Where the body is, there shall the eagles be gathered together." Yet meanwhile in our pilgrimage He does not deprive us of His bodily presence; but unites us with Himself in this sacrament through the truth of His body and blood.<sup>88</sup>

Thus, it is through the Eucharist that God, who "lived among us" (John 1:14), extends friendship in and through Christ, in whom "the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily" (Col 2:9), here and now. Transubstantiation explains the fullness of this offer. In a similar vein, Lonergan defines the Eucharist as "a proper symbol of the sacrificial attitude of Christ as Head, first, as that attitude is represented in the sacrifice of the cross, second, as flowing to the members of the church through multiplication of the eucharistic sacrifice, and third, as now multiplied in the members themselves through their active participation."<sup>89</sup> For Lonergan, "symbol" refers to a mode of communication that speaks to the whole of one's embodied being.<sup>90</sup> The wholly engaging presence of Christ in the Eucharist offers congregants the full, real, and enduring possibility of a transformative union with Christ and his Spirit, to become what they receive.<sup>91</sup> The Eucharist invites those gathered to live in Christ as subject, grafting them onto himself. Participation in the Eucharist invites one to become friends with God in Christ and to allow one's being to be determined, however gradually, by Christ's own intentionality. It molds congregants—and their experiencing, understanding, judging, and deciding—in the sacred heart and paschal mind of Christ and sets them ablaze with the love of God for all those whom God loves.

<sup>88</sup> Aquinas, *ST* III, q. 75, art. 1.

<sup>89</sup> Bernard J. F. Lonergan, "The Notion of Sacrifice," in *Early Latin Theology*, CWL 19, ed. Robert M. Doran and H. Daniel Monsour, trans. Michael G. Shields (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011), 29.

<sup>90</sup> Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 64.

<sup>91</sup> Lonergan, "The Notion of Sacrifice," 17. See also Joseph C. Mudd, *Eucharist as Meaning: Critical Metaphysics and Contemporary Sacramental Theology* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2014), 201–24.



The Eucharist also reveals that God extends friendship incarnationally, through bodily presence. As per Aristotle through Aquinas, friends desire to dwell together, to be physically proximate to one another. This claim does not reduce Christ's real presence in the Eucharist to a crude physicalism. Instead, it reveals Aquinas's profound "materialism," his conviction humans come to know primarily through the concrete world.<sup>92</sup> Because Lonergan advances a modern appropriation of Aquinas's epistemology, he holds the same.<sup>93</sup> According to him, understanding—and, by extension, judging and deciding—while not reducible to experiencing, arises only from experiencing, just as authentic knowing arises only from attentiveness. The object of human experiencing is, along with the data of human consciousness, "the endless variety of things to be seen, sounds to be heard, odors to be sniffed, tastes to be palated, shapes and textures to be touched."<sup>94</sup> Acts of meaning—like understanding, judging, and deciding—do not abstract from but rather enrich the world of experience. As for Aquinas, for Lonergan, meaning can be neither communicated nor found apart from experience, even if meaning cannot be reduced to pure experience alone.<sup>95</sup> So too does the same incarnational logic hold true for divine meaning, God's offer of friendship, as Christ's real presence in the Eucharist demonstrates. "You can't talk to your body without symbols," Lonergan remarks.<sup>96</sup> Whatever is received is received in the mode of the receiver, and the recipients of God's loving friendship are by nature embodied knowers. The symbolic character of the Eucharist illustrates the bodily, experiential, sacramental, and thus fitting manner by which God extends friendship. Indeed, the privileged medium of God's message of friendship is the Eucharist.

If friendship entails imitating the friend, the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist demands that those who receive the Eucharist in turn remain bodily and really present to others: that is, it demands their attentiveness. Religious conversion, understood as friendship of God, perfects all one's

<sup>92</sup> See, for example, Aquinas, *ST I*, q. 81, art. 3; *ST I*, q. 84, art. 7; *ST I*, q. 85, art. 8; and *ST I*, q. 87, art. 2, ad. 2. On Aquinas's "materialism," see Denys Turner, *Thomas Aquinas: A Portrait* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013), 47–69.

<sup>93</sup> Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *Verbum: Word and Idea in Aquinas*, CWL 2, ed. Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 44–45, 154–58, 169.

<sup>94</sup> Bernard J. F. Lonergan, "The Response of the Jesuit Priest and Apostle in the Modern World," in *A Second Collection*, 141.

<sup>95</sup> For a project that tries to develop the ecclesial possibilities of the internet from the second half of this sentence, see Katherine G. Schmidt, *Virtual Communion: Theology of the Internet and the Catholic Sacramental Imagination* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books).

<sup>96</sup> Bernard J. F. Lonergan, "An Interview with Fr. Bernard Lonergan, S.J.," in *A Second Collection*, 225. See also Lonergan, "The Notion of Sacrifice," where he adds that symbols are founded on "our sentient and corporeal nature" (7).

activity—deciding, judging, understanding, and experiencing—through self-transcending love such that one might be liberated from bias and for human authenticity, from the obscurity of sin and for living as God’s image. That is, the reception of God’s love breaks one open to fully “be responsible” in deciding, “be rational” in judging, “be intelligent” in understanding, and “be attentive” in experiencing.<sup>97</sup> As mediated through materiality, Christ’s eucharistic, real presence speaks firstly (though not only) to one’s experience. This experiential mediation demands that one “be attentive” first and foremost, such that one can receive and recognize this divine offer of friendship and its ethical consequences. It is to be attentive to this extension of friendship hidden in the materiality of bread and wine. Robert Imbelli captures this implication well when he writes that “the ongoing transformation of believers that the Eucharist promotes is the development of a heightened consciousness: an ability to see more attentively, to act more mindfully.”<sup>98</sup> Considering the loving friendship that gives shape to this real presence, this attentiveness extends beyond the attentiveness of a curious bystander. Christ’s offer of friendship—as extended through his real, eucharistic presence—is a call, comments Pope Benedict XVI, to “look on [another] person not simply with my eyes and feelings, but from the (‘supernatural’) perspective of Jesus Christ. His friend is my friend. . . . Seeing with the eyes of Christ, I can give to others much more than their outward necessities; I can give them the look of love which they crave.”<sup>99</sup> To see with the eyes of Christ entails the loving, empathetic attentiveness that befits a friend’s real presence that another craves. To live in Christ as subject is to be lovingly attentive, to see as Christ sees and to feel as Christ feels.<sup>100</sup> It is to image the God who has “searched me and known me,” who knows “when I sit down and rise up” (Ps 139:1–2), and who even counts all the hairs of my head (Luke 12:7).

Friendship, understood eucharistically as real presence, affords the conditions for effective freedom amid the shallows of the digital age. Whereas the digital age tends to reduce knowing to skiing and skimming, the real presence of friendship demands an attentiveness that allows one to encounter the depths of the other, to wonder lovingly and unrestrictedly about him or her. Whereas the digital age tends to promise a world without friction, the real presence of friendship requires the unguarded embrace of the other in

<sup>97</sup> Lonergan, *Insight*, 372–76; and Lonergan, “Christ as Subject,” 176–77.

<sup>98</sup> Robert P. Imbelli, *Rekindling the Christic Imagination: Theological Meditations for the New Evangelization* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2014), 54.

<sup>99</sup> Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, (December 25, 2005), [https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_enc\\_20051225\\_deus-caritas-est.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20051225_deus-caritas-est.html), §18.

<sup>100</sup> See Jennifer Crawford, *Spiritually-Engaged Knowledge: The Attentive Heart* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2005), 97–98.

his or her own imperfect yet revelatory uniqueness. Whereas the digital age tends to lend an illusion of control to interactions, the real presence of friendship requires the renunciation of control so as to receive the other's unique particularity. Whereas the digital age tends to allow one to be anywhere any-time one wants, the real presence of friendship requires physical proximity. Friendship, after all, requires time-worn habits like patience if one is to trust and love the other more fully.<sup>101</sup> It requires stability. It requires the surrender of utilitarian efficiency. It requires the stilling of other appetites.<sup>102</sup> Through such asceticism, friendship inspires an enduring commitment to behold and even adore the presence of Christ in the other, to see as God sees and befriend as God befriends. At the center of *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis's magisterial call for friendship, stands the Christ figure of the Good Samaritan, who "gave [the injured man of the parable] something that in our frenetic world we cling to tightly: he gave him his time. . . . Without even knowing the injured man, he saw him as deserving of his time and attention."<sup>103</sup> Befriending God's friends demands the type of real presence that bothers to love through time and attention. Just as God enduringly dwells with God's people in the Eucharist, so too are those who encounter the Eucharist called to enduringly dwell with others. As Pope Francis declared to a group of liturgists, "The genuine liturgical life, especially the Eucharist, always impels us to charity, which is above all openness and attention to others."<sup>104</sup> Understood on the third stage of meaning, Christ's real presence in the Eucharist invites the type of attentiveness that characterizes loving friendship.

This real presence must distinguish the church's life, as Christ's eucharistic body in history, amid a digital age. Friendship, as a real presence that imitates Christ's own eucharistic presence, can ground what Pope Francis calls a "culture of encounter." This culture can offer an alternative paradigm to the technocratic paradigm and counter the globalization of indifference. The pope describes a culture of encounter Christologically and, by implication,

<sup>101</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 8, chap. 3. Again, this is not to disregard the possibilities that friendships can be sustained through virtual media; nevertheless, even these interactions typically are oriented toward the incarnational.

<sup>102</sup> As Rowan Williams writes, "Generosity begins not in the overflow of warm feeling, but in a patient looking and listening. It's why love needs contemplation; why the Buddhist, as well as the Christian, tradition lays such stress on compassion being the fruit of 'dispassion'—which is absolutely not chilly detachment, but a freedom from your own feverish desires when you look at another" (in Mary Zournazi and Rowan Williams, *Justice and Love: A Philosophical Dialogue* [New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021], 99).

<sup>103</sup> Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, §63.

<sup>104</sup> Pope Francis, "Audience with Teachers and Students of the Pontifical Liturgical Institute," (May 7, 2022), <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2022/05/07/220507f.html>.

eucharistically: “The Gospel tells us constantly to run the risk of a face-to-face encounter with others, with their physical presence which challenges us, with their pain and their pleas, with their joy which infects us in our close and continuous interaction. . . . The Son of God, by becoming flesh, summoned us to the revolution of tenderness.”<sup>105</sup> Encounter, as a tenderness that becomes flesh, demands loving attentiveness to the presence of another. Demonstrating his willingness to preach this message to the digital margins that still takes those technologies seriously, Pope Francis uses a TED Talk to define this incarnate tenderness:

It is the love that comes close and becomes real. It is a movement that starts from our heart and reaches the eyes, the ears and the hands. Tenderness means to use our eyes to see the other, our ears to hear the other, to listen to the children, the poor, those who are afraid of the future. To listen also to the silent cry of our common home, of our sick and polluted earth. Tenderness means to use our hands and our heart to comfort the other, to take care of those in need.<sup>106</sup>

Just as Christ’s presence “becomes real” in the Eucharist, a culture of tender encounter requires a love that “becomes real” in incarnate, attentive, and caring friendship. In his apostolic letter *Desiderio Desideravi*, Pope Francis has critiqued spiritualistic, quasi-gnostic understandings of the eucharistic liturgy; instead, the Eucharist leads worshipers more fully into the life of God in a way “consistent with all action of God, following the way of the Incarnation, that is, by means of the symbolic language of the body, which extends to things in space and time.”<sup>107</sup> Just as Christ in the Eucharist reaches human eyes, ears,

<sup>105</sup> Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, §88.

<sup>106</sup> Pope Francis, “Video Conference on the Occasion of the TED Conference in Vancouver,” (April 26, 2017), [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/pont-messages/2017/documents/papa-francesco\\_20170426\\_videomessaggio-ted-2017.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/pont-messages/2017/documents/papa-francesco_20170426_videomessaggio-ted-2017.html).

<sup>107</sup> Pope Francis, *Desiderio Desideravi*, (June 29, 2022), [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_letters/documents/20220629-lettera-ap-desiderio-desideravi.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_letters/documents/20220629-lettera-ap-desiderio-desideravi.html), §19. See also §28, §42, §44. The Vatican Dicastery for Communication has expounded the implications of this claim for our digital environment: “One cannot share a meal through a screen. All our senses are engaged when we share a meal: taste and smell, glances that contemplate the faces of the diners, listening to the conversations at table. Sharing a meal at table is our first education in attention to others, a fostering of relationships among family members, neighbors, friends, and colleagues. Likewise, we participate with the whole person at the altar: mind, spirit, and body are involved. The liturgy is a sensory experience; we enter into the Eucharistic mystery through the doors of the senses that are awakened and fed in their need for beauty, meaning, harmony, vision, interaction and emotion. Above all, the Eucharist is not

and hands, so too must friendship remain anchored in this type of corporeal encounter. In the words of one commentator, for Pope Francis, “to be close and concrete in a technocratic world” defines the church’s evangelizing mission in the twenty-first century.<sup>108</sup>

Indeed, the eucharistic praxis of the church commits it to a ministry of real presence amid the dominance of the distracted and frictionless shallows. The contemporary digital milieu calls for a commitment to this eucharistic vocation of real presence. So too does it call for a commitment among those ecclesial communities who fail to reflect this lofty vocation; more often than not, eucharistic celebrations in parishes mime precisely the depersonalization, polarization, and isolation that the church claims to redeem. Again, this mission need not be understood as a rejection of digital technologies or even virtual presence *tout court*. A world governed by statistical norms allows for alternative technological possibilities that may very well aid and supplement the type of communion demanded by the Eucharist.<sup>109</sup> Pope Francis’s hope for the possibilities of various technologies even while naming the technocratic paradigm in *Laudato Si’* starts to capture that delicate task of identifying the possibility of redeemed technologies, a task that goes beyond the scope of this article. At the very least, just as Saint Ignatius counsels humbling in times of consolation and confidence in times of desolation, a technological age that skews toward the distracted and disincarnate necessitates a reprioritization of the attentive and the incarnate.<sup>110</sup> A student of Lonergan, Robert Doran has characterized the church’s mission as the reconciliation of tense balances between dialectical forces in history, including between technology and embodiment.<sup>111</sup> It may be as undramatic (though certainly not easy) an endeavor as recovering what Albert Borgmann calls “focal practices” that

something that we can just ‘watch’; it is something that truly nourishes us” (Dicastery for Communication, *Towards Full Presence*, 61). Note the role of both presence and attention here.

<sup>108</sup> Austen Ivereigh, *Wounded Shepherd: Pope Francis and His Struggle to Convert the Catholic Church* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2019), 223.

<sup>109</sup> For the articulation an exceptional, ecclesial experience of digital connection, see Deanna A. Thompson, *The Virtual Body of Christ in a Suffering World* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2016). One might also think of the pastoral accommodation for shut-ins to watch televised Mass. Still, here the exception proves the norm. Pastoral accommodations represent what Lonergan might call a “statistical residue” of what is typically the norm.

<sup>110</sup> Ignatius of Loyola, *The Spiritual Exercises*, trans. Anthony Mottola (New York: Image Books, 1964), 131.

<sup>111</sup> Robert M. Doran, *Theology and the Dialectics of History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), 82–85, 514, 650–51. Doran here is expanding upon Lonergan’s formulation of the “law of limitation and transcendence” in human development in *Insight*, 497–502.

demand an attentive, sacramental engagement with the world, like preparing and gathering for meals or playing music together.<sup>112</sup> In a society tempted to view virtual presence as the “new normal” (the Metaverse?), the church’s grounding in the real presence of eucharistic friendship requires it to hold up real, attentive presence as the norm.<sup>113</sup> Only from that norm might the right use of digital communication technologies be judged today. Only from that norm can the mission of the church be judged today. The digital signs of the times must be read through the eucharistic friendship of Christ.

### Conclusion

For the final exam in TH 282, I asked my students to consider theologically the role of technology amid lockdown. Without exception, each student confessed the insufficiency of digital connection and their longing for physical communion. They expressed frustration with the distractions that prevented them from learning effectively through Zoom. They rued their separation from their peers, identifying mealtime conversations, dorm life, and even classroom conversations as particular losses. At the same time, they welcomed the rediscovery of family activities and resolved to foster a more intentional presence to the world around them. They longed for friendship. They longed for real presence. And the virtual world satisfied neither. While this anecdote does not intend to indict online education per se, it does illustrate the particular griefs and anxieties, joys and hopes that a theology that operates on the level of our time must answer.

The pandemic has precipitated a sacramental moment, a moment that thirsts for the concrete and seeks salvation within the concrete. “Is it possible that the pandemic,” José Granados wonders, “could reawaken a nostalgia

<sup>112</sup> See Borgmann, *Power Failure*, 117–28. See also Richard R. Gaillardetz, *Transforming Our Days: Finding God Amid the Noise of Everyday Life* (Liguori, MI: Liguori, 2007). In the last chapter of his book, Gaillardetz develops the Eucharistic contours of this proposal.

<sup>113</sup> The Catholic Bishops of Australia capture the eucharistic dimensions of this claim especially well: “God’s encounter with creation is incarnational; primarily in the person of Jesus. Jesus, the God who became man, gathered children in his arms, touched and healed the leper, the blind, the sick and the broken. This incarnational presence continues sacramentally in the Church as we gather to hear God’s Word and receive the Eucharist. We are anointed with oil, sprinkled with water and have ashes deposited on our foreheads. Even the best of digital encounters cannot replace the Real Presence of Christ, given and received sacramentally, or the real presence of human encounter” (Australian Catholic Bishops, *Making It Real: Genuine Human Encounter in Our Digital World*, Social Justice Statement 2019–20, 17).

for the sacramental?"<sup>114</sup> Pope Francis certainly thinks so. In an interview amid the height of the pandemic lockdown, he reflected:

Sometimes, we only experience a virtual form of communication with one another. Instead, we should discover a new closeness. More concrete relationships made of attention and patience. In their homes, families often eat together in great silence, but not as a result of listening to each other, rather because the parents watch television while they eat, and children are on their mobile phones. They look like monks, all isolated from each other. Here there is no communication, whereas listening to each other is important because that's how we can understand the needs, efforts, desires of the other. This language made of concrete gestures must be safeguarded. In my opinion, the pain of these days should open us up to this concreteness.<sup>115</sup>

Since that time, Pope Francis has repeated this commitment to the real with even more force. As he contends:

One of my hopes for this crisis we are living is that we come back to contact with reality. We need to move from the virtual to the real, from the abstract to the concrete, from the adjective to the noun. . . . As we have experienced personally in this time, no media can satisfy the human soul's desire for direct contact with those they love and with reality; and nothing can substitute for engaging directly with the complexity of other people's experiences. Communication is much more than connection, and is most fruitful where there are bonds of trust, communion and fraternity and physical presence.<sup>116</sup>

Once again, the pope expresses his hope for a reclamation of real, physical, and attentive presence amid the shallows of virtual connection. This article has argued that this sensibility is a deeply eucharistic one, following the logic of Christ's own physically mediated offer of friendship through real presence.

In fact, for many, the most memorable image of the pandemic lockdown came on March 27, 2020. On that day, Pope Francis hobbled up the steps of an empty, dark, and rainy Saint Peter's Square to expose the Blessed Sacrament. To a world gone online that longed for the real, Pope Francis held up the real presence of Christ. To a world of isolation that longed for communion,

<sup>114</sup> José Granados, "The Pandemic: A Sacramental Reading," *Communio* 47, no. 3 (Fall 2020): 455–70, at 456.

<sup>115</sup> Pope Francis, with Paolo Rodari, "Pope Francis on Coronavirus Crisis: 'Don't Waste These Difficult Days. While at Home Re-Discover the Importance of Hugging Kids and Relatives,'" *La Repubblica*, (March 18, 2020), [https://www.repubblica.it/vaticano/2020/03/18/news/coronavirus\\_pope\\_francois-251572693/](https://www.repubblica.it/vaticano/2020/03/18/news/coronavirus_pope_francois-251572693/).

<sup>116</sup> Pope Francis, with Austen Ivereigh, *Let Us Dream: The Path to a Better Future* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020), 16, 23.

Pope Francis held up God's hope to dwell among us as one dwells with friends. To a world full of fear that longed for hope, Pope Francis held up the cruciform love that such friendship involves. And he could use a digital medium precisely to awaken that thirst and reveal the abnormality of the supposedly new normal! At no point in the twenty-first century has the church's mission been made clearer than on that day. The pandemic has indeed awakened a longing for real presence and has indeed unearthed a dissatisfaction with the shallows. Offering Christ's eucharistic friendship with boldness and confidence can answer this hope. Yes, to spin a Rahnerian aphorism, Christians of the digital future will be people of real presence or they will not exist at all.<sup>117</sup>

<sup>117</sup> I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers, my wife Catherine Petrany, Tom Syphan, Nicole Buchek, and my many students in TH 282 for helping me write this article and improve it.