

*Fr. Perozich comments —*

*In confession I hear people say that they are disturbed by various politicians, church leaders and others who get more coverage than does the average person.*

*My advice to them in penance and to the assembly in homilies is to watch 30 minutes of the news just to see what is being presented, and then to turn it off in order to safeguard the peace of soul.*

*It is comforting to me to see that I am not the only one giving such advice.*

*If I watch network channels, which I do for local weather or because the sporting broadcast will follow, I hear almost word for word the same messages and topics on the major channels.*

*Newscasters are not unbiased investigative journalists. They are talking heads reading what has been presented to them. And who is presenting it to them in order to form the minds and opinions of the listeners?*

*When church leaders comment on politics or speak contrary to biblical morality, I hear them, but do not follow their ideas. I stick with Jesus.*

*Certainly it is good to find alternative news sites such as on the internet in order to discover other facts and opinions rather than to be force fed what larger news outlets are promoting.*

*Beside recommending a limit of 30 minutes of news, I advise not to indulge one more minutes of screen time than one has spent in prayer.*

## **Spiritually Toxic News**

Fr. Raymond J. de Souza  
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Is it a sin to follow the news? Or to read commentators upon the news? Or to listen to podcasts that comment upon the commentators? Or to watch the YouTube videos of those picking apart the podcasts?

It's Lent, the season for more than the usual number of Confessions. And this Lent, as has increasingly been the case over

the last half-dozen years or so, more and more penitents are confessing that they are following the news.

They don't put it exactly that way. **They say that the news is making them angry, more apt to harbor resentments, to making rash judgments, to indulging prejudices, to cultivating ill will, to rejoicing in the misfortune of others – even to wishing harm upon those who disagree. All this is directed at people they have never personally met – this political leader, that famous personage.**

For those penitents who know the language, they speak of the news as an occasion of sin, about which they've been careless.

I don't recall hearing that in the confessional ten years ago; if I did, it was rare. Now, I hear it frequently. The volume and ethos of the news is evidently disturbing the peace of those very few Catholics who go to Confession. The pious, one might think, ought to be less troubled than others by the passing scene. Perhaps they are. In which case, imagine the state of the rest.

Our TCT friend Francis X. Maier, [confessed here](#) a few days ago that, "Once upon a time, I was a news junkie."

No longer? At least much less so, because **"so often these days I find myself locked in my head, in the Land of the Unreal, battling enemies and ideas that blind me to the beauty of the world and the people I love."**

Fran notes that marvelous things are available digitally – The Catholic Thing! – but **"these information formats also host a generous share of nutcases, liars, and haters. . . .The result is fatigue, tribalism, and (too often) grievance.** Grievance culture is venomous. It's also self-sustaining, like a colony of ticks in the secret places of the heart, because there's always another oppressor to expose and indict."

His complaint is by now "tediously familiar," Fran concedes, but the familiarity is breeding so much contempt that a warning is in order.

**“Resentment is addictive,”** writes the former news junkie. **“It presumes the wickedness or ignorance of those who disagree.** It precludes reasoned discourse because it’s a waste of precious time listening to others if, by definition, they’re stupid or evil since their views conflict with our own.”

**The toxins are coursing through public life as entire cable networks, podcasts, and social media platforms are reliant upon a business model that requires the cultivation of outrage to monetize the anger.** It’s commercially successful, politically powerful, and culturally influential.

“That explains why so much of our nation’s current public life is toxic,” Fran concludes.

It’s much worse than that.



*The Prodigal Son Wasting His Inheritance by Johann Wolfgang Baumgartner, c. 1750  
[National Gallery of Denmark, Copenhagen]*

**The spiritual life of millions of souls has become toxic too. We can see the degradation of our public life. The interior life is harder to see, but a similar degradation is quite advanced and threatens the sanctity of souls seeking to live close to God.**

A few recognize this and seek forgiveness in Confession – and the grace of the sacrament to resist this particularly powerful vice. Good for them. For many more, **the interior is life continuously corrupted without awareness or apparent remedy. Their minds, hearts, and souls are daily drenched in the toxins of “our poisoned shared culture.”**

Years ago, when a searching soul would approach me with inquiries about becoming Catholic, I would generally start with a few words about God’s love, our need for salvation and the person of Jesus. Then an introduction to what prayer is and how to do it. After that, more formal study of the truths of the faith.

Now, when a young person approaches me – usually a man (there has been a noticeable uptick among young men) – I begin by discussing his digital habits. I speak of the **“3 Ps.”**

I warn him against **pornography, pious conflicts online, and politics.** All of them are aware of the first danger, and the overwhelming majority were or are addicted to it. But some are surprised that immersing themselves in liturgical and doctrinal disputes online is harmful to their relationship with Jesus. As to politics, **nearly all of them began their path toward deeper questions by following popular political voices, most of whom are combative and lacking in charity.** While a good proportion offer juvenile ridicule of rivals, there are a few who lead the impressionable toward the spiritual dangers of racism and hatred of Jews.

Fran, after a lifetime of discipleship, recognizes the danger, **turns off the news, and goes to Eucharistic Adoration.** The young men have neither the experience nor the wisdom to

recognize that on their own. But I don't have a hard time convincing them of the value of getting the "3 Ps" out of their life. I am pointing out something that they already intuit. They readily accept that **it is essential to make room for God's grace to enter.**

Lots of parishes – sometimes entire dioceses – make Confession a priority during Lent, offering extra times “when the light is on.” Pope Francis has made “24 Hours for the Lord” a priority during Lent, sitting in the Confessional personally, usually after going to Confession himself.

Yesterday, the Diocese of Arlington Virginia held a [Diocesan Day of Unplugging](#) – a day to put away the phones, shut off the screens. It's aimed at more than just the 3 Ps, but it is a response to the same spiritual danger. I expect that in Arlington, many more will “unplug” than will get to Confession. Sacramental grace is more powerful than a brief screen sabbatical, but it may be that the latter is more urgent, a sort of plowing of the field before sowing the seed.

Is following the news sinful? Not in se. But it is a near occasion of sin for a great many. About such occasions, there's relevant advice much older than my 3 Ps.

If your screen causes you to sin, cut it off.

## **In the Kingdom of Noise**

*Francis X. Maier*

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Here's a fun fact: In December 1990, the planet had exactly one [website](#) <sup>[1]</sup>, created by Tim Berners-Lee, inventor of the World Wide Web. A year later, total global websites numbered 50. By

December 1993, there were 623; by January 1996, 100,000; by April 2008 (around the time *The Catholic Thing* started), 162 million. Today the number is north of 1.1 billion. About 4 percent of those websites are pornography-related. Predictably, given the potholes in human nature, porn-related web searches are sharply higher. But overall, for better or worse, it's now almost impossible to imagine (or remember) a world without Google search, Amazon shopping, and unhinged YouTube videos like *The Sound of Music: Action Recut*.<sup>[2]</sup>

I mention this because we humans have a genius for wandering into problems we should have seen coming. Here's an example.

One of the men who helped shape my adult thinking was the media scholar Neil Postman. In 1996, as the Internet exploded, we had the first of several conversations. A neophyte tech addict – I'd taught myself Linux and the joys of the command line interface (CLI) – I bubbled on about the web's democratizing impact; how it would horizontalize power structures; how everyone could now have a voice in world affairs, national governance, etc.

Postman, the author of *Amusing Ourselves to Death*<sup>[3]</sup> and *Technopoly*,<sup>[4]</sup> listened patiently. Then he suggested that **too much information, too raw, too loose, too loud, from too many sources, might not have happy results. The greater and faster the flow of information, the more opportunities for confusion and conflict. The more confusion and conflict, the more the need for curators.**

And curators – elected or expert or not, he said – come in all flavors, including unpleasantly controlling, deceitful ones, as the COVID experience later proved. Postman was far from authoritarian in politics. He was classically secular and liberal. He simply foresaw **the potential for anarchy in a culture overwhelmed by new tools and unable to digest the tsunami of new ideas, ambiguities, and appetites they**

**create. He understood that fragmentation inevitably breeds anxiety and the need for centralized power to offset a culture's turmoil.**

Postman died in 2003, before the birth of Facebook (2004), Twitter now X (2006), Substack (2017), and Bluesky (2019). The information torrent that triggered his concern has only increased – exponentially. To be fair, much of it is good. Facebook connects families and friends. Thousands of excellent religious resources are available online (including publications like this one). Substack hosts the work of terrific new and established voices like Matthew Crawford, Iain McGilchrist, N.S. Lyons, Paul Kingsnorth, Nathan Pinkoski, Mary Harrington, and many others; writers who can say what they want, whenever and however they want.

The trouble is that **all these information formats also host a generous share of nutcases, liars, and haters. . .who also say and argue whatever they want in the same space. Tracking real reality – the news and views that comprise a truthful understanding of the world – becomes a challenge of catching facts in a hurricane-strength wind tunnel. The result is fatigue, tribalism, and (too often) grievance.**

**Grievance culture is venomous. It's also self-sustaining, like a colony of ticks in the secret places of the heart, because there's always another oppressor to expose and indict.** It's true that anger is not always a bad thing. It's a natural response to wickedness and corruption. In Luke 19:45, Jesus himself shows a righteous anger toward the Temple's moneychangers.

**But anger is, by nature, corrosive. It feels good in an ugly sort of way because it so often involves a moralizing exercise that subtly reinforces the self: *I* was mistreated, or *I* see others mistreated. So *I* want justice. *I demand* justice, now.**

*I* don't care about the cost. And *I* want the transgressors punished. So let me tell you all about it – online.

**Resentment is addictive. It presumes the wickedness or ignorance of those who disagree.** It precludes reasoned discourse because it's a waste of precious time listening to others if, by definition, they're stupid or evil since their views conflict with our own. And that explains why so much of our nation's current public life is toxic. It's senseless to blather on about the "common good" when, by our own words and actions, we make a genuine common good impossible.

**The more resentment we bring to our public discourse, the more poisonous our shared culture becomes.** If so many of us feel that we're now the targets rather than the active agents of our social and political environment, it's because *that's what we are*. That's what **we've become, the world we ourselves have helped create**. And it will get worse until we as a people – assuming we can still call ourselves "one people" – remember that even our perceived enemies bear the image of God and thus deserve some compassion and respect.

Yes, I know: None of what I say here is new. In fact, it's tediously familiar, even to me. So why bother putting it into words? There's no way to turn back the clock and un-invent the tools that now rewire the world. And yet I can't get two vivid images out of my head, both from C.S. Lewis.

There's a moment in *The Screwtape Letters* when the devil Screwtape speaks rapturously of **the sound of Hell: an endless cacophony of noise and disorder**. And in *The Great Divorce*, damned souls, given a bus ride to Heaven and the chance to repent, can barely suffer the pain of treading on Heaven's grass. **Hell is self-absorption, nursed resentments, and the refusal of reality**. The blades of Heaven's grass are too intensely real.

Once upon a time, I was a news junkie. But so often these days I find myself locked in my head, in the Land of the Unreal,



battling enemies and ideas that blind me to the beauty of the world and the people I love. Others might know what I'm talking about. It's why **Adoration matters. It's silence before the Real.**

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