

A View from the Pew

by Deacon Greg Kandra

Let Us iPray

This is about an incident which happened to a priest in another diocese during his parish's Holy Hour.

While the priest was praying before the Blessed Sacrament, a parishioner noticed the glow emanating from an object in the priest's hand. It was his cell phone. His fingers were swiping over the screen. The parishioner was horrified. She walked up to him, tapped him on the shoulder, and whispered, testily, "Father, you shouldn't be reading emails now!"

"I'm not," he replied. He showed her the screen. "It's my breviary. I have it on my phone!"

Mortified, the woman slipped back to her pew.

Welcome to the spiritual life, circa 2015.

Aside from the unfortunate sin here of rash judgment—that's a topic for another column—what this episode reveals is the increasing reliance of the church on electronic devices to help us pray, study, reflect, and even say Mass. I have seen this it for myself. Once we had a Mass celebrated in the boardroom at my office in Manhattan, and the priest read all the prayers for the new translation of the Missal from his office iPad, swiping his finger across the "page" to move from prayer to prayer.

But that's just the latest innovation. For years now, you've been able to download versions of the Rosary, tapping the "beads" to move through the devotion. There's even an excellent version of the Liturgy of the Hours, an application called Divine Office, which not only offers access to the daily prayers, but also augments the material with chants and music. I've tried it a time or two on the subway on the way to work. Slip on a set of earbuds and you could be in a monastery chapel—if the chapel contained a hundred other people, pressed elbow to elbow, groggily slurping morning coffee or trying to scan their Kindles.

There are apps for the Bible, for Magnificat, for a wide array of spiritual resources. Nowadays, you can carry an entire theological library in something just a little larger than a credit card. Or in something roughly the size of a small magazine.

My Kindle has changed how I read, how I commute to work, and how I pray. Not only does it offer me the convenience of the Liturgy of the Hours, but I also have access to a growing library of books and newspapers. The convenience is unbeatable, and the absence of weight in my briefcase has done wonders for my mood, and for my posture. Lacking a bulky breviary in my bag, I now have no reason to slouch.

And I have every reason to just pick up the Kindle and read, or pray, or browse. A world of words and holy wisdom is more portable than ever. Gutenberg would be in awe.

Some people, of course, will always prefer the printed page. (Longtime readers of this column know that I used to be one of them. You can consider me, now, a convert, baptized into the Cult of Kindle.) Once when I suggested to a seminarian who had just completed a pastoral year assignment at our parish the idea of reading his daily office off a screen, he was not impressed. "I'll always prefer having it in a book," he sniffed. Old habits die hard.

But none of us can fight the fact that a world of paper and ink is rapidly disappearing into—literally—a Cloud. The digital world is replacing the printed one.

I'm not sure where all this technology will take us. But for now, a word of caution: That priest who appears to be reading his emails and texting his Aunt Mildred while he's up on the altar might actually be communicating, instead, with God.

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