

A View from the Pew

by Deacon Greg Kandra

Call Waiting — or Not

What did we do before cell phones? Once upon a time, we waited patiently in line to use a public phone. There were these things called “phone booths” on street corners and in office lobbies. Most had doors. You could shut them and quiet the noise and have a civilized conversation with your wife or your daughter or the maître d’ at a restaurant to make a reservation. (I’m fairly sure all of this is true, because I’ve seen it in grainy black and white movies they show on TCM.)

Those were the good old days.

Now, each of us is a walking phone booth. We have devices that clip on our belts or fit into a purse. We wear tiny headsets that are almost invisible. We pass people, walking alone on the street, who were having animated conversations with no one in particular. (I know, this has always been common in New York, but we used to give these sorts of people a wide berth. Now they work in the next cubicle.)

Portable phones are just the beginning. We are constantly sending each other texts or tweets from devices small enough to fit in the palm of our hand. My smartphone sends emails, manages my calendar and even has GPS to help me in case I get lost. It also has games, plays music and does duty as a camera. There’s even an app to help me find my keys.

Maybe all this is a great step forward for the human race.

But I’m having a hard time believing it.

Since we can do so much, anywhere, anytime, with so little effort, we have forgotten that obscure and much-overlooked virtue: patience. We no longer have to schedule a phone call or wait for the mail; anything can be done whenever it’s convenient.

And bit by bit, I fear, we are forgetting some of the most exquisite human emotions. Things like anticipation. And apprehension. The agonizing worry that goes with waiting. The necessity of biding time. As a result, time has become less meaningful—and we no longer have to wait for the answer to a question or the resolution of a problem. Do it now. We can. And we do.

This has a ripple effect, I think, that can even touch our lives as Christians. We can become less willing to accommodate another’s imperfections, less able to see the value of someone else’s time. It can even impact how we pray. We can be tempted to fill the periodic moments of silence with chatter. Who has time to converse with God, when there’s a voice or text message on your phone waiting to be answered?

The inconvenient truth is, This isn’t how we were made to live. And because communication has become so instantaneous and spontaneous, I think we run the risk of losing a vital part of our humanity. The part that listens and that waits for an answer. The part that anticipates. The part that delays gratification, and satisfaction, and doesn’t demand it immediately.

I know my smartphone has made my life easier in many ways, but I also wish I could give it up for Lent. It would probably be a good spiritual exercise and teach me a few things about myself. It might make me more patient, more tolerant, more accepting.

It would certainly give me more to talk about with God, in my free time.

And frankly, my thumbs could use the rest.

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