

From the Chapel – July 1: No comment



[“From the Chapel”](#) is a series of short, daily reflections on life and faith in a time of uncertainty. As people across the world cope with the effects of the coronavirus – including the social isolation necessary to combat its spread – these reflections remind us of the hope that lies at the heart of the Gospel.

“O Lord, make me chaste – but not yet!” When I first read St. Augustine’s “Confessions” as a serious and eager young college student, struggling with my faith and dealing with the reality of attending a university with roughly 25 times the population of my hometown, his ironic prayer (often rendered with “pure” or “good” in place of “chaste”) seemed to me a deeply insightful distillation of the battle within our souls between the grace that we are freely given by Christ and the lasting effects of the damage done to our human nature by Adam’s fall. A year or two later, St. Augustine’s latter-day disciple, Bruce Springsteen, looked at that same battle through more of a Pauline lens: “Tonight I’ll get down on my knees and pray / our love will make that other man go away. / But he’ll never say goodbye. / Two faces have I.”

Thirty-plus years later, I continue to believe that Augustine had hit on something essential, but I now read his prayer with a more nuanced eye. At age 19, even though I already regarded myself as a conservative (or rather, as I would come to understand a few years later while reading John Lukacs, because I regarded myself as a conservative, with everything that implies in the American political and cultural context), I could simultaneously believe in the fallenness of human nature and the possibility of progress – not merely growth in grace, but progress to the point where (though I would not

have put it this way at the time) our fallen human nature could be overcome.

That Augustine may have written those words with a wry smile on his face, knowing that even the most holy among us will go to our graves with a bit of that “not yet” still playing on our lips, would take me a few more decades of life, growth in the Faith, happiness and tragedy to recognize.

I had Augustine’s prayer in mind when I ended [yesterday’s column](#) by saying that I finally intended to take my own advice and quit reading the comments on Facebook – “Starting tomorrow.” That same sentiment has entered popular culture as a joke about procrastination, so it never even struck me that someone might take it seriously. And yet at least two of my Facebook friends – and more than Facebook friends, but people I have known well for many years in the real life that still exists beyond social media – did just that. I know, because I read the comments.

In an unexpected way, that illustrates the point I was making, which wasn’t really about Facebook, or even so much about comments, but about the difference in engagement in different forms of media – print versus digital, long form versus short, in person (buying Yeats a pint at the pub) versus distant. It’s Marshall McLuhan and “[the medium is the message](#)” all over again.

At my previous publication, where I was executive editor for 20 years, we had a website featuring content as early as 1997. And we had comments on the site for 15 years or more, before we finally turned them off – and redirected those who wanted to discuss an article to Facebook. But when we had comments, I often encouraged the more thoughtful commenters not to comment more, but to comment less, and instead to redirect their effort to writing articles of their own engaging the piece that they were commenting on.

Why? Part of it was the ephemeral nature of the web, and knowing that those comments would one day all vanish (and they did). Those who disparage print and elevate digital often mistake ubiquity of access to something on the web with both ubiquity of distribution and, oddly, with permanence. But just because everyone in the world can access something you wrote at a particular URL does not mean that more than the slightest fraction of them will, nor does it mean that the contents of that URL are magically archived in many places. Even a print publication with a distribution of, say, 300 copies has, by its very nature, about 297 more archives of that content than something on the web, which may have only one physical server housing it, with maybe a backup or two.

But more important than the ephemeral nature of comments on a website or Facebook is the difference in effort and engagement that writing a considered response to an article – say, an article of your own, or a letter to the editor, or even a private letter to the author of the piece – requires. [It's easy to dash off a comment](#), and to dash off another if the author replies, and over the course of a comment thread to find that you haven't actually made a coherent argument engaging the original piece but have instead ended up tailoring your comments and responses to your interlocutor's comments and responses. In other words, you can end up mistaking the means for the end, becoming more concerned with scoring points than with arriving at the truth – which, [for us as Christians](#), should always be the point of our communication.

There will always be room for spirited back and forth, with short-form responses. The best medium for those messages, though, will always be that corner pub, or the front porch, or around the dinner table, or a debate at a conference, or any place where friends or even foes can hear the nuances in your voice and see the wry smile on your face, and not miss the joke.

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