

## Religious Life and Holiness in the Digital Age

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*In this essay, Fr. Nicholas Sheehy, LC reflects on how religious life can survive and even thrive in the digital age when it stays grounded in prayer and a strong interior life, noting that the real danger is not technology itself but how easily it disrupts silence, attention, and a sense of identity when it replaces communion with God; drawing on Church teaching and lived experience, he ultimately calls for a renewed commitment to prayer, trust, and spiritual discipline as the foundation for religious life in an increasingly distracted world.*

Although it might seem like a priest with an iPhone or a religious sister on TikTok are in danger of losing their souls, those in religious life can not only survive but thrive if they anchor their identity in prayer and resist the subtle erosion of interiority that constant connectivity can cause. Religious life began with hermits who fled from the distractions of society to follow Christ—today the challenges are different, but that risk of distraction remains the same. The digital age does not threaten religious life because technology is evil, but because it can erode the interior life if misused.

The digital age presents new challenges to religious life, so when the General Superiors of Religious Orders met last fall in Rome, they wanted to focus on the theme of prayer in a digital age. They discussed the theme, "[Connected Faith: Living Prayer in the Digital Age](#)" at the 104<sup>th</sup> Assembly of the Union of Superiors General (USG). It is important to reflect on this change to the way culture works so that we can give witness also to the modern world. One

highlight of the meetings was visiting Pope Leo XIV, who shared his own reflections on the topic.

### **Pilgrims of Hope**

Speaking to religious, Pope Leo XIV reminds us that we are called to be “pilgrims of hope.” He insists that we are not destined for darkness or the abyss, but rather for an encounter with the Lord of glory. We make our own the call from the Book of Revelation: “Come, Lord Jesus!” (cf. Rev. 22:20). Even though the world may seem dark, we ought not give in to despair. Are we paying enough attention to our spiritual lives?

Each religious institute has norms designed to help its members grow spiritually. Culture may vary widely from one institute to another, however. In a world that values the pragmatic over the spiritual, it’s easy for spiritual life to get lost in the shuffle, even in religious life. Religious institutes need to work that much harder to communicate the importance of spiritual life to their members.

Focusing on spiritual life helps us to examine our use of technology through a different lens. When we look at our use of technology, we can become focused on the efficiency that it offers, rather than its impact on our religious life, especially our life of prayer. Distraction in a digital age leads to diminished interior silence, fractured attention, and loss of recollection.

### **From Distraction to Interior Silence**

Many, maybe even most of us, struggle with the correct use of technology. Perhaps we use our smartphones to pray in community. Even a good use of technology, such as using the same app so that we can make sure we have the same texts to pray from, is only a slip of the finger away from opening another app and distracting ourselves, even when in the chapel or praying in community.

None of us wants to give up our interior silence and so we do wonder how best to protect it. We question if our social media accounts are worth the distraction they cause. Do you ever think about your phone while you are in prayer? This is probably a sign that you are more attached than you should like to be.

Yet we may also feel tempted to define ourselves by our output in a world that does not automatically recognize the value of religious life. We may feel compelled to justify our existence by explaining what we do, pointing to our online presence as an example, rather than joyfully proclaiming who we are. Technology can push us to prioritize doing over being.

Two positive influences on religious life in the past half-century have been the teaching of Pope Saint John Paul II and the teaching of the Second Vatican Council. John Paul II's metaphysical grounding of his reflection on human existence extends to his reflection on religious life. The Second Vatican Council invited religious to focus on what is essential to our vocation. Let us reflect a bit on each of these teachings as they apply to technology.

### **Walking in Communion with God**

Religious life is meaningless unless we are walking in communion with God. Pope John Paul II distilled his teaching on religious life in his Apostolic Exhortation [\*Vita Consecrata\*](#). In this document, he reminded us that prayer is essential to the very existence of religious life, not merely one activity among many. It reminds me of a story from the life of Pope Saint Paul VI. In the wake of the Council, thousands of priests left active ministry. As he signed the indulgences, he is said to have sighed: "They have prayed little."

The same could be said for many religious men and women in the decades following the Council. In many cases, the busyness of the secular world seeped into religious communities, promoting a narrow and inaccurate vision of religious life that only the service of mankind could be a worthy reason to enter religious life. Too often, little

attention was given to the service rendered through prayer. Much confusion about religious life has sprung up, but without prayer, who are we?

Pope Saint John Paul II reminds us that

In every age, consecrated men and women must continue to be images of Christ the Lord, fostering through prayer a profound communion of mind with him (cf. Phil. 2:5-11), so that their whole lives may be penetrated by an apostolic spirit and their apostolic work with contemplation ([Vita Consecrata, 9](#)).

He sees the active element of religious life rooted in the prayerful or contemplative element. We may feel pressure to learn techniques and methodologies to support our ministries, but if we do not first become masters of prayer, we cannot witness to the Gospel in the unique way that religious life promotes. We might find ourselves reaching for our phones throughout the day, instinctively, to avoid leaving them behind. We should ask ourselves whether we do the same with our rosary, our Liturgy of the Hours, or our crucifix. The phone connects us to the world, but prayer connects us to God.

### **Prayer Opens Our Hearts to God**

Prayer opens our hearts to God. We learn to ask and to receive His gifts with trust and gratitude. These two virtues go together. Trust means believing somebody beyond us. This trust allows us to act courageously. This is true for all Christians but takes on special significance for those in religious life.

Courage in proclaiming the Lord Jesus must be accompanied by trust in Providence, which is at work in the world and which "orders everything, even human differences, for the greater good of the Church" ([Vita Consecrata, 81](#)).

The other day, I saw a child walking down a flight of stairs. He was still learning to walk and the stairs were too tall for him to navigate comfortably. Yet, he possessed deep confidence,

holding on to his mother's hand. Consequently, he threw himself into each new step, bounding down the stairs with ease.

Technology can try to supplant our sense of trust in God. Constant connection can create an illusion of control. While devices can help increase our organization and efficiency, they can distract from doing God's Will. Thinking and praying about God's Will is a great way of recognizing that we are in God's hands.

### **In God's Hands**

It is simultaneously humbling and encouraging to recognize that we are in God's hands. There is no better place to be, yet so often we rebel with the thoughts and words of our first parents: "I will not serve." Much of the work of religious life is to root out the negative attitudes of rebellion and selfishness, which we all harbor. This goes back to a spirit of trust.

Trust is hard when we are carrying baggage from our personal history. Many of us enter religious life with trust issues from our families of origin or other experiences made long before entering religious life. Other experiences within religious life might also contribute to wounding our sense of trust. We witness institutional failures and wonder if we should really open up to our community or our superiors. Will it help, or will we be pigeonholed and stuck in a certain category? We can overcome this mistrust only if we recognize that we are truly in God's hands.

Pope Leo XIV reminds us that we are creatures who need everything. We depend completely on the good hands of the Creator. Recognizing that God cares for us inspires a deep sense of gratitude in each of us. Gratitude recognizes that we depend totally on God. These two virtues work together to form a true spirit of humility in our hearts, which is the virtue at the base of all true progress in holiness.

The Second Vatican Council wanted to renew the life of the Church and its reflections on religious life are gathered in the Decree on Religious Life, [Perfectae Caritatis](#). Religious life should make us grow in our love of God and neighbor.

[The] love of God both excites and energizes that love of one's neighbor, which contributes to the salvation of the world and the building up of the Church. This love, in addition, quickens and directs the actual practice of the evangelical counsels ([Perfectae Caritatis, 6](#)).

This love grows through prayer. Love is impossible without interiority. We need to become aware of what is happening in our hearts if we are going to love properly. One risk of electronic devices is that they can easily put us in “automatic pilot” mode and distance us from ourselves, particularly our inner thoughts and emotions. We should continually check whether our devices are taking more from us than we would like to admit. Pope Leo XIV reminds us that

Prayer is fundamental in the existence of every consecrated person: it is the relational space within which the heart opens to the Lord, learning to ask and to receive, with trust and gratitude, his love that heals, transforms, and enflames the mission ([Pope Leo XIV, Address to Participants in the Meeting Promoted by the Union of Superiors General, 26 November 2025](#)).

Prayer grounds our identity, from which our mission naturally flows.

### **Moving Away from Obligation**

While the Council Fathers intended for religious men and women to deepen their experience of meaningful prayer, the call to revise the Constitutions – each institute’s governing laws – led some communities to reduce their prayer obligations. While trying to discard outdated forms and to “come closer to the People of God,” many institutes inadvertently moved away from the very source and goal of their vocation. As G.K.

Chesterton once observed, the Church should move the world, not simply move with the world.

While the world moves, religious life must remain rooted in prayer. Each member of a religious institute discovers the specific charism through community formation and through personal prayer. From this foundation, mission flows naturally. We can tend to be preoccupied with tasks or obligations, worried about the mission our community or superiors entrust to us. Perhaps we should spend more time recognizing that it is Christ himself who entrusts us with our mission. Clearly, we are called to serve others, but our mission also heals, transforms, and sets our hearts on fire if we carry it out sincerely and authentically.

## **Escapisms**

When we lose the spirit of faith, our life and apostolate become barren. Escapism and defensiveness are two of the major enemies of our faith life.

We can fall into escapism when we are workaholics—focusing on completing many tasks, while forgetting the mission. Escapism can also creep into religious life from the other end of the spectrum, when we become lazy.

We don't want to be ruled only by efficiency, nor left complacent, feeling that our religious families are merely a safety net. These are dangers to religious life today that can be rooted out by a faithful life of prayer. We are pilgrims of hope and cannot turn our pilgrimage into a hopeless journey by forgetting its source and destination. Pope Leo encourages us to return to what matters. He invites us to cling to God's ardent heart.

The digital age offers opportunities, but without a rooted identity, it can water down our sense of self. Sometimes, the smart devices themselves can give us a clue to how well we are using them. We can look at our screen time reports and see how often we lift up our

phones to respond to notifications or simply because we feel the need to see if anything has changed. We should ask ourselves whether we lift our minds and hearts to God through prayer with a similar frequency.

### **Putting Tools at the Service of the Mission**

Before discerning our mission, we must recover the foundational truth: as religious, we belong entirely to God. Young men and women consistently note that community life and prayer are key aspects that attract them to religious life as a path of total self-giving (see [CARA, "Recent Vocations to Religious Life: A Report for the National Religious Vocation Conference", March 2020](#)). As we look at our mission, we should also examine the tools we use. The more we establish our identity in Christ, the more effective we will be in our mission.

In the digital age, we should prioritize our connection to Christ over our connection to the world. The identity of religious institutes will flourish in the digital age not by rejecting technology, but by recovering the primacy of prayer and the contemplative gaze. Religious life will not survive the digital age because we master our devices, but because we first allow Christ to master our hearts.

**You may find the original posting of this essay, as well as the author's biographical and contact information, at <https://www.reviewforreligious.com/essays/religious-life-and-holiness-in-the-digital-age>.**