

Sensual Prayer -- Electronic Context Ignatian Prayer for Internet Users

John M. Staudenmaier, S.J.

Published in *The Way* July 2000 (Vol 40, No 3):209-221]

A good friend read an early draft of this article and told me that many readers (himself included!) might read the title and expect advice about best prayer sites on the web. That would be a good thing to write about but it is not my purpose.¹ Instead, I want to look at the electronic media, of which the internet is one, as a defining presence in our everyday lives at the end of the twentieth century. The media change the way we live and think and feel. They are not the only important influence in life, of course; our health or sickness, our children and the other loves of our life, our aging and our work, any part of life that changes us deeply becomes, by that fact, an important place to meet God. Clearly the electronic media have changed our lives and it is those changes that I want to discuss here. Which disciplines of prayer can help us meet God in the electronic dimensions of life?

Before proceeding, I should flag my central theme, one having to do with prayer and media use alike. I am impressed by the challenges to intimacy that we find when we use the media. I will be asking what it means to be "present" in a world where our bodies and our symbols do not reside comfortably in the same kind of space. If intimate presence is the heart of prayer (and, I would argue, the heart of what we find most beautiful about human beings) then the question of presence must be central to an essay about prayer and the media. A final prenote: In what follows I will use the wisdom tradition of *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius Loyola*. A few principles from the *Exercises* make a good starting point, therefore, before turning to electronic media themselves.

Sensual Prayer, Principles Learned from Ignatius of Loyola

Ignatius' central teaching about prayer counsels me to follow the trails left by my affective experiences--Ignatius sorts them into consolations and desolations--looking for the place where my heart desires to pray. Both consolation (peace, joy, serenity, kindness, awareness of beauty) and desolation (alienation, hostility, suspicion, doubt, bitterness) are good news in Ignatian prayer because both can point me toward an inner place where I desire (Ignatius' word) to be met by God at the present moment. One approaches prayer, however, not knowing in advance where those places are. We must be ready for surprises. Too sure a sense of one's inner condition delays the process; it is better to enter prayer wondering what will be given than assuming that I already know what matters most to me at this moment in my life.

Surprises. When I come to prayer, will I find that I am frightened? or angry? or joyful? or tired? "I was sure that I had finished grieving my father's death! Where does this anger and these tears come from?" "I came to prayer knowing that I am in dreadful shape, exhausted,

¹ Several matters having to do with electronic media warrant mention at the outset although they fall outside the scope of this essay. I will not discuss who has access to the internet and who does not. Nor will I offer diagnostic tools for sifting through the hype that links planned obsolescence (computer upgrades) with a vaguely preternatural form of breathless and inevitable progress. The relationship between the internet and public discourse will get only passing notice. I will concentrate on personal prayer and explore a discipline of prayer that I hope will prove helpful to internet users.

One can fruitfully ask this question about any technology which has become embedded in the fabric of society. One could ask, for example, how electric lights with their promise of instant clarity influence intimacy's need to sometimes welcome uncertainty. Or how automobiles, seen as mobile bits of private property, influence one's creativity and one's capacity for mutuality. What follows here, in short, might be understood partly as a discussion of the internet and prayer and partly as modeling a habit of paying attention to one's context of prayer with an eye toward seeking the presence of God within the technological fabric of ordinary life.

bitter, compulsive, a mess. But all I discover in myself is joy. What's going on?" Ignatius would say that our ability to be surprised by our experience must precede our understanding of what is going on. If we are willing to be led by our experiences to the place where our heart desires to pray, clarity about why that place is important will be given, usually very gradually. Praying means finding the right place to pray and learning to wait there to be met. Our surprise is an acknowledgement of God's mastery even of our expectations.

This first Ignatian maxim is rooted in reverence and affection for human beings as sensual and physical. My body occupies one perspective at a time. So, because I travel a unique path through the world and acquire a unique history, I enter any moment of prayer with my inner awareness shaped by where I have been, what I have learned, which memories have mattered most to me. Ignatius sees respect for the body's capacity for presence in place and in sequential time, as the bedrock condition for good prayer. No interior journey without care for bodily presence. When he tells the retreatant to look for a good place to pray and a helpful posture and time of day, he means that we need to do some trial and error shopping until we find what helps us most. He means, too, that we ought to remain alert to changes that might suggest another place or posture or time of day. Looking for the right place to pray calls for supple attention to my body, its present environment, and my inner self (consolations and desolations). Sensual prayer means that I pay attention to my body and my heart as I find them now. Sensual respect for place and time puts Ignatian prayer squarely in the sacramental tradition which treats material reality as the heart of worship and encounter with God.

In a related maxim, Ignatius teaches that when I have found the place my heart desires, I should stay there "until I have been satisfied." Let us note here in passing that the same advice describes a good vacation, when we make time to do what we want to do as long as we want to do it. A frustrated vacation means we hurried too much and missed the flavor. So too with prayer. How long should I stay with my grief, or joy, or fatigue? "Until I am satisfied," counsels Ignatius, rather than "until it's time." Time within prayer operates best when I am able to let the inner event create the time frame. This is countercultural to be sure; most of our lives we tailor events to a clock schedule but sensual prayer requires time enough to let the present moment unfold according to its inner rhythm.

Before we move from these general principles about prayer to the electronic media, consider a final observation about prayer. Ignatius shares with the mainstream of the Roman Catholic theological tradition a basic orientation about the world: The world is first of all good (before it is dangerous) and conversion is primarily gradual (more than it is sudden). Catholics baptize babies rather than waiting for an adult moment of life-changing decision, expecting that the life of grace will evolve gradually and that no one ever outgrows the need for conversion. Thus, grace typically operates *within* ordinary life rather than as a radical intervention from the outside. This is important here because it implies that we should expect to meet God within the ordinary life of our culture. Insofar as our culture at the end of the millennium is influenced by electronic media we should expect to meet God in our experience of those media. More, we should assume that this electronic dimension of creation, like all others, needs to be understood as good before it is treated as suspect. The conversions we will surely need to live in the current world gracefully will come to us gradually if we approach electronic media neither with breathless awe nor with sour distaste, but with an affection for the human condition beloved of God. Affection opens us to the graces and temptations that will be shown us as we pray, a little at a time. Conversion is gradual and comes from paying attention to ordinary living.

With these few prayer rules in mind, let us begin an inquiry into how the media shape ordinary life by asking what the media are and how long they have been around.

Talking at the Speed of Light: What Difference Does it Make?

Although truly revolutionary events are rare, one that makes almost every historian's short list occurred in the mid nineteenth century when the telegraph began to move information at the speed of light. The telegraph began to transform human awareness, a change so powerful that we are still learning how to integrate the media into the rest of life. Human consciousness lives a physical existence carried as it is in our bodies. What would it mean that words and symbols could move so much faster than bodies can?

The telegraph began competing seriously with speed-of-body delivery systems (horses and ships and walking humans) after 1850 and began a dynamic evolution that continues today. Early on, businesses learned to move financial and strategic information. About the same time, news organizations created the wire services which gathered

news, packaged it in standardized text, and sold stories to local papers anywhere the wires went. The telegraph was followed, near the end of the nineteenth century and in close succession, by the telephone and the radio. By 1900 telephone companies began integrating local and long distance talk and by the 1920s radio was evolving from an interactive medium (early radio operators sent and received messages) to a broadcast medium with network stations sending and passive units receiving. Television came on the market after World War Two, paralleling the radio as a broadcast system. And in the recent past, internet and world wide web protocols have burst into popular use as something of a mix of interactive and broadcast media. One can now use the internet for business or checking scores of one's sports team, and use email to talk with friends or strangers near or far away. One can publish on the web or join something that looks a bit like an ethnic neighborhood--fellow specialists in growing grass for cattle grazing, fans of Indonesian football, anti-Jewish hate groups, lovers of Russian icons. Web sites can host all these and thousands more.²

That these electronic technologies have changed the way we live and understand ourselves no one doubts. But *how* do they influence us and how we might best engage with them? That's an elusive question and the breathless excitement about web life, alarmist and worshipful alike, makes it hard to think about it with much perspective. Consequently, I begin long before the internet era, arguing that the main challenges to intimacy derive from speed of light information systems that pre-date the web world by a century or more. After making that point, I will turn to several aspects of the web which have amplified the patterns we will have seen in earlier technologies. Finally, I will come back to the beginning of this article and ask how Ignatius' rules for sensual prayer might help us find our balance.

“News from far away is seldom sooth”: Transcending the Village

Before the wire services began selling stories to my local newspaper (c.1870), experience of the world was divided into “the news” and “the olds.” The news came from very near where I lived. Everything else traveled in slow motion, in letters from friends or interpretative essays

² We should note, in passing since it is not our topic here, that as very large corporations merge to gain control of print media, telephone networks, radio, film, and television broadcast outlets, and internet access providers, the question of interactive spontaneity on the web remains an open question. There is plenty of evidence supporting predictions that the internet might go the way of the interactive radio buffs around 1900 (still around but hardly noticeable when compared with radio broadcast stations cum passive radio set listeners) and another solid body of evidence suggesting that internet spontaneity will survive corporate centralization. Either outcome would influence the prayer life of internet users as part of the context within which prayer occurs.

describing events that had occurred months before I read them. The wire service (and, later, radio and television) changed my experience of the world in two ways that bear on how we experience intimacy. First, as I followed unfolding events told to me by people from far away, I began to understand myself as part of vast and changing world. The grip of the local and familiar loosened and my sense of what it was to be human expanded. At the same time, I lost the access I had before to the one who told the news. In a village world, where I knew the local editor, I could dispute interpretations in person. Audiences were interactive, sometimes vociferously.³ Electronic news renders me passive simply because I don't know far away places well enough to critique distant stories very effectively. In what world, then, do I live? Is the place where I sleep at night and live my ordinary life more real than the larger world to which my imagination has access? Does my ability to understand the subtleties of my local context contribute more to my intimate life than my ability to reach out into the wide world? How should we pray within the tension between local and global frames of reference, between the world where my body moves and the electronic world to which I now have so much access?

Telephones and Personal Network Managing

Before electronic media and high speed transportation, moving from one place to another forcibly inserted me into a new local context and detached me from my old one. Letters, often cherished for decades, did not substitute for daily interaction, and one got to know the people in the new neighborhood like it or not. Contiguity was unavoidable. Now, thanks to the telephone (and, recently, email) it has become more and more possible to move and stay close to friends no matter where they live.⁴ Even if I move several times, those who are important to me take the geographical form of a dispersed network. They need not know each other; they are less a community than a personal network. This intriguing and mostly recent arrangement makes unsettling demands on us. I find myself editing what news I tell various people in my personal network. They live at a distance and so, like 19th century readers of wire service stories from far away, they depend on what I tell them or do not tell them for news about me.

Consider in this light two stories, one true and one fictitious. First, the story that actually happened to me: late one night, while I worked frantically to finish preparing class for the morrow, my phone rang. A close friend from a distant city was sobbing. "John, Charlie died. . . . Are you busy?" I turned away from my computer and said, "I'm not busy; talk to me." We had a wonderful conversation, the very stuff of enduring friendship. Still, an unsettling question remains. Did I lie to my friend by editing part of my context? It is more unsettling still to compare this conversation with a similar one, this time fabricated. Were I attending a conference and my late night caller was my wife asking "are you busy?" what if my context included another woman in bed with me? Would the *structure* of my editing differ from what I hid from my friend in the actual example?

³ Pre-electronic audiences, in the theatre or opera or orchestra hall, assumed their right to interrupt performances (e.g., to pelt the performers with rotten fruit when disapproving content or delivery.) I know these patterns better in the United States where interactive audiences thrived in all venues through the mid nineteenth century. See Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow, Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Harvard University Press, 1988).

⁴ Two qualifying observations are important here. First, to the extent that long distance interpersonal communication becomes more accessible in non-western places through cyber cafes and cell phones, the patterns I will discuss here begin to apply beyond the traditional industrial societies of the world though they are clearly much more operative in industrialized economies. Second, the question of long-distance friendships to which we now turn depends on telephone (and email, which we will address below) but also on transportation technologies (automobiles, trains, airplanes, etc.) which allow our bodies to move quickly. Transportation speedups change the context of prayer in ways similar to the electronic media and they interact with electronic media. While outside the scope of this article, they should not be overlooked entirely.

Talking at the speed of light helps me to trust that my closest friendships can endure, mediated by phone and email. These same media introduce ambiguity that cannot be avoided. They seem to call for explicit efforts to tell “enough” about myself to those on whom I count as my close kin and allies. Do we doubt that we manage this well? How well do we know each other across long distance? And does the same doubt hold for prayer? I sometimes get the impression that twentieth century believers imagine God less like the alarmingly intimate stranger with whom Jacob wrestled all night long in *Genesis 32*--scratching and gasping, demanding a blessing at dawn--than Santa Claus who, in the words of a childhood song: “sees you when you’re sleeping, who knows if you’re awake, who knows if you’ve been bad or good . . . Oh you better watch out . . .” I eventually learned that Santa Claus, the invisible scrutinizer, wasn’t there at all and that when I wrote Santa asking for a toy train, no one at the North Pole was paying attention. Is God, in my prayer life, an alarming and tender presence so close I can smell the sweat of our encounter? Or is God at the other end of an electronic connection? If so, can I trust that what I have to say matters? Challenges of intimacy cut the same way with God as they do between human beings.

“Reply” “Forward” “Send”: Email and Intimacy

I recounted these two telephone stories to underscore an important matter. Electronic intimacy problems did not enter our lives with the internet. Precisely the same liberations and ambiguities operated in the world of radio, television and telephone well before email and the web burst on the scene a decade or more ago. Nonetheless, internet technology adds some new elements to our communicative lives. Consider email patterns first.

Just as telephone users have begun to purchase tools that protect from sudden interruptions--I am thinking here of answering machines that tell me who’s calling before I answer and caller ID units that read incoming phone numbers and screen those I have coded as undesirable--along comes email with its seductively imperious “reply” and “send” buttons. All email users know about those buttons. So when I choose not to reply for a while, I am a little more obvious than I might like. Did I not reply immediately because I forgot? Didn’t care? Had to think hard about how to answer? It is so easy to hit “reply” and answer immediately that delays call attention to themselves. Email users have also come to expect their interlocutors to compose in a hurry, to tolerate poor grammar and spelling, to type without thinking through implications. When does intimacy *require* taking time to savor what someone wrote before answering? Does email’s easy response system sometimes trick me into answering too soon? Do I “turn emails around” without much thought about which ones need some ripening time before I answer?

Over against these liabilities, however, we find that the very roughness of rhetorical quality sometimes helps people to replicate the informalities of sensual conversation more than the studied and better crafted media of letter writing. Email operates in a middle range, I think, between telephone’s immediacy and a letter’s contemplative focus. The trick is to sense when to answer spontaneously and when to contemplate a while.

Email breeds time pressures, mostly because its address protocols work so well. I am thinking here not only of the “reply” button but also of that marvelous electronic polluter, the “forward” button. Not a few email messages that land in one’s inbox are neither business nor personal but group-address messages: advertisements, vagrant cyber jokes, pious stories, or petitions for urgent action presumably from like-minded souls around the world. They add to

computer traffic jams. The sheer ease of passing them along clogs the inbox; they take time if only to delete them.⁵

Some group messages have to do with a peculiar but helpful decision making process for teams who work at a distance from one another. When a difficult matter confronts such a group, and all the parties need to digest the problem and have a say in what to do, discussion quickly becomes laminated and pretty hard to track. I may have responded to the initial email stating the problem but so have seven others, each changing the problem definition a little or a lot. Do I want to answer some or all of those seven? Individually? Do I ignore some and concentrate on others? Laminated decision making discussions can be very creative but sometimes they get bogged down. People begin to forget who took what position and which formulation of the problem is current. It's hard work for one's memory and imagination. Thus, ironically, the ease of sending, replying, and forwarding email messages adds new pressures to already busy lives. So, while emails join the telephone in opening up informal long distance access with all its benefits and ambiguities discussed above, it also contributes notably to media fatigue. A parallel set of observations can be made about the world wide web, the final technology we will consider.

Webtime

Webtime, the process of gaining access to specific electronic sites for whatever reason, shares the same set of characteristics we've seen in electronic media generally, access to a wider world and liberation from the village constraints at the price of ambiguity about the relationship of author or editor with reader or listener or viewer. Let us explore how those patterns look in the web world. Moving electronically from site to site gives me access to a very wide world and in that sense amplifies the nineteenth century wire service experience extraordinarily. If a friend from Rwanda visits me in Boston and wants to catch up on immediate events back home we can track Kigali's weather, look through Reuters and CNN for recent stories, and find Rwandan web sites using search engines. If I am flying to Seattle or London or Tokyo, I can check the weather report before deciding what to pack.

URL address protocols (those sometimes impossibly idiosyncratic symbol strings in the address box of a web browser) support all this electronic visiting. URLs underpin the workings of three key web functions, book-marks, search engines, and hyper-text inserts. Bookmarking lets me return routinely to personally important sites. Thus, while living in Boston, I can easily check the Detroit newspapers to keep up with my favorite sports teams and my sometimes less than favorite Michigan politicians. This March I bookmarked a site to look at Washington DC's famous cherry blossoms. I open the Encyclopedia Britannica to answer general knowledge questions. Search engines help me track down literary references and shopping sites, people, institutions and special interest groups. Finally, hypertext links invite me to move from one site to another according to the tastes of the editor who embeds some addresses (but not others) on a given site. URL protocols, because they make links between web sites so easy, dramatically expand my access to multiple worlds.

On the other hand, the very profusion of websites makes for hard work when I want to sort out truth from falsehood and reverence from manipulation. What, for example, is to keep someone from creating a website designed to appear reliable but with news stories created out of whole cloth having no basis in actual events? Then too, URL protocols make it a simple matter

⁵ Forwarded messages can go out of date but continue to wander in cyberspace. I once sent a call for urgent action to a batch of friends only to learn from one of my addressees that this particular message was now two years out of date and that events had long since rendered it obsolete. Embarrassing but not so unusual in a world where messages are very easy to create and to forward but not so easy to call out of circulation. One thinks of various bits of space trash, satellites no longer functioning but still orbiting the earth.

for me to join sites dedicated to things that interest me. The webworld hosts thousands of extraordinarily specific sites which might repel some people and attract others. Sites that advocate racial hate appall me but attract their own following. On the other hand, the Irish Jesuit prayer site, Sacred Spaces, links me with a tradition of prayer where I feel immediately at home. How do I, the website visitor, discern the character of the individuals who create the sites I visit? With hard work and some sophistication, I can work at editing this flood of symbols and texts at least a little by comparing the multiple perspectives on different webpages. It's hard work, it takes time and it surely contributes to media fatigue.

Village or Network or Both? Sensual Prayer in an Electronic Context

This 150 year sketch of electronic media, over simple as it surely is, still allows us a vantage point for inquiring about our prayer. We live in a tension between the places where our bodies are present and a network of electronic communication systems. It is a tension that characterizes the world of our consciousness and it confronts us with the unavoidable task of learning to integrate the two. I want to argue here that we cannot negotiate the networked world of electronic symbols, a world so fluid and vast that it threatens to dwarf our tiny physical presence in the world, unless we find *places* where our bodies and imaginations, minds and memories can give the vast range of networked symbols grounding in a discerning human consciousness.. To live only as networked would mean that I send and receive messages more or less without reference to any such places so that questions like "Do you mean what you said to me?" or "Did what you are telling me really happen?" or "Do other people where you are agree with your reading of events?" fade into the background of the fast moving networked messages themselves. The swirl of networked messages, if I were living at the electronic extreme of the network-local tension I would not be connecting the messages I send and receive with any perspective that could challenge me and build on my past life experiences.⁶

Living a life where personal integrity thrives on a diet rich in electronic messages is remarkably challenging. That has been my thesis. If we hold to the Catholic tradition of God's affection for the humanly-constructed world and God's commitment to our gradual conversion, we will approach the networked dimension of our lives, its opportunities and its burdens, with affection and with respect for the conversions we will need to live it gracefully. However, given the power of the network-body tension I have been trying to explore here, I think we must also learn how to find sensual places that can nourish us in the hard labor of interpreting what we electronically send and receive. Finding nourishing places in a webbed world, that is where Ignatius' rules for sensual prayer can help us the most in the present world. Their purpose, to recall the introduction, is to help us locate the specific and even physical place where I desire to be met by God.

Let us return to the Ignatian rules briefly and interrogate them in light of the challenges of a networked life. We can summarize what has gone before in a series of questions. How should I live in a world so wide that it challenges the smaller world of my body and my personal presence? How live with the ambivalences that stem from the editing I do about my own news, the editing I know others do about their news? When I encounter so many crafted messages, all aiming to capture some bit of my attention, how do I find remedy for routine burnouts? How can

⁶ The possibility of a disconnect between my personal self and the networked world is particularly strong, I think, with symbols. When a symbol disconnects from the ground of human experience from which it arose, it loses its ability to move me and stir my humanity deeply. If the exultation and fear I see on the faces of voters in East Timor was completely staged, so that there was no place called East Timor where people risked their lives to vote for independence from Indonesia, no *place or human experience* from which the symbol emerged, the faces might look just the same on my electronically mediated screen but the symbol would be empty.

I live between the slippery world of networked messages and the world of my body in an integrated and not a schizoid way? How find the best times to savor messages, to differentiate those that need care, those that simply delight me, and those I can ignore. How find places to play, pray, and be cared for so that my imagination comes back to the networked world refreshed?

It has seemed to me for some years now that the *Spiritual Exercises* offer us a remarkable set of disciplines for living in a more than networked way. If the foregoing assessment of electronic media is correct, what we need most of all is a discerning sensitivity to our sensual selves. Following my consolations and desolations, emotions after all that reside in my body, to the place I desire to pray, staying until I am satisfied, being glad to be surprised: by these habits of prayer Ignatius encourages us to interpret our experience of the world and especially to sense when we need to pause and where. Knowing when to surf (a lovely word here) the pulsing electronic networks available to me and when to pause and contemplate; that looks to be a central requirement for living in a networked era.

We should not conclude, however, without turning the question of prayer around a little. Besides asking how I might find the place where I desire to pray, should we not also ask ourselves how such places might be provided in the high pressure networked worlds we negotiate? Here I am thinking like a Benedictine perhaps. The places we need for prayer in the networked world cannot depend completely on individual creativity. Given the pressures of the present world, that's just too much work. We need to give and receive welcome.

Consider two ways that hospitality can help us to pray. The first has to do with physical welcome, caring for my home or my place of work so that people who come in know that their presence matters to me--I am thinking here of cleaning and cooking and inviting and listening, all the deft ancient labors of hospitality. Few experiences restore me when I am worn down more than knowing unmistakably that you want me here in your place, want to hear what I have to say, want to tell me your stories in return, want me to eat what you have prepared. It is not by accident that our tradition of following Jesus places the meal and table at the center of our worship. In a world tempted to hurry too much, welcoming one another gets more important rather than less. Perhaps one of the disciplines of prayer can be found here, preparing welcoming times and places set aside for listening to one another's unimportant stories, and by listening, to savor one another's beauty.

Second, and perhaps a bit more of a reach, we might look at our electronic habits and ask how we can create internet places (even telephone places) where the relationship between what is said and the one who says it is trustworthy. Perhaps we could include more of our immediate context in our emails and phone calls, welcoming those who receive our messages into the context from which we send them. Perhaps we could become more alert to our habitual little deceptions about the contexts from which we network. The habit of allowing my self to be accessible, if I stay faithful to it over a long time, might educate the people who communicate with me electronically to expect welcome and freedom from deceit even in mundane business matters. This is counter cultural indeed, what with the many alarms in the news about web and email fraud and I do not counsel naivete. Just the opposite. I cannot make myself accessible in electronic forums without skill in discerning the messages I send and receive, the very sort of discernment that comes from the habits of prayer at the center of this article. Hospitality, whether I am offering it or receiving it, comes from and renews an intimate life of presence that is the essence of discernment.

Finding my way to a place of prayer, welcoming the people of my life into places of hospitality, letting myself be welcomed in return, these disciplines are within our reach. They

would go a long way toward easing the media fatigue brought on by networked intensity. The disciplines of prayer, “sensual” as I am calling them, all require that we care for the relationship between the ground of our experience and the play of symbols in an electronic world order. In imitation of Jesus’ enduring affection for the human world, we must approach the electronic technologies with affection more than awe, recognizing them as tools that are helpful for some things and inhibiting for others. As with all tools, it helps to respect their capacities and limitations and to learn how to weave my use of them into the larger fabric of my life and its loves.
