In conjunction with the annual World Communications Day, the Salesian Center for Faith & Culture at DeSales University sponsors a writing contest for members of the campus community. World Communications Day is celebrated in most countries on the Sunday before Pentecost. The announcement of the theme is usually made on September 29, the Feast of the Archangels Michael, Raphael and Gabriel, who have been designated patrons of those who work in radio. The Holy Father’s message for World Communications Day is traditionally published on January 24, in conjunction with the Memorial of St. Francis de Sales, patron of writers.

**Theme for World Communications Day 2009**

New Technologies, New Relationships:
Promoting a Culture of Respect, Dialogue & Friendship

“**best student essay**” 2009

“Communicating Love:
Friendship in the Technological Age”

by **Matthew Kuhner**
As pilgrims enter St. Peter’s Square, the welcoming entry to the State of Vatican City, there is much that may catch the eye. They might notice the massive façade of St. Peter’s Basilica looming over the colonnade, trying to fathom that they are looking at over three football fields of carefully handcrafted masonry. Or maybe they will see the giant, 4000-year old obelisk stationed directly in the middle of the Square, quietly praying over the realization that it may be one of the last things St. Peter saw as he hung upside down upon his cross. Or the visitor could be struck by the powerfully emotive statues of the two greatest apostles, one holding his sword and the other his keys. Or, it is a very good possibility that the pilgrim may first take notice of those big, not-quite-so-beautiful, white Jumbotrons that are positioned on each side of the square. Surely these giant screens were not part of Bernini’s original plan!

When I arrived at Rome in early September of last year, I remember taking a moment to question why these giant structures were so (seemingly) obtrusively placed amongst such breath-taking art! Shortly afterward, as I approached the square on a Sunday morning, I understood why these screens were thought to be so important: Pope Benedict XVI’s words echoed across the square and his image filled the screen as he prayed the Angelus … while 16 miles away at his summer residence! On the following Sunday, I watched him pray the Angelus at Lourdes! Though I waited anxiously for the Holy Father to arrive in Rome, those Jumbotrons aided me and the myriad other pilgrims in encountering the Pope, even if it were via modern communications technology and not in person.

The Vatican seems to understand that the advantages bred by this advance in technological communication must be recognized and capitalized upon in the work of the Church in the twenty-first century. The new evangelization is finding fresh ways to go about fulfilling Christ’s missionary directive to “go into the whole world and proclaim the gospel to every creature” (Mark 16:15), whether it be through those Jumbotrons in St. Peter’s Square, the Vatican’s new YouTube page, the Pope’s texts for World Youth Days, or the many other ways Catholic churches have utilized
communication technologies. It is stunningly clear that the Church has something very positive to say about these advances.

Such accolades are confirmed in the Message of the Holy Father for the 43rd World Day of Communications entitled: “New Technologies, New Relationships: Promoting a Culture of Respect, Dialogue and Friendship.” Pope Benedict XVI enumerates the many advantages of mobile telephones, computers, and the Internet, from increased familial contacts to their ability to “facilitate more dynamic forms of learning and communication, thereby contributing to social progress.” Also, the Pope makes a rather philosophical observation about the popularity of these innovative modes of communication and contact: “in reality, when we open ourselves to others, we are fulfilling our deepest need and becoming more fully human.”

Thankfully, the Holy Father does not solely exhibit praise for these new technologies. Just as a father warns his children about potential dangers, our Holy Father illuminates his most poignant concern: “reflecting on the significance of the new technologies, it is important to focus not just on their undoubted capacity to foster contact between people, but on the quality of the content that is put into circulation using these means.” In response to these concerns, Pope Benedict considers three points of reflection for all those “active in the emerging environment of digital communication” – namely, respect, dialogue, and friendship. In the remainder of this essay, I will consider the third reflection on friendship. Our Holy Father spends much thought (the most out of the three considerations) concerning how modern means of communication could affect our understanding of friendship, and I shall consider his words on the subject in light of other’s writings on friendship and love, particularly St. Francis de Sales (1567-1622), Bishop and Doctor of the Church.

When we consider the act of communicating, it is undeniable that a human person relates with other human persons far differently than a computer relates with other computers, squirrels with other squirrels, and neurons with other neurons. Is it not true that man actively seeks the relations of another not simply because he or she needs the other as an individual, but because they receive joy from their person? Made in the image and likeness of God, human communications and the relationships they
foster exist analogously (and amazingly) to the relationships among the three persons of the Trinity, for “the real distinction of the persons (in God) from one another resides solely in the relationships which relate them to one another” according to the Catholic Catechism.\textsuperscript{4} The relationships within the Godhead serve as a marker or waypoint to answer our questions about what communication and relationship should be.

Exalted by every age, friendship has served as the main exchange of communication between people. Strangers become friends, and friendships grow into marriages; friendship is the common denominator which seems to touch humanity’s deepest need. While it is false to suggest that everyone who communicates with another is a friend, it is nevertheless true that a friendship is not possible unless there is a certain level of communication. As St. Francis de Sales reminds us, “Friendship is the most dangerous of all types of love, since other kinds may be had without intercommunication, but friendship is completely based on it and we can hardly have such communication with a person without sharing in its qualities.”\textsuperscript{5}

This relationship is so fundamental because it requires, though analogously, the exact kind of communication found between the persons of God: love. De Sales begins his discussion of friendship in the Introduction to the Devout Life (whose 400\textsuperscript{th} anniversary of publication is celebrated this year) with the following claim: “Among the passions of the soul love holds first place.”\textsuperscript{6} In the presence of this love, humanity rises above any minimalist or utilitarian sense of existence in which man is depicted as ultimately self-seeking and inwardly conditioned.

The Doctor of the Church recognized the wonder of love in friendship. As a phenomenal spiritual director who sought, even in his letters, to adapt himself to every situation, he always put the other first. Nothing that attests to his knowledge and practice of friendship better than his beautiful relationship with St. Jane de Chantal, with whom he founded the Order of the Visitation of Holy Mary. Wendy Wright explains this artfully when she writes of how “they (Francis and Jane) draw upon the dynamics of human love, which at root are part of the larger movement of love in the created world which draws all things into the love of God.”\textsuperscript{7} A short reading or quotation from their letters will quickly serve to illustrate the selfless approach both
took towards the other; their entire communication and, in turn, their relationship was built to lift the other to the Almighty from whom they came.

A saint such as Francis who knows the depths of the love of friendship certainly recognizes the all-too-common counterfeits. Not very far into his discussion of friendship, he states that “all love is not friendship, first, because we can love without being loved.” Following this, Francis says, interestingly, that “according to different kinds of communication friendship also differ, and communications differ according to the variety of goods exchanged. If the goods are false and empty, the friendship is false and empty.” Thus, “the nature of friendship is determined by what is communicated.”

I am interested, however, in exploring the relationship between how something is communicated and what is communicated. Modern technological communication is surely an advantage in many ways, as attested to by the experiences produced by the Jumbrotons. However, one must be able to assess and acknowledge the limitations of sustaining a relationship via certain technologies. For example, it is common to hear one member of a dating relationship ‘break-up’ with the other by way of text messaging. Equally common are the sighs of distress upon hearing this, for it is almost universally frowned upon as an act of cowardice. Why is this so? Might this be because the technology of text messaging increases the quantity of our communications but also decreases the quality? Does it not put space between the sender and the receiver?

This year the Church is celebrating another great communication-oriented saint, St. Paul. Of particular interest to us are his motives for writing his letters: he wrote as a way to make himself present despite his physical absence. As the father of so many Christian communities throughout Galatia, Macedonia, and elsewhere, his heart wrenched every time he had to be away from his spiritual children: “For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus” (Philippians 1:8). St. Francis de Sales writes in a similar fashion. As the bishop of a diocese, he provided spiritual direction and wrote to many who lived far from him. Presupposed in the
letter writing of St. Paul and St. Francis is the fact that, given the choice, *presence is always preferable to the written word!*

These great communicators recognized that the use of technology to communicate, whether the feather-pen or the cell phone, was not the best way to overcome the distance between persons. Might it be possible that the greatest reason why this technological distance becomes problematic is because it impedes our ability to truly love? De Sales comments that “chaste friendship is at all times and in all ways honest, courteous, and amiable. It never changes except into a purer and more perfect union of minds, a living image of the blessed friendship that exists in heaven.”

In order for friendship to be preserved amidst this technological age, we must begin by identifying how this technology might impede the “more perfect union of minds.”

If friendship is a form of love, and if, as Erich Fromm points out, “the active character of love can be described by stating that love is primarily giving, not receiving,” then it might be true that some are afraid to give of themselves. Said another way, according to Matthew Kelly, “we are afraid that if people really knew us they wouldn’t love us.”

Given this fear, the technological distance might be a formidable temptation; instead of necessarily revealing myself entirely in a face-to-face encounter, it is certainly easier for me to instant message or e-mail the other person. As a result, the written word can shroud my personhood in the same way my presence can more perfectly reveal it!

I think the product of such a fearful communication sounds very much like de Sales’ discussion of ‘fond loves’ in part three of the *Introduction to the Devout Life.* “They (fond loves) are only abortive births, or rather phantoms of friendship, and deserve the name neither of friendship nor of love by reason of their complete vanity and deep imperfection.” These fond loves are best described by vanity, in the sense that one is easily swept up in them, yet their roots do not fix themselves deeply. Because the modern advances in communication increase the quantity of communications, it seems that the opportunity to flatter and to throw affection at others has increased. True friendship, however, is based on the *quality* of communication, not just its frequency. Our tendencies toward superficial communication have led to a fear of truly giving of
ourselves and have thus generated a whirlwind of dangerous emotional shrapnel that harms many and unites none. This is the danger of which de Sales writes when he points out that “Some have the sole purpose of satisfying their hearts with loving and being loved, and in this way give in to their amorous inclinations.”

But of course these persons are not interested in true love, the love of giving oneself; they are only seeking the windswept affections of the heart without “foundation nor reason.”

In conclusion, I wish to suggest that the proper use of communication technologies, especially in the realm of creating and sustaining friendships, can be realized only in a Christocentric worldview. Because true communication requires true love (both receiving and giving), how might we furnish successful relationships if we do not know love in itself?

In the last paragraph of his message, Pope Benedict XVI remarks, “human hearts are yearning for a world where love endures, where gifts are shared, where unity is built, where freedom finds meaning in truth, and where identity is found in respectful communion.” As Catholics, we must be the lights of the world and the salt of the earth; we must show the world that which they seek: namely, the person of Jesus Christ. If we “seek first the Kingdom [of God] and his righteousness… all these things will be given you besides” (Matt 6:33). The union of friendship and the advances in our technologies of communication (even the Jumbotrons!) are all pointing towards that unity which is only to be found fully in Christ and his Church. We must allow Christ to reveal the fullness of such communion to us, for we cannot be the light to the nations if we are not first on fire with his love. Only then can we show the world the source and reality of that which they seek in the broken realities of fond loves, fearful, watered-down relations, and superficial flattery. Let us climb our lamp stand and, in Christ Jesus, with St. Francis de Sales, St. Paul, and our Pope, show the world true friendship through our loving and proper use of communication technology.
ENDNOTES

1 http://www.youtube.com/vatican

2 http://www.zenit.org/article-23249?l=english


4 Catechism of the Catholic Church (New York: Double Day, 1995), Section 255.


9 Introduction to the Devout Life, 158.


11 Introduction to the Devout Life, 166.


14 Introduction to the Devout Life, 159.

15 Introduction to the Devout Life, 159.

16 Introduction to the Devout Life, 160.