Lesson Learned
UNPLUGGED WITH CHRIST

By Kathryn Jean Lopez, B.A. 1997

It was in the early hours of a Sunday morning much more than a decade ago that my father’s heart gave up, way too young and way too soon. I wouldn’t say I came to resent the Sabbath Day for the devastating loss, but it took a while before I’d doze off on a Saturday night without bracing myself.

If there is one lesson my father was probably fairly certain he hadn’t successfully taught me, it was that sometimes you just have to step away from work. While my job at National Review magazine focused my attention on the national political stage, he would gently remind me about the fecklessness of presuming to be in control of much of anything.

This was especially powerful coming from him. Dad worked hard. My parents would get up at farmer hours to get their children ready for school before opening theirs — both were Catholic-school teachers and later principals in inner-city Manhattan. All of our summer vacations and the occasional Easter break (which they pulled off with frugality and creativity) would include the teacher resource center at Epcot Center or Cape Canaveral, or would be built around a National Catholic Educational Association convention. I’d always wake up to their Saturday morning conversations comparing notes about schools, successes, ideas, best practices, challenges, concerns.

There are many reasons I’d like for my father to still be among the living. But this June the reasons went well beyond the card and well-intentioned gift I would have given him on Father’s Day. I would have loved for him to have seen me unplug. Entirely.

On the feast of Corpus Christi, this opinion journalist/commentator surrendered the email and Internet for an Ignatian silent retreat. Early Monday morning I set my email accounts to auto-reply. For eight days I stopped and listened and prayed. I even took a few extra days to do things like watch for bald eagles on a bay they frequent. Understand that my expertise and leading credential for years was the ability to stay on top of breaking news — whatever it was — 24/7 in the pioneering years of the blogosphere. A number of the people who received my auto-reply, in fact, thought it had to be spam, so unlike me it seemed.

Back when Pope Benedict visited Catholic University in 2008, the Archdiocese of Washington took out ads — I remember seeing them on the backs of buses — quoting from his first encyclical, Spe Salvi: “One who has hope lives differently.” Are we living differently? Take a moment and just observe the current wired scene. So many people are running around, plugged into iPads, iPods, and smartphones, crowding out the silence with the often empty noise of the Internet. It’s good to ask: Am I contributing to this? Do I let myself encounter Christ in silent moments?

I have miles to go before fully detaching myself from unnecessary connectedness and noise. It’s a plague of our day, the instinct to be constantly connected in order to make sure we’re not missing anything. And as an editor and writer, it just so happens to be what I get paid to do! But silence and contemplation are essential to a well-balanced life, particularly one lived following Christ.

Not everyone can or needs to spend eight days unplugged. But it’s important to remember that the time you give God will make all the difference to the lives and souls around you. It’s not about retreating from the world but letting God enrich you, strengthen you, better prepare you for your encounters with others, drawing you deeper into Him. And, as they say, the soul saved may be your own. It’s a lesson my Dad knew well. And finally his wisdom has penetrated my previously over-cybered existence.

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