

Along the track

Grace at Meals

I recently saw a sign on a family dining table which said:

Thank you, God, for all your many blessings,
for the food and the company and please God,
may there be no phones at our table.
Amen.

For many of us, the first thing we do when we sit down at a table is to put our phone on it. We need it close by. Try as we might to ignore the sound of the notifications, eventually we give in and check! Did you know that there are restaurants around the world that offer a discount on your meal if you switch off your cell phone and put it away for the entire time? And their businesses are growing dramatically. Some restaurants are beginning to display signs like: "No, we have no WiFi. Talk to each other!"

Cell phones or mobile phones, whatever we choose to call them, are a marvellous invention and they seem to be getting better and better. Apart from being a very convenient way of keeping in touch, they have been instrumental in saving lives, finding those who are lost, and giving us access to all sorts of information, literally at our fingertips. But have our manners kept pace with the technology? Are we losing our ability to be present?

So is this an old grump objecting to someone taking selfies or getting annoyed by social media addicts who have to show everyone they know what they're eating, right now, at this very moment. Some may even stand on a chair with their phones in the air above their food snapping away without much regard for those on surrounding tables. Yes, I am that grump.

It is true that there are people who rely on the phones for companionship, for safety, for business and for all sorts of other reasons but that does not have to be in conflict with respect for others, their need for companionship and enjoyment, not just yours. Manners and etiquette go hand in hand but are not the same. Etiquette is a set of rules dealing with how we might go about things. Good manners are ways that we show respect and appreciation for others – they are an expression of our inner character. How do they express inner character – because we listen attentively to others and show genuine interest in their thoughts and opinions rather than just my own, or my phone's. Listening is more than just an exchange of information. Manners help

us create a positive atmosphere where we want people to feel welcome and appreciated. We want to create community, companionship and friendship and so manners help us tell the other: you matter.

It is interesting to watch 'companionable silence' sometimes, two or more people who are happy in each other's company and no words are necessary. That takes a lot of work, if that is the right way of putting it. But generally, we do need words to express love and affection, to let others know how grateful we are, that we appreciate them and, sometimes, that we are sorry. When we listen to others we can sometimes be astonished at others' goodness and their wisdom. Underlying all that is an attitude of respect.

Mobile phones make us accessible to others, day and night! That has, no doubt, made our lives more efficient, and more able to keep in touch but it has also made them more demanding, taking away from many of us the precious few chances we still have to get away from the pressures of life, for time on our own or with friends. Have we become too accessible? Author Thomas Friedman suggested that mobile phones, text-messaging, emails, are making us so accessible to everybody that paradoxically we are becoming accessible to nobody.

In his reflection entitled *Towards Full Presence A Pastoral Reflection on Engagement with Social Media* Cardinal Paolo Ruffini wrote:

We Christians should be known for our availability to listen, to discern before acting, to treat all people with respect, to respond with a question rather than a judgment, to remain silent rather than trigger a controversy and to be "quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger" (James 1:19).

There's a movement around now (only one!) that encourages us to choose to look up from our phones and out – either at our surroundings or each other. That is good for our brains, our bodies, our relationships and our experience of the world, the founders of that movement suggest. I agree.

Regards
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