

# From the Chaplaincy



## DIGI-STRESSING

By Fr. Francis Ongkingco

“Five-hour meetings at home?!” This was unthinkable during pre-COVID times, but with COVID, the normally dreaded marathon meetings have become a global lifestyle. With this new lifestyle, a new form of stress is born.

Although we are compensating for our social confinement with more efficient tools, a positive mindset, and renewed energy, we are nonetheless still experiencing greater anxiety than ever. Why? Because our senses are taxed and strained by now having to pass through more mediums or intermediaries for longer durations of time every day.

Man's senses physically connect him to the world and enrich his soul. His contemplation of the world has a way of stirring the deepest recesses of his being. When we contemplate the beauty of nature, it moves us to deeply consider things that have a substantial bearing on our life; it brings with it a realization of what we are and who we are in relation to the One who created all things. Thus, a captivating sunset that sets fire to the sky, a colorful rainbow that frames the horizon, the vast ocean that blankets the earth, the undulating waves that sing in the sea, the awe-inspiring mountain that towers above us – all these never fail to calm our soul and inspire us to say a silent *Amen*.

All these natural wonders can now be readily seen and enjoyed through our TVs or laptops. But as much as we can spend hours upon hours viewing them, we sense that a soulful engagement of them is lacking. This is because our senses are not connecting to the realities themselves but are connecting through an intermediary, that is, a TV, a laptop, or a phone. Our sight and hearing are actually physically in touch with our digital devices more than with the projected reality themselves – we see and hear the natural wonders projected through our screens but we do not actually experience it – therefore, the reality of it doesn't touch us at all. This is because the stimuli we get from and through gadgets are only “pseudo-experiences” and do not really have much “value added” to the soul. The absence of the “real experience” that results from an encounter of a “real stimuli” creates an invisible gap somewhere within us. And it is our inability to embrace that “real reality,” to have a real experience of them, and to have our souls rejuvenated by that experience is what cause our senses to be strained because we are perpetually (but unconsciously) trying to bridge that gap, compensate for what we sense is missing, and embrace a reality that doesn't enrich us.



The gap, in my opinion, is the need of our senses to somewhat *connect to something real* and package it as a *gift* for the soul. For example, when we see a rose, when we touch and smell it, the entire experience composes and illustrates our enjoyment of a flower, thus engraving a stronger and longer memory of the flower into our souls. That real experience affords us genuine joy.

In relation to our social dealings, physically working with someone in the office or playing a sport with him in a basketball court results in an exchange of energy – both physical and spiritual – that one cannot experience when working in front of a screen or playing NBA on a PlayStation4. It is this real physical connection and companionship with others that is missing even though we are engaged in a conversation with our loved ones through Zoom or playing as a team with friends in a video game.

The desire to have real and enriching experiences with nature and with people projects itself to that unconscious need to prevent the gap from growing into a chasm. This need then compels us to try to connect more and in longer durations to things that are seemingly real in our screens, forcing our senses to overwork. Thus, a great part of the stress and anxiety we are experiencing in our *circovidstances* is due to our

overworked senses that are unable to produce something nourishing for our souls. This is not to say that we are not achieving the goals in work or connecting with loved ones separated from us, but it is more the lack of a “real experience” – an experience that touches the soul and builds stronger connections – that is causing this new form of stress and anxiety.

Since we are more directly and intensely dealing with secondary realities like the mouse, mute button, screen brightness, or volume, our senses are busier establishing an equilibrium that would maintain the quality of communication with others than focusing directly on composing the soul's inner richness. The deplorable and expensive internet service in our country aggravates our stress and anxiety because we have the added worry of bad or intermittent connectivity that does not make our work or schooling any easier. Losing our internet connection or not having it increases our feeling of “disconnectedness” from the rest of the world and from people who matter to us. And this makes us feel more distanced and isolated, more anxious and stressed.

How can we manage this new form of stress and navigate these challenging times? There isn't one fixed solution, but taking breaks to connect with someone real to embrace and kiss, to feel textures or smell scents in our little homemade gardens, to taste the sweetness and feel the warmth of newly baked bread in our mouth are occasions – no matter how brief – for real experiences. Similar moments like these that we frequently create and constantly find are “mini-contacts” with reality. With these mini-contacts, our senses will once again regain their natural dispositions to help both body and soul feel more whole, more peaceful, and more like fruitful gifts to God and others.

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