

Curating the Thoughts You Share

By Matushka Ann Lardas

I was thinking of how best to talk about how to share your thoughts with friends on the internet. Inspiration came from my college work-study job at the Art Museum. My job was to stuff envelopes with information about a new exhibit. But in the process, I learned a great deal about how museums present artwork, and I think it fits in well with how we share our thoughts, online and off.

When you speak, you create images in the minds of your listeners, just like museums share images and words. And when you post things on the internet, or share via email or Instagram or whatever technology comes next, you are giving the world an idea of who you are. If you are the only Orthodox Christian people know, what they think they know about the Church will come from their perception of you. Museum curators – the people who gather and display art – are very careful about what they show. They only share the best. Likewise, the Apostle Paul urges us, “Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, but that which is good to the use of edifying, that it may minister grace unto the hearers.” (Eph. 4:29)

The obvious part of this is to be careful not to use bad language, because that brings the mind into the bedroom or bathroom. Don’t share anything unseemly online. No details about the size, shape or volume of anything that leaves your body – solid, liquid, or gas. (The exception is if you give birth – then we want height, weight, name, and pictures!) Post nothing unkind about another person.

One way a curator avoids having a bad art exhibit is by being careful not to buy bad art. There is beautiful book, a collection of essays by and stories about the Elder Thaddeus, entitled. “Our Thoughts Determine Our Lives.” If you haven’t read it, ask for it for Christmas. In it Elder Thaddeus explains how all our problems begin with bad thoughts, while our good actions spring from good thoughts. So, be a curator of your thoughts. Start by being careful which thoughts you accept, from all of them that come knocking. You pay for them with your time and with their effect on your peace of mind. Be a wise shopper.

A curator does not just pay the price that a seller asks for a piece of art. A curator looks it up, considers the origin, talks to artists and dealers to determine its worth. Likewise, before you spend time with a thought, evaluate it with help. Is this thought worthwhile?

It’s easy for us to be played by bad thoughts. We make assumptions about others and we don’t question them. If one of the old ladies at church frowns at us, we assume that she doesn’t like us, and we decide we don’t like her, either. But she could be in pain. She could have gas. Or she could dislike you because of something you did, that you can repent of and change. You won’t know until you lovingly approach her and at the very least say, “Good morning,” after the service. (Don’t talk during church.)

We think things are too hard for us, and never try them, or we think things will be easy, and get in over our heads. One way to check your thoughts is to run them by someone you trust – your parents, your godparents, your priest, close friends. Every once in a while, I tell my husband all the things that I am thinking about doing. Some of them, he thinks are wonderful ideas. Some, he thinks are crazy. Some, we are not yet ready to attempt but can try later. It helps me to have his perspective; I am too close. Think about who your “panel of experts” can be –

people to turn to for help with your sports, academics, with your spiritual life, and with deciding what to do next. Who do you want to be like? How do you wish to live?

Besides the humans in our life, God has given us a still, small voice within, our conscience, which tells us when we are planning something wrong. We also each have a patron saint to whom we can turn. We can ask our Guardian Angels to help us through danger and difficulty. We can tell God, in prayer, what we would like, and prayerfully ask Him if the thing is good, to grant it, and if it isn't, not to let it happen. We can turn to the patron saint of our church.

And, make Orthodox friends that you can talk to. They are less likely to get you into trouble (or at least some kinds of trouble), and you have to explain so much less. Come to camps, conferences, pilgrimages, and the special walks that your diocese offers. Friend each other on social media, and write and talk to each other between gatherings. Modern life is lonely. You want to make sure that your social media friends are also people you talk to in real life.

Visit each other's parishes, too! Drive crazy distances, spend the weekend, make sacrifices to be with each other. Nothing good comes easily or without effort. When you come, dress nicely, come to church on time, and put something larger than a one dollar bill in the collection plate. Say nice things about the food at the coffee hour. If you don't like the food, say something nice about everyone greeting and feeding you. Because, you don't need to say everything you think.

In fact, unvoiced thoughts – the things that you think, but never say or post – are your friend. If you think something angry or unkind but never say it, you mitigate the damage that your thoughts could have caused if they found their way into words.

Curate your thoughts. When a museum puts up an exhibit, they don't just put things up on the walls and on pedestals willy-nilly. They comb through the collection and choose the most worthy pieces. They position them carefully, and focus special lights on them – strong or diffused, direct or indirect, depending on the artwork. And they juxtapose things carefully, putting things next to each other in a way that helps the brain form new connections.

So, when you meet people in a new parish and they ask about someone you know from church, comb through the collection of what you know. Everything that you say must be true, but you don't have to share every true thing you know. The art of discernment is learning when to say something and when to say nothing, when to act and when to hesitate. It takes a lifetime to develop, but none of us are too young to start. And discernment starts, as everything does in an Orthodox life, with prayer.

A curator makes sure that the artwork he buys is authentic, and not a forgery. Be careful with your words. Verify that everything you share is true. Some people check Snopes, some people distrust Snopes – don't post news about the parish if you haven't run it by the priest or someone from the council. Don't post news about your school until you've checked it with someone. If you are posting a news item that you were sent, check it against a news source you trust before you share it.

All of us have, at one point or another, fallen for an internet hoax. If you find you have done this, thank the person who tells you. Post that what you posted was incorrect, and apologize. Take it down, if you can. But remember, once you put words in cyberspace, you have no control over who saves them, who believes them, who stores them, or how they will use them. My late brother became a monk, then a priest, then head of the Russian Ecclesiastical Mission to Jerusalem. I was urging him to be cautious about something, and he said, "My dear, I always

behave as if the CIA, KGB, FBI, Mossaad, and Mom were watching.” Have a standard for yourself. And remember, God is always watching.

Personally, when I write for publication, something I run it by the Vladyka Hilarion Test. If the Metropolitan were to pick up this article at the dentist’s office and read it, would he be happy with me? If the answer is no, I don’t publish it. I also have bishops, priests, my children, and several elderly nuns on my newsfeed. This keeps my content clean. Have someone among your friends who is your standard. (And yes, you can friend me.)

When curators frame prints, they put them in matting first. Matting is a strong cardboard that is cut into a border to go around a piece of artwork, to draw the eye to the picture. When you write to adults, make sure that you write out all your words, no abbreviations. Check your punctuation and spelling before you hit “send.” And use white space – line breaks and the like – as matting, so your words aren’t huddled in a lower-case mass like experimental poetry from the sixties. (I have several professor friends who have shared badly written requests for extra time, a better grade, to change an exam date – when the requests have been written in cell phone text language, the answer has always been “No.”

What do you do when one of your friends has shared something untrue or inappropriate?

The guiding principal should be this: **Praise in public, correct in private.**

This works in several different circumstances. If someone posts news of a celebrity death, say, and the death actually took place a few years back, write to the person in private. If something a friend has shared is inappropriate, write to him or her privately. “That was funny but maybe you want to rethink sharing where N can see it.” Or just, “Dude, what were you thinking?” Often the truest answer to this question is, “I wasn’t. I’m sorry.”

You don't have to correct everything. An Orthodox netiquette pioneer, the ever-memorable Affanassy Thompson, coined the phrase "politely ignore." Some mistakes online you can politely ignore, since the person didn't mean anything by it and it doesn't harm anyone. Choose your battles.

How do you talk about a bad day without going on about, say, your miserable math teacher?

When you must talk about something bad, talk about your own role. I am the director of our parish choir, and at the Summer School of Liturgical Music, an instructor told us that any mistake the choir makes is the conductor's fault, period. If your singer messes up, it's still the conductor's fault, "because you should have known he would do it." So if I had a rough day on kliros and feel compelled to complain, I might write, "In retrospect, it would have been better to rehearse the Turchianinov before we sang it today." My fellow conductors and singers will understand, and no one singer or group of singers will feel singled out.

Never criticize an adult in public. It makes you look bad, and there may be consequences. Instead, be sad that something happened. Not, "My math teacher stinks!" but, "I wish my grade had been higher on the last test. I had studied so hard!" Not "My parents are crazy!" But, "I won't be going to the carnival today."

Especially never use the internet to punish someone. First, we are not here to punish each other. God put us here to help each other to be saved. A friend is someone who helps you in the struggle for salvation. If someone hurts you, first, pray for help forgiving them, and ask God to forgive them, before they ask. I was fully twenty-six before I figured that part out. Then I was

going to confession to a bishop we love. I said, “Well, I didn’t forgive So-and-so, but, he didn’t ask, so I suppose it’s okay.”

I had never seen him unsettled before. He said, “No! Matushka! You have to forgive!”

“But, he never asked,” I said.

Vladyka said, “You have to forgive even if they never ask.”

It was my turn to be unsettled. I said, “You’re kidding!”

He assured me, “I’m not! You have to forgive everyone, even the people who don’t ask.”

Well! Accordingly, if you’ve forgiven someone, why would you humiliate them?

So, never “give them a taste of their own medicine,” or repay evil with evil. Take the high ground and stay there.

If someone is dangerous or posts inappropriate things after you’ve asked them not to, block them. But don’t unfriend good people for making mistakes, or because you are in a bad mood. You can “hide” people on Facebook so that you don’t see their posts until you are in a better mood. But don’t be punitive, online or off. “For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again.” (Matthew 7:2)

Saint Paul says, “Do all things without murmurings and disputings” (Phil. 2:14). That means, don’t complain. Don’t pick fights. Don’t let others trick you into fighting. And don’t “vaguebook” – it makes you look crazy. Really, those posts that say, “Someone had better be careful if he thinks he can get away with treating me like that!” does not make you look the nobler person here. Try to think of something good about every day and post that. Sometimes the

only good thing I can think to say about something is, “Heaven will not be like this.” On those days, I try to think, more, about Heaven. It keeps away the wrinkles.

Let’s look, also, at a curator’s setting. A curator works in a museum, which is well lit, it’s climate controlled, there is security, and people walk about quietly. Likewise, your online life should be bright and open, but also guarded. Don’t friend strangers. When I get a strange friend request, I look at our mutual friends and message those people to say, “Ivan Ivanovich wants to friend me. You are a mutual friend. Is he safe?” Sometimes I hear, “Yes, he’s wonderful, friend him by all means!” Other times I hear, “No! No, delete!”

This leads me to talking about other people. There are very specific situations in which you must tell someone in authority something bad about someone, or you have to keep a good person from trusting a bad one. But most of the time we have no need to say anything bad about another person. More than that, we should stop ourselves from even thinking something bad.

So, you are visiting a friend’s parish (maybe you are on a college visit. When you are looking at colleges, the first question should be, “What parish is it near?” and the second question should be, “And how can I get to church?”). Someone comes up to you and says, “I know someone from your parish! Do *you* know Ivan Ivanovich?”

Well, you do. You comb through all the things you know about him as if you were a curator digging through the archives. Let’s see. He comes to church three out of every four Sundays. He sings in the choir – sometimes too loud, sometimes off, but he sings. He stays for lunch and has been known to take more than his fair share of the shrimp and rice. And he dug a path from the parking lot last blizzard.

Dig. Think. Ask yourself:

Is it true?

Is it helpful?

Is it inspiring?

Is it necessary?

Is it kind?

You dust off each thought, examine it in the light of those questions, and choose which things to share. “Yes! He comes to our church and sings in the choir. And when we had a blizzard, he dug a path to the parking lot to help us all.”

Congratulations. You just met his godmother.

Only, sometimes you will find that someone is asking because they don't like another person. They will say, “Really? Because when I knew him, he sang badly and he took all the chicken from my casserole.”

Okay, Youth, this is where you have to be careful.

NEVER pile on when someone is being criticized.

First, it makes things worse for the other person, whose character is being assassinated in his absence. Second, it makes you look bad, in that you are someone who speaks badly about others in their absence.

Thirdly, the two people may reconcile, and be great friends once more. And then one day the person you met will say, “You know, you had better be careful about that kid from your

parish, Ivan. He said bad things about your singing and said something about you stealing seafood.”

Well, you did.

The best thing to do, when anyone tells you that somebody did them wrong, is to say or write, “I am so sorry you are going through this.” It conveys what is important and essential, that you are sorry this person is suffering. And it keeps you from choosing sides or assigning blame.

And then pray for the suffering person. And pray for the person they’ve accused.

The most important thing a curator does is to surround himself and provide others with beautiful things to contemplate. That! Do that! But in order to share things that edify – that build people up – you have to read good things. You have to think about beautiful things. You have to look for beauty. You might even specialize.

One friend has a medical problem that affected her speech and writing. (Never publicly criticize someone else’s spelling or grammar. You don’t know what they are struggling with.) But she takes pictures and videos of birds. Her beautiful birds sing and soar across my page every day, and raise my eyes and mind upward. Some friends post things their kids say. Some people post good recipes, especially Lenten recipes. Some people post the troparion or life of the saint of the day. Some people post pictures of people we love. Look for things you can share that will make other people smarter, kinder, and happier.

This reminds me – be careful of the photos you take and share, and be careful what pictures you are in. There should never be a bottle of alcohol in a picture you post. Take it off the table before the selfies begin. Everyone should be wearing enough clothes to make their

grandmothers happy should they see the picture. And never post photos that degrade or embarrass others or yourself. If you go and do something foolish, please, don't document it.

Instead, spend some time talking about your faith, online and off. You don't have to force it down people's throats. Mention that you went to church for today's feast. Share a good thought from the day's Gospel or sermon. Your words may be the only ones about God and His Church that someone sees that day. Make it good, and not just, "Oh, my goodness, do my feet ever hurt!"

Curators are happy people. They spend their time learning about and seeking out beautiful things. They read about them and talk about them. They share them and they help others learn about them.

St. Paul says, "Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things *are* honest, whatsoever things *are* just, whatsoever things *are* pure, whatsoever things *are* lovely, whatsoever things *are* of good report; if *there be* any virtue, and if *there be* any praise, think on these things." (Phil 4:8) I would like you all to be radiantly happy curators of thoughts that will bring us all closer to God. Each of us has a different gift, each of us sees something beautiful each day. Dig through the collection in your hearts. It will help us all.

Thank you.