



The Internet Connection

You don't know what you've got until it's gone. In previous articles I have written about gas shortages, power outages, and water being shut off to homes...effects of the ongoing deterioration of Venezuela's infrastructure. For the past twenty years, funds needed to maintain and update refineries, power stations, transmission lines, water mains, and the rest of the infrastructure of a modern-day country have been redirected elsewhere. Could you imagine the condition of your home if you had not spent a penny on upkeep or home improvement for the past twenty years? As an old English expression goes, there comes the time to "pay the piper". You can put some things off for a while, but with Venezuela not having paid all these years, the piper is now playing a dirge.

Given the restrictions to combat the spread of Covid-19, Venezuelans, as with people elsewhere, counted on television, internet and telephone service for their contact with the rest of the world. Recent developments have landed all three...television, telephone, and the internet...on the ever-expanding endangered services list. To comply with Trump administration sanctions, DirecTV, the major provider here, cut off service to Venezuela on May 19th. It didn't affect me personally since I don't watch TV, but in mid-June when the internet went from periodic brief outages to a total shutdown at our house, that was a different matter. I rely on the internet for news, research, email and telephone contact with folks back in the States.

We're not the first ones to be affected. The sector of the parish where we live is just the most recent to lose internet service. Several families with whom I spoke have been without phone and internet service for over a year, but they keep paying the monthly fee to keep their current nonfunctioning line since it would cost \$400 to get a new one. That cost of acquiring a line has resulted in many lines being stolen by tech savvy thieves...a good example of Jesus' comment on how astute the worldly are at conniving to get what they want (Luke 16:8). There is no shortage of such examples on both small and grand scales here in Venezuela.



During my early years here in the 1990s, there were no phone lines in the Alacranes neighborhood where we lived. We had to go downtown to the telephone offices where a call to Minnesota cost around \$1.50 per minute. My calls home were brief and infrequent. In 1998 we moved to the barrio of Guaiparo where the house we purchased had a phone line. Not only could we call Minnesota whenever we wanted...we were also connected to the internet. For you younger folks who never experienced it, ask your grandparents about "dial-up". It was slow and inconsistent but an amazing advancement in its time.

In this technological age, one day's amazing advancement becomes the next day's expected norm, and it's a whole lot easier to go from nothing to something than the other way around. With all the shortages and outages here, I think about our ancestors a century or more in the past who, never knowing such services, were not affected by electrical outages, lack of telephone service and internet access, gas shortages, and water cut off to their homes. They got by without these and so many other blessings to which we have become accustomed...perhaps better said, dependent.

As the infrastructure of Venezuela continues to deteriorate along with its economy, there is little hope that things will improve in the near future. People are living in a sort of purgatory, still hoping for the blessings and services they once knew while being purged of dependence on them. It gives me pause to consider, having gotten used to spending significant time on the internet, how differently my ministry took shape back in the '90s. With no internet, I am having more direct person-to-person contact with parishioners, spending more time reading and studying the bible, and am getting to bed earlier every night.

The fact that you're reading this means, I found someone who still has internet service. People connections have always been and always will be the best connections, with or without the benefits of technology.

Points to ponder

How much time do you spend with television, the internet, and on your cell phone? To what extent is it time well used or time better spent elsewhere? How difficult would it be for you to go without this technology?

The Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis has staffed and supported parishes in the diocese of Ciudad Guayana in Venezuela since 1970. These "Did you know?" papers are designed to give you a better understanding of life in Venezuela and to strengthen connections between the parishes of the Archdiocese and their archdiocesan mission during our 50th anniversary year. Please direct any comments or suggestions for future papers to Fr. Denny Dempsey at ddempsey@churchofstdominic.org or 651-368-7324.