



The Telephone

"Mr. Watson, come here. I want to see you." Before Alexander Graham Bell's first telephone transmission on March 7, 1876, the telegraph had been the cutting edge of communications technology. How curious that the preferred method for relaying such a message today would return to a written text message rather than voice communication. That call was transmitted from one room in Bell's workshop to the next, less than the distance we kids used to stretch a string between two tin cans and play telephone. Six months later, Bell successfully made the first long-distance call over telegraph wires to a town eight miles away. Within two years exchanges were popping up in many cities and the telephone was well on its way to being the latest need-to-have gadget.

For my first several years at our Venezuelan mission in the 1990s there weren't even landline phones in the neighborhood where we lived. There was a payphone a quarter mile away which worked now and then, but whom were we going to call? Few parishioners had phones. Contact was done in person, either direct or relayed through someone else. Calls to Minnesota were infrequent, requiring a trip downtown and a wait in line at the CANTV telephone center. At \$1.50 per minute, calls were also brief and to the point.

Fifty years after telephones first appeared nearly half the homes in the US were connected. The proliferation of cell phones in Venezuela took far less time. They were just coming on the scene when I left in 1999. On my return twenty years later, I was amazed how common they had become, especially among young people for whom cell phones, smartphones in particular, are both a communications necessity and a social status symbol. Far superior to the basic \$20 phone I carry, they are also far more expensive, beginning at around \$80 and up. In this country where the basic monthly wage is less than \$5, where do people get the money to buy such phones? Most folks to whom I put that question just shrugged. "It's a necessity so people find ways. They go without other things they want or need or get help from relatives living and working in other countries."

Coming up with the money to buy a phone is hard enough, but, unfortunately, it rarely stops at one. On a home visit the other day, a woman told me someone had stolen her phone that morning. Fortunately, it was an inexpensive one she had purchased for \$15 specifically to use when she leaves the house where she kept her smartphone, having learned her lesson after losing three phones previously. One fellow told me his younger son had lost two smartphones, both stolen out on the street at gunpoint. His elder son was now on his fifth phone. As with most students during his years at the university, he was dependent on public transportation for getting back and forth. Buses are a favorite target for thieves here, especially on the university route. Thieves know most students carry smartphones. A solitary thief can pick up a few phones rather easily between the bumps and jolts on a packed bus since many young people, as in Minnesota, keep them sticking out of their back pocket. As a group, however, thieves don't bother with finesse and stealth. Two guys with guns cover the doors while a few accomplices pass among the passengers collecting everything of value. Phone theft is not unique to Venezuela. According to the FCC, one out of three robberies in the US involves a cell phone. The great difference, of course, is that it will cost the average worker here two years' pay to replace the same phone that a teenager in Minnesota working at McDonald's could purchase with two days' earnings.

However, once you have a phone, if you can keep it from being stolen, the service plans are quite inexpensive. Checking the internet for service plans in the US, I saw one with unlimited national calls and texts and 1 GB data capacity for a bit under \$7 per month. As great a deal as that might be, a similar plan here in Venezuela is around 50 cents a month. The monthly bill for my little "unintelligent" flip phone is the equivalent of 20 cents.

The desire to stay connected with loved ones is pretty powerful, especially true here where an estimated one out of every six Venezuelans have left in recent years seeking their livelihood in neighboring countries. In this land where electric power goes down frequently, landlines get hijacked, and computer service is inconsistent, the cell phone is the most reliable communications tool and is here to stay...at least until the next cutting-edge technological advancement and need-to-have gadget comes along.

Points to ponder

How much and for what do you use your cell phone? Could you get by without it for very long?

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.