Does “social” media bring us closer together or move us further apart?

There is a lot of debate about the overall effect of social media in fostering and nurturing real, healthy relationships. Social media have the potential to help people build and maintain relationships, especially when family and friends are separated from one another by great distance. However, they also have a flip-side that can see an unhealthy preoccupation with comparing ourselves to others and coming away feeling dissatisfied or depressed. This is not just an issue with teens who are particularly vulnerable to social pressures from peers, but also with adults who can experience depression because their lives don’t seem as interesting or good as Facebook friends’ lives appear to be. Sometimes too, social media can over emphasize trivial things or share too freely private matters that really should not be made available for more general consumption. Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI in his message on the 47th World Communications Day in May 2013, cautioned: “social networks are the result of human interaction, but for their part, they also reshape the dynamics of communication which builds relationships: a considered understanding of this environment is therefore the prerequisite for a significant presence there.” He emphasized the many positive ways social media can affect our lives, especially as means of sharing and discussing the most fundamental aspect of human experience, our faith. However, he advised us that our use of it should be founded on the desire to bring us together in mutual respect, dialogue, reasoned argument and understanding if social media is to be a truly human means of communication. Social media is indeed a powerful tool, but tools must be used with care as they can be misused. We must choose to use it wisely to build each other up rather than to tear one another down.

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