

# CrossCurrents

*A Catholic Reflects on Faith in Our Times*



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## Leading Us Astray

Perhaps you saw the same AP headline I did: “*Nevada couple stranded three days after GPS leads them astray.*” It seems they asked for the shortest route from Portland to Reno, and they got it – but their machine, while full of instant data, was mindless enough to recommend an unsafe, snow-bound road.

Methinks a parable lurks therein! And as we look back on the decade of the 2000s, perhaps this story offers an apt theme. It has something to do with technology and our response to it—or, more accurately, our varied *responses*.

There are, of course, those people who embrace every new technological advance with gusto – the folks who had home TVs in the 1940s, video cameras by 1970, a \$700 single-disc CD player by 1983, a car phone by 1990, and a \$4000, 30-inch HDTV by 2000.

Then there are the people who militantly resist every innovation. They clung to black & white TV, and to dial phones, and they have no use for snow blowers or dishwashers or cell phones.

The first group bought Apple computers in 1982; the second group still holds the line against e-mail and pays cash for everything.

Most of us, I suspect, are somewhere in between. We neither race into new things nor resist them on principle. We don’t need to be the first kid on our block. We’re content to wait until new technologies prove their worth. We know they often need debugging, and we prefer not to play the role of guinea pig. We guess that subsequent versions will not only be better but also cheaper. And we even suspect that some innovations will eventually either fail or prove actually

harmful. So we never went for Edsels or 8-track tapes or Fen-Phen or sub-prime mortgages.

Yet we embrace proven technologies with prudent optimism. We start emailing, while remaining alert to spam and viruses. We buy hybrids, but know that batteries remain underdeveloped. We love the way computers transmit data at the speed of light, but we never forget that they're still stupid machines. We use credit cards but watch for scams. We experiment with voice-recognition software, but chuckle wryly when it types Ratzinger as "rap singer" or Jesus as "cheeses."

My own humble opinion is that this middle way is not merely moderate, it is also wise.

In fact, a strain throughout Christian history – or at least Catholic history – has been to display mixed feelings about technology in general. Given the Christian view of the world, this makes perfect sense. Since all technology comes from human intelligence and our drive to subdue creation to our benefit, we regarded it as *potentially* a gift (albeit indirect) from God. But since every technology is a human product, it is never perfect, and its flaws may outweigh its benefits.

No humans in history have ever needed this insight more than our present generations. The nuclear age unleashed power simultaneously capable of enormous benefit and vast destruction. Automobiles offered unprecedented freedom and mobility, but made us dependent on oil, cost us an appalling annual death toll, and jeopardized our very atmosphere. Computers enabled whole new work styles and lifestyles, while tethering humans to their machines in increasingly intimate ways. That GPS system eventually signaled authorities with the snowbound couple's location, and saved their lives – but not before it nearly killed them!

For me, this bit of Christian insight has always been the key theme emerging from Vatican Council II (1962-1965). The Council Fathers expressed their enthusiasm and high optimism for modern culture's technical achievements. But they argued that the power unleashed by new technologies should always be matched by the wisdom to steer them toward our benefit, lest they lead us astray.

The challenge of our age, then, is to **yoke power to wisdom**. This means harnessing the forces of technology with the sources of prudence and perception, to form a partnership that serves the common good of all humanity. The challenge is acute, because the pace of technological advance in our time threatens a runaway innovation that overruns all attempts to harness it.

That threat affects us all, and at many levels of our lives. It obviously affects the struggle to encourage peaceful nuclear energy while reining in its destruction—witness the current crisis in U.S.-Iran relations.

It affects our need to tame globalization before it runs roughshod over most of humanity—witness the recent struggles at the Copenhagen climate conference.

It affects the challenge of parenting in an age when all the world's marvels and evils emerge from our children's laptops and cell phones.

It affects each of us individually, when freedom of choice runs amok and we fall victim to the helpless aimlessness of “too many choices” at the supermarket, the car dealership, or our TV's program guide.

And it affects us all when the cold calculus of our GPS replaces common sense human judgments.

Looking back on the decade before 2010 is not a bad time to reflect on how we are coping – or failing to cope—with this challenge in our life as a nation, as families, and as individuals. Looking back allows us measure our efforts by spotting some signs of the times—signs that are all around us, all posing the same key question: *can wisdom keep pace with power?*

**The Credit Crisis** reminds us that while credit cards have freed us as consumers from the constraints of cash-flow systems, they also risk burdening us with unmanageable debt.

**The Healthcare Crisis** reminds us that, while we Americans possess the most advanced medical technology, we also suffer shorter lifespans and higher infant and maternal mortality than any US ally---at twice their cost!

**The Energy Crisis** makes us realize that our modern technical marvels come with a price tag: the depletion of fossil fuels and the earth's ozone layer.

**The Terror Crisis** reminds us that anything can be “weaponized”; all our full-body scanners cannot guarantee our security as long as we fail to conquer hatred.

**The “Smart” Crisis:** all the smart cars, smart phones, smart bombs cannot protect us from senseless highway deaths, frivolously life-sapping telecommunications, and stupid wars.

The truth is, technology is never self-guiding, self-governing, or self-limiting. People must keep machines in their place, and only wisdom can do that. So as machine culture marches on, we neglect our wisdom institutions at our peril. Finally it may dawn on us that “Smart” is not “Wise.”

“**Avatar**,” on its way to becoming the biggest grossing movie in history, tells a 3-D tale of high-tech earthlings attacking another planet's spiritually superior but technically primitive people because earth itself has become a polluted wasteland. The energy source earthlings desperately seek to mine from the new planet: “Unobtainium”!

It's radically ironic that the most technically advanced special effects ever seen are employed to deliver this clear message: unguided power inevitably leads us astray. Ultimately, power self-destructs, and wisdom wins.

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***Dr. Swain's opinions do not represent the views of this parish or any other official body.***

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