

Can You hear me now?

By Mr. Don Clarke, Director of Campus Ministry

(I wrote this article for the Principal's Newsletter after the 2006 freshman overnight retreat.)

Consider the changing world of the cell phone.

When I first started at Jesuit, I had a cell phone; it was one of those “brick” phones that had the huge antenna. Three, maybe four faculty had a cell phone, and I think a few students had one, but it was rare.

Soon, I purchased one of those “super duper” analog phones with a black case, and 3db antenna, so I could call from St. Benedict Lodge and other retreat sites. Only my phone would work in those places because typically coverage was not good. I called parents whose kids needed medicine or found themselves banged up after a retreat football game. I remember one sophomore overnight retreat when the snow and ice in Portland made the return trip a little “iffy,” and my phone, at the going rate of .90 cents per incoming call, was ringing off the hook. Students thought I was cool to have a phone that could work that way and so did the phone company charging me for each call. We had access to the outside world, and it was a local call to Portland because I had the technology. On a snowy night in March, 2002, when a faculty member died on an Encounter, my phone, considerably smaller with a stylish Donald Duck face plate, logged 90 phone calls to parents from students who needed to talk to mom and dad. About half the students had cell phones, and they were all used that night; I was glad they were there.

Fast forward to the ten retreats of the 2005-2006 school year. Because phones are all over the place, we make numerous requests each time to put them away and just go on retreat, rather than text messaging or calling people continually. On a retreat in January 2006, during a bon-fire, some kids were singing while others were text messaging secretly to friends at a party back home. Responses to “whs n ur cbn” and “u shld b hr” flew through satellite coverage that makes retreat sites now accessible to a number of phone programs. Scores of games, “What’s on TV?” and, “Who’s doing what?” zipped through space. Groups huddled secretly, not wanting to be found using a phone, called friends back home telling them what was going on, or to hear they were missing a party. Some knew the news; some found it out, but these groups split the retreat. Sadly, cohesiveness soon splintered, and unless God can text message the retreatants in a hurry, even He will be left out of the loop.

Parents, we need your help. Please, when concerned about your child’s well being, avoid calling or text messaging directly to your child as the number one disclaimer of cell phone use while on retreat is, “but Mr. Clarke, it’s my mom.” Soon after, the boys’ cabins are text messaging the girls’ cabins, and, when retreat leaders would think their students are fast asleep, meetings are being planned and ... well ... our students may be at the retreat, but they are not **on** the retreat.

Thus, I believe we have a serious problem, one I hope you will help alleviate. I am well aware in this post 9/11 world that cell phone sales skyrocketed so parents could keep track of their kids and that our society finds these a necessity, and our students find their usage defines the way they talk to each other. I also know I need my cell phone each day. On retreats, I have to use it constantly when



situations call for it. I have a vague memory of what it was like when I didn't have one. **I do know cell phones are significantly changing the face of youth retreats.** That is why we have a problem: the technology has become so advanced that we may not have the ability to go on retreat, get away, and listen to what God is saying without a vibrating phone yanking us back to a noise that shuts Him out.

As we ask students to turn off their phones--completely not just to "silent"--I realize we are fighting technology that is becoming even more discreet. To ask students to turn in their phones before a retreat simply encourages a more discreet technology. We know in the retreat business that there has to be space from the world and that the desire to get away can not be imposed but has to come from within. This is where it gets insidious. Unless the phones go completely off, a religious experience requiring quiet, thoughtful participation can be destroyed by the ring tones of just one phone. As a result, **we are in real danger of losing retreats in our tradition because the technology is**



advancing faster than God. In our society, IPODS, PSPs, BlackBerrys, and cell phones will finally challenge and make senseless the Biblical instruction, "Be still and know that I am God" (Ps 46:10).

Parents, again, we need your help. Please talk with your children before they go on a retreat. Tell them that if there is an emergency, you will call the phone number on the handout sheet to reach them. Please let them know that it is important that they leave other methods of communication off during the retreat (speaking on the phone, text messaging, sending videos and pictures). It will be a gift to your child and a real gift to all who want to get away.

Let me give you a positive example: March 2005, when we won the state basketball championship in an amazing comeback, one that will go down in history, not one of the girls on the Encounter knew what happened until they were told by the retreat leaders. I knew there was no way they could have hidden their joy if they knew the score beforehand. I hold this group of girls as a shining example that phones being shut off can be done, even with a state championship on the line.

Before the Freshman Overnight Retreat, two students came to my office. The brave one stepped forth asking, "Can we use our IPODS on the bus to listen to our music?" I responded, "Nope, in fact, you can leave them at home." As they turned to leave, the one who didn't speak to me said to the other, "See, I told you he wanted us to talk to each other."

(2012-13) addition... on the first day of the December 14-16, 2012 Encounter, our country experienced an unthinkable tragedy with the shooting and killing of 20 children at Sandy Hook Elementary School. After speaking with the retreat coordinators, we thought it best to let our students call home and talk to their parents because of the monumental story that was playing out away from the retreat site. We also knew that as soon as our students turned on their phones, they would open their world to all the texts they had received and internet possibilities but it was a trade we were willing to make. Parents, please know we will allow phone calls to parents to be made in case of emergencies.

(2021-22) addition...the proliferation of iWatch technology is giving us a new battle in leaving devices off. If you could talk to your son or daughter, about leaving that at home, that would be a big help for us. Please know if your child has a blood sugar "signaler" that connects with your phone, your child can use that technology but please let us know. We are glad to help but we know it is easier if we know how. The coverage is much better at our retreat sites now and if you feel you must have your child check in with you in the evening, please have them do that through one of the school phones and not their personal phones. If you think that you are the only one that will get messaged, experience says it doesn't work that way.