***Do you hear what I hear? Running your life through a cell phone.***

During Christmas our dog found my hearing aid on the carpet where it landed when I inadvertently knocked it off the end table of the bed. When we observed that she was playing with something other than a toy, and we discovered that it was my hearing aid, I told my wife that maybe our dog’s favorite Christmas Carol was, “Do you hear what I hear?”

Hearing and listening are, of course, very different. There are quite a few of us who have the gift of hearing but we are not necessarily good listeners. For some personality types it is essential, when listening, to have no distractions. Some people can read and study with music and noise all around them while there are others who can’t remember a thing they read if there is any noise at all, including the loud ticking of a grandfather clock.

However, when someone acquires a cell phone people rarely ask if the person will be able to hear and listen at the same time. I believe that it has gotten so bad that people are even making critical decisions from their cell phone. Priests are driving down the highway allegedly paying attention to the speed limits and other traffic and at the same time are handling critical pastoral matters.

Cell phone conversations and Zoom meetings are not substitutes for a face-to-face meeting. These means may be very helpful, especially when emergencies occur, but the clergy cannot run their parishes from a cell phone and clicking a heart emoji is not an appropriate substitute for a hug.

I fear that during the Pandemic we have adopted some extraordinary means of communication that may well become normative after the Pandemic if we are not careful. For emergency purposes extraordinary means are critical, but people need to be with people. Connecting with relatives who live miles away by using Zoom is an amazing blessing. Driving in our cars, trying to hear what someone is saying through their sobs and tears may well mean that we are not listening. As I recall the advertisement of a technology company which had as its key point “Can you hear me now?” I have wondered what it would be like if someone said “Are you listening to me now.” Often we can hear words, but we need to listen to their meanings. Many depressed people are convinced that no one really listens to them. Calling a depressed person on our cell phone from our car is a good first step, but it is not a substitute for “the sacrament of presence.” Many a bad decision has been made while driving down the highway and being distracted by all that is around us. There are people who hang on every word we utter, and we need to offer them the best that we can.

Can we use our cell phones driving down the highway to confirm appointments, to double-check an address, to say “I’m on my way” — of course, but far too many bad decisions can occur when we are distracted. **People formerly would write an intense letter, then place it in the drawer and pray over it before mailing it**, whereas today with one click we can send a message that upon reflection should have remained “in the drawer.” These instantaneous messages, once sent, cannot be retrieved, and hurried and distracted words on a cell phone may well be words that cut like a knife. Listening means looking into someone’s eyes and heart, pondering their words and praying that we respond in a godly way. All distractions should be eliminated when we are truly listening. Not all questions require an immediate response, and now that we are conditioned into thinking that everyone deserves an immediate response, (especially ME) listening, pondering, and praying are all too often removed from the dialogue. It is not inappropriate to say, “I need to pray about that, and then I will get back to you.” In this way, we can demonstrate that God is in the middle of our decision-making, as we seek His direction and counsel, rather than us being the source of sound decisions.

Maybe as we approach Lent, we can all evaluate how we communicate with people, how we LISTEN to people, and how we can eliminate distractions from our communications. Do we REALLY need to read on social media what people’s opinions are about what we say, or do we need God’s direction and affirmation in order to give to others our undivided attention that is not dependent upon people with opinions, but rather upon God whose Word is not open to a satisfaction survey.

PRAYER: Do you hear What and Who I hear?