The Second Annual TRS Theology/Technology Round Table Discussion Group was held over the lunch hour on Monday, April 4, 2011. Approximately twelve people attended, including professors from the Pastoral Studies and Religion and Culture Areas, and graduate students in Biblical Studies, Spirituality, Religious Education /Catechetics and other areas. The event was sponsored by the Pastoral Studies Area and planned by Fr. Raymond Studzinski, Will Reaves and Kristina Olsen. A pleasant lunch was enjoyed by all.

A lively discussion on the use of technology for pastoral and spiritual purposes was held. Opinions were shared on the pros and cons of technological advancement, with a special eye toward their use in religion. Distraction may be caused by multi-media tools, resulting in a loss of reading and writing intensity and focus. Staying glued to our smart phones often disengages us from those around us. Msgr. Rossetti mentioned that his recent research shows that the most likely indicator of a good relationship with God was having close friends, and he thought a good dissertation topic would be measuring social intimacy against smart phone usage (he guessed that as smart phone use goes up, intimacy decreases, except possibly at the low end of usage, when both may rise together).

The implications of a small version of Google in the brain were discussed, as was the physicality of sacramentality and the importance of a sense of permanence in the “embodiment” of sacred scripture in the printed book. People lose their sense of themselves as embodied beings with too much internet and computer use. An “adoration cam” seems to lose something due to the absence of being present with others and with the Blessed Sacrament, and avatars at an online church also seem to be lacking something, although there is a sense of Greek drama about attending something behind a “mask.” We already take on a persona when we interact with other people. Online Facebook pages seem to have unreal and inauthentic descriptions of people – most are too good to be true. However, in a public world, it may be the best we can do. On the other hand, anonymity and disinhibition could benefit some users who go online for support with grief, dating or alcoholics anonymous.

Reading online puts more control into the hands of the reader, and this is the opposite of ancient monastic reading, in which one gives up control to the book, as well as prayer, when one surrenders to the Other. The desire for control in reading may emerge in part from defending against the onslaught of information and advertising which aims to manipulate viewers as “ears and eyeballs,” rather than whole persons, in order to get them to buy something. Technology may be best used as a supplement to face-to-face relationships, not replacements for them. No one should say “I Love You” in a text message, unless it’s your kids checking in every week or so. Technology can really help those who already have strong personal relationships to stay in touch more easily. Telephones, which were designed to help us to communicate better, may now be hindering social intimacy.