THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND THE INTERNET
By
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The Catholic Church worldwide is both an organized, structured institution *and* a community of smaller diverse communities. Where does cyberspace fit in? What impact will the Internet have on individual Catholics and the institutional church?

The truth is we don't yet know. Individuals and institutions feel quite certain that opening up cyberspace – like any huge new frontier – will impact individuals, economic systems, communication patterns, and institutional structures.

In California, at Xerox PARC (Palo Alto Research Center), computer scientists have funneled about 55 million pages of the World Wide Web on to disk space and are busy analyzing it. They speak of the Web as "a beautiful garden," "an ecosystem," a "vast spider web of connections."

Margaret Wertheim in *The Pearly Gates of Cyberspace* calls cyberspace "a new global space of being."   She says this may be where humans can once again gain ground against a universe that has become so scientific that the spiritual life has shriveled.

Keeping Technology Humane

One thing is certain. For the Catholic Church the *human being* must remain at the center of any natural universe – whether it is terrestrial or virtual. Communication techniques and technologies must be viewed as gifts and tools for humanity within a graced, redeemed universe.

If the Internet is viewed as an environment we realize it is one of many locales in which the human person resides. Other environs include the family, ethnic groups, a nations, schools and work communities, and, for most, a community of faith.

The Catholic Church would hope to promote various opportunities within this environment:

.. easy access to information (spiritual, educational, commercial);
.. open and dialogic expression for all (within legal parameters);
.. justice for all groups, including respect for the rights of others and
 access by the poor through public libraries and community centers;
.. equal economic opportunity for all in an electronic-commerce world

We see clearly that evil exists in other environments inhabited by mankind. And the church urges society (parents and educators in particular), to be aware of the dark side of cyberspace – pornographic, fraud, and hate sites that are potentially harmful, especially to youth or the elderly. This will clearly require public policy initiatives to enforce already-existing laws on things like harassment, fraud, and the protection of minors.

Telephone Extension

Some communication specialists think of computer networks like the Internet as a natural development of the telephone. For over a century we have used wide access to telephones to link human beings. The telephone is a good example of how a technological tool can be of unique service to humanity in very intimate and humane ways. Since E-mail represents the most popular application of the Internet, human beings have simply found a new way to reach out and touch one another. The very rapid growth of the Internet seems to prove that millions find it useful.

Telephone conversations, of course, are hard to control. The frontier of human interaction on the Internet also seems like a Wild West that is chaotic and unmanageable. Institutional structures like the church will need to study the sociology of the Internet in order to plan strategically to enter cyberspace in a pastoral manner.

We may see cyberspace as another environment where we can speak authoritatively. However, our church-related web sites ought to invite dialogue whenever possible. We need to be imaginative especially when reaching youth and young adults who are most comfortable on the Internet.

Church Planning

The Catholic Church has long demonstrated interest in, and support for, communication tools. Specific church documents have articulated many significant communication principles, for example, supporting public dialogue, the redemptive power of truth, the value of multiple approaches, support for media professionals, and collaboration with other religious groups.

An annual collection in all U.S. Catholic churches supports communication projects at both the national and local levels. In a recent

document (*Aetatis Novae*), the church has urged all nations and dioceses to draft a specific pastoral plan for church communication in their area.

The pastoral plan developed by the U.S. bishops stresses seven specific communication actions:

1. evangelizing;
2. influencing the values, judgments, and actions of U.S. society;
3. telling the Church's story;
4. protecting the communication environment;
5. teaching communication;
6. reflecting systematically on the quality of church communication;
7. supporting one another in a ministry of communication

Expanding Pastoral Initiatives

All of the above objectives could apply to the newer technologies like the Internet. However, cyberspace may call for new pastoral approaches and may require that we re-think our current structures. For example, we are used to inviting people to come to our churches for meetings. One parish discovered that its Young Adult site was visited 10,000 times in one year.

Perhaps each time someone visited this Web site we could consider that a "meeting" occurred. We may need to re-define our ways of thinking about human contact in our pastoral ministries. Cyberspace may provide opportunities to dialogue and serve many thousands who are not currently attending religious services.

The Catholic Church is already quite visible on the Internet. The Vatican has a Web site.(www.vatican.va) The Dominican's list of home pages and Web sites includes over one hundred links and is coordinated by a "Webfriar." (webfriar@mac.domcentral.org)   Many monasteries have a presence in cyberspace, continuing the monastic tradition of welcoming the traveler that goes back many centuries. Some monks design Web sites or do computer archival work – a sort of technological Scriptorium. Religious communities may find that contacts with future candidates can begin with Internet conversations. Many dioceses and individual parishes have Web sites.

Academics have begun to research topics like "the theology of the Web" and "communities in cyberspace." We all have much to learn.

One of the first things to learn is that things may not be what they seem in cyberspace. Many sites calling themselves "Catholic" may not

reflect official church teaching. One way to deal with this issue may be for church groups to publicize widely Web site addresses that are truly supportive of authentic practices. For example, one site that encourages contemplative prayer practice (www.centeringprayer.com) has already had almost 40,000 visitors.

In a recent "Resolution on Computer Networking" the U.S. bishops stated:

> By the convenient and almost instantaneous communications they make possible, these new means help bring about an enhanced sense of working together, whether in a pastoral center, a diocese, or a far-flung religious community. This conquest of time and space offers new ways to gather people together for a common purpose. We encourage an extensive exchange of information and ideas among Church leaders and communicators about creative uses of computer networking and the Internet for service to the Church's pastoral mission.

As the bishops speak of "an enhanced sense of working together," we are reminded that another aspect of networked church communication is the *internal* flow within church communities. Internal networks are often called *Intra*nets. Many church leaders are realizing (as corporate leaders have), that existing organizational communities can be strengthened by internal computer networks. Such networks, however, with their easy horizontal communication flows, tend to level the organizational pyramid of authority we have been used to.

Pastoral Examples

It might be helpful to reflect upon some specific examples of Internet pastoral applications.

Perhaps as "distance learning" becomes more widely used for instruction, there could be courses in cyberspace that share the rich content of biblical study, catechetics, pastoral theology, and many other areas. These courses, possibly offered by educational institutions, could be individualized and interactive, allowing for rich exchange.

Linking people together in supportive prayer groups is a natural example of cyberspace community. Much of this already occurs on the

Internet. This represents a natural extension of support groups like AA or telephone help lines. Many people are supported during a grieving period by contacts made on the Internet.

Some listserve and chat room discussion groups can permit individuals of faith from around the world to discuss current news events, including mass media events, in the light of the gospel.

Many publications are appearing (even as samples) on the Internet, so this may represent an outreach for diocesan newspapers and church publications. U.S. book sales reach $21.3 billion annually. Many individuals now order books over the Internet and some of these orders will be thoughtful religious or spiritual titles. On the other hand, as advertisers move to the Internet, advertising funds for many print publications may dwindle, threatening their existence. Small bookstores may continue to disappear under siege from large Internet book supermarkets.

In Germany a Web site called "fun city" allows young children to enter a virtual church building and chat with four young priests or ask for prayerful support for their problems. A recent book was published there entitled *The Internet for Theologians*. This will challenge church leadership to be thoughtful about cyberspace.

Some religious educators encourage youth to set up pen pals in other communities or nations. Some can search for various kinds of religious art (as more and more museums make their holdings available online). Bible study sites are multiplying. People can even pray with the Taize community online.

Dr. Lynn Andrea Stein tells her students at M.I.T. "…don't think of computation as just calculation. Think of computation as a community."

Cardinal Roger Mahoney of Los Angeles puts it this way: "Cyberspace has the capacity to be the modern shore of the Sea of Galilee along which the Lord walks, calling disciples to himself."

For Further Reading…

Esther Dyson, *Release 2.0* (New York: Broadway Books, 1997)

U.S. Catholic Conference publications – (202) 541-3000
 Aetatis Novae, publication #504-6
 Pastoral Plan for Church Communication, publication #5-141