

The Church and Internet

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I. INTRODUCTION

1. The Church's interest in the Internet is a particular expression of her longstanding interest in the media of social communication. Seeing the media as an outcome of the historical scientific process by which humankind "advances further and further in the discovery of the resources and values contained in the whole of creation,"¹ the Church often has declared her conviction that they are, in the words of the Second Vatican Council, "marvelous technical inventions"² that already do much to meet human needs and may yet do even more.

Thus the Church has taken a fundamentally positive approach to the media.³ Even when condemning serious abuses, documents of this Pontifical Council for Social Communications have been at pains to make it clear that "a merely censorious attitude on the part of

the Church...is neither sufficient nor appropriate."⁴

Quoting Pope Pius XII's 1957 encyclical letter *Miranda Prorsus*, the Pastoral Instruction on the Means of Social Communication *Communio et Progressio*, published in 1971, underlined that point: "The Church sees these media as 'gifts of God' which, in accordance with his providential design, unite men in brotherhood and so help them to cooperate with his plan for their salvation."⁵ This remains our view, and it is the view we take of the Internet.

2. As the Church understands it, the history of human communication is something like a long journey, bringing humanity "from the pride-driven project of Babel and the collapse into confusion and mutual incomprehension to which it gave rise (cf. Gen 11:1-9), to Pentecost and the gift of tongues: a restoration of communication, centered on Jesus, through the action of the Holy Spirit."⁶ In the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, "communication among men found its

¹ John Paul II, encyclical letter *Laborem Exercens*, n. 25; cf. Vatican Council II, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 34.

² Vatican Council II, Decree on the Means of Social Communication *Inter Mirifica*, n. 1.

³ For example, *Inter Mirifica*; the Messages of Pope Paul VI and Pope John Paul II on the occasion of the World Communication Days; Pontifical Council for Social Communications, Pastoral Instruction *Communio et Progressio*, Pornography and Violence in the Communications Media: A Pastoral Response, Pastoral Instruction *Aetatis Novae*, Ethics in Advertising, Ethics in Communications.

⁴ Pornography and Violence in the Communications Media, n. 30.

⁵ *Communio et Progressio*, n. 2.

⁶ John Paul II, Message for the 34th World Communications Day, June 4, 2000.

highest ideal and supreme example in God who had become man and brother.”⁷

The modern media of social communication are cultural factors that play a role in this story. As the Second Vatican Council remarks, “although we must be careful to distinguish earthly progress clearly from the increase of the kingdom of Christ”, nevertheless “such progress is of vital concern to the kingdom of God, insofar as it can contribute to the better ordering of human society.”⁸ Considering the media of social communication in this light, we see that they “contribute greatly to the enlargement and enrichment of men’s minds and to the propagation and consolidation of the kingdom of God.”⁹

Today this applies in a special way to the Internet, which is helping bring about revolutionary changes in commerce, education, politics, journalism, the relationship of nation to nation and culture to culture – changes not just in how people communicate but in how they understand their lives. In a companion document, *Ethics in Internet*, we discuss these matters in their ethical dimension.¹⁰ Here we consider the Internet’s implications for religion and especially for the Catholic Church.

3. The Church has a two-fold aim in regard to the media. One aspect is to encourage their right development and

⁷ *Communio et Progressio*, n. 10.

⁸ Vatican Council II, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes*, 39.

⁹ *Inter Mirifica*, 2.

¹⁰ Pontifical Council for Social Communications, *Ethics in Internet*.

right use for the sake of human development, justice, and peace-for the upbuilding of society at the local, national, and community levels in light of the common good and in a spirit of solidarity. Considering the great importance of social communications, the Church seeks “honest and respectful dialogue with those responsible for the communications media” – a dialogue that relates primarily to the shaping of media policy.¹¹ “On the Church’s side this dialogue involves efforts to understand the media – their purposes, procedures, forms and genres, internal structures and modalities – and to offer support and encouragement to those involved in media work. On the basis of this sympathetic understanding and support, it becomes possible to offer meaningful proposals for removing obstacles to human progress and the proclamation of the Gospel.”¹²

But the Church’s concern also relates to communication in and by the Church herself. Such communication is more than just an exercise in technique, for it “finds its starting point in the communion of love among the divine Persons and their communication with us”, and in the realization that Trinitarian communication “reaches out to humankind: The Son is the Word, eternally ‘spoken’ by the Father; and in and through Jesus Christ, Son and Word made flesh, God communicates himself and his salvation to women and men.”¹³

¹¹ *Aetatis Novae*, 8.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ethics in Communications*, n. 3.

God continues to communicate with humanity through the Church, the bearer and custodian of his revelation, to whose living teaching office alone he has entrusted the task of authentically interpreting his word.¹⁴ Moreover, the Church herself is a *communio*, a communion of persons and eucharistic communities arising from and mirroring the communion of the Trinity,¹⁵ communication therefore is of the essence of the Church. This, more than any other reason, is why “the Church’s practice of communication should be exemplary, reflecting the highest standards of truthfulness, accountability, sensitivity to human rights, and other relevant principles and norms.”¹⁶

4. Three decades ago *Communio et Progressio* pointed out that “modern media offer new ways of confronting people with the message of the Gospel.”¹⁷ Pope Paul VI said the Church “would feel guilty before the Lord” if it failed to use the media for evangelization.¹⁸ Pope John Paul II has called the media “the first *Areopagus* of the modern age”, and declared that “it is not enough to use the media simply to spread the Christian message and the Church’s authentic teaching. It is also necessary to integrate that message into the ‘new culture’ created by modern communications.”¹⁹ Doing that is all the

more important today, since not only do the media now strongly influence what people think about life but also to a great extent “human experience itself is an experience of media.”²⁰

All this applies to the Internet. And even though the world of social communications “may at times seem at odds with the Christian message, it also offers unique opportunities for proclaiming the saving truth of Christ to the whole human family. Consider...the positive capacities of the Internet to carry religious information and teaching beyond all barriers and frontiers. Such a wide audience would have been beyond the wildest imaginings of those who preached the Gospel before us...Catholics should not be afraid to throw open the doors of social communications to Christ, so that his Good News may be heard from the housetops of the world.”²¹

²⁰ Aetatis Novae, n. 2.

²¹ John Paul II, Message for the 35th World Communications Day, n. 3, May 27, 2001.

¹⁴ Cf. Vatican Council II, Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation *Dei Verbum*, n. 10.

¹⁵ Aetatis Novae, n. 10.

¹⁶ Ethics in Communications, n. 26.

¹⁷ *Communio et Progressio*, 128.

¹⁸ Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, n. 45.

¹⁹ Encyclical *Redemptoris Missio*, n. 37.

II. OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

5. “Communication in and by the Church is essentially communication of the Good News of Jesus Christ. It is the proclamation of the Gospel as a prophetic, liberating word to the men and women of our times; it is testimony, in the face of radical secularization, to divine truth and to the transcendent destiny of the human person; it is witness given in solidarity with all believers against conflict and division, to justice and communion among peoples, nations, and cultures.”²²

Since announcing the Good News to people formed by a media culture requires taking carefully into account the special characteristics of the media themselves, the Church now needs to understand the Internet. This is necessary in order to communicate effectively with people – especially young people – who are steeped in the experience of this new technology, and also in order to use it well.

The media offer important benefits and advantages from a religious perspective: “They carry news and information about religious events, ideas, and personalities; they serve as vehicles for evangelization and catechesis. Day in and day out, they provide inspiration, encouragement, and opportunities for worship to persons confined to their homes or to institutions.”²³ But over and above these,

there also are benefits more or less peculiar to the Internet. It offers people direct and immediate access to important religious and spiritual resources – great libraries and museums and places of worship, the teaching documents of the Magisterium, the writings of the Fathers and Doctors of the Church and the religious wisdom of the ages. It has a remarkable capacity to overcome distance and isolation, bringing people into contact with like-minded persons of good will who join in virtual communities of faith to encourage and support one another. The Church can perform an important service to Catholics and non-Catholics alike by the selection and transmission of useful data in this medium.

The Internet is relevant to many activities and programs of the Church – evangelization, including both re-evangelization and new evangelization and the traditional missionary work *ad gentes*, catechesis and other kinds of education, news and information, apologetics, governance and administration, and some forms of pastoral counseling and spiritual direction. Although the virtual reality of cyberspace cannot substitute for real interpersonal community, the incarnational reality of the sacraments and the liturgy, or the immediate and direct proclamation of the gospel, it can complement them, attract people to a fuller experience of the life of faith, and

²² *Aetatis Novae*, n. 9.

²³ *Ethics in Communications*, n. 11.

enrich the religious lives of users. It also provides the Church with a means for communicating with particular groups— young people and young adults, the elderly and home-bound, persons living in remote areas, the members of other religious bodies – who otherwise may be difficult to reach.

A growing number of parishes, dioceses, religious congregations, and church-related institutions, programs, and organizations of all kinds now make effective use of the Internet for these and other purposes. Creative projects under Church sponsorship exist in some places on the national and regional levels. The Holy See has been active in this area for several years and is continuing to expand and develop its Internet presence. Church-related groups that have not yet taken steps to enter cyberspace are encouraged to look into the possibility of doing so at an early date. We strongly recommend the exchange of ideas and information about the Internet among those with experience in the field and those who are newcomers.

6. The Church also needs to understand and use the Internet as a tool of internal communications. This requires keeping clearly in view its special character as a direct, immediate, interactive, and participatory medium.

Already, the two-way interactivity of the Internet is blurring the old distinction between those who communicate and those who receive what is

communicated,²⁴ and creating a situation in which, potentially at least, everyone can do both. This is not the one-way, top-down communication of the past. As more and more people become familiar with this characteristic of the Internet in other areas of their lives, they can be expected also to look for it in regard to religion and the Church.

The technology is new, but the idea is not. Vatican Council II said members of the Church should disclose to their pastors “their needs and desires with that liberty and confidence which befits children of God and brothers of Christ”; in fact, according to knowledge, competence, or position, the faithful are not only able but sometimes obliged “to manifest their opinion on those things which pertain to the good of the Church.”²⁵ *Communio et Progressio* remarked that as a “living body” the Church “needs public opinion in order to sustain a giving and taking among her members.”²⁶ Although truths of faith “do not leave room for arbitrary interpretations”, the pastoral instruction noted “an enormous area where members of the Church can express their views.”²⁷

Similar ideas are expressed in the Code of Canon Law²⁸ as well as in more recent documents of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications.²⁹ *Aetatis Novae*

²⁴ Cf. *Communio et Progressio*, n. 15.

²⁵ Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, n. 37.

²⁶ *Communio et Progressio*, n. 116.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, n. 117.

²⁸ Cf. Canon 212.2, 212.3.

²⁹ Cf. *Aetatis Novae*, n. 10; *Ethics in Communications*, n. 26.

calls two-way communication and public opinion “one of the ways of realizing in a concrete manner the Church’s character as *communio*.”³⁰ *Ethics in Communications* says: “A two-way flow of information and views between pastors and faithful, freedom of expression sensitive to the well being of the community and to the role of the Magisterium in fostering it, and responsible public opinion all are important expressions of ‘the fundamental right of dialogue and information within the Church.’”³¹ The Internet provides an effective technological means of realizing this vision.

Here, then, is an instrument that can be put creatively to use for various aspects of administration and governance. Along with opening up channels for the expression of public opinion, we have in mind such things as consulting experts, preparing meetings, and practicing collaboration in and among particular churches and religious institutes on local, national, and international levels.

7. Education and training are another area of opportunity and need. “Today everybody needs some form of continuing media education, whether by personal study or participation in an organized program or both. More than just teaching about techniques, media education helps people form standards of good taste and truthful moral judgment, an aspect of conscience formation.

³⁰ *Aetatis Novae*, n. 10.

³¹ *Ethics in Communications*, n. 26.

Through her schools and formation programs the Church should provide media education of this kind.”³²

Education and training regarding the Internet ought to be part of comprehensive programs of media education available to members of the Church. As much as possible, pastoral planning for social communications should make provision for this training in the formation of seminarians, priests, religious, and lay pastoral personnel as well as teachers, parents, and students.³³

Young people in particular need to be taught “not only to be good Christians when they are recipients but also to be active in using all the aids to communication that lie within the media...So, young people will be true citizens of that age of social communications which has already begun”³⁴ – an age in which media are seen to be “part of a still unfolding culture whose full implications are as yet imperfectly understood.”³⁵ Teaching about the Internet and the new technology thus involves much more than teaching techniques; young people need to learn how to function well in the world of cyberspace, make discerning judgments according to sound moral criteria about what they find there, and use the new technology for their integral development and the benefit of others.

³² *Ethics in Communications*, n. 25.

³³ *Aetatis Novae*, n. 28.

³⁴ *Communio et Progressio*, n. 107.

³⁵ John Paul II, *Message for the 24th World Communications Day*, 1990.

8. The Internet also presents some special problems for the Church, over and above those of a general nature discussed in *Ethics in Internet*, the document accompanying this one.³⁶ While emphasizing what is positive about the Internet, it is important to be clear about what is not.

At a very deep level, “the world of the media can sometimes seem indifferent and even hostile to Christian faith and morality. This is partly because media culture is so deeply imbued with a typically postmodern sense that the only absolute truth is that there are no absolute truths or that, if there were, they would be inaccessible to human reason and therefore irrelevant.”³⁷

Among the specific problems presented by the Internet is the presence of hate sites devoted to defaming and attacking religious and ethnic groups. Some of these target the Catholic Church. Like pornography and violence in the media, Internet hate sites are “reflections of the dark side of a human nature marred by sin.”³⁸ And while respect for free expression may require tolerating even voices of hatred up to a point, industry self-regulation-and, where required, intervention by public authority-should establish and enforce reasonable limits to what can be said.

³⁶ Cf. *Ethics in Internet*.

³⁷ John Paul II, Message for the 35th World Communications Day, n. 3.

³⁸ *Pornography and Violence in the Communications Media*, n. 7.

The proliferation of web sites calling themselves Catholic creates a problem of a different sort. As we have said, church-related groups should be creatively present on the Internet; and well-motivated, well-informed individuals and unofficial groups acting on their own initiative are entitled to be there as well. But it is confusing, to say the least, not to distinguish eccentric doctrinal interpretations, idiosyncratic devotional practices, and ideological advocacy bearing a ‘Catholic’ label from the authentic positions of the Church. We suggest an approach to this issue below.

9. Certain other matters still require much reflection. Regarding these, we urge continued research and study, including “the development of an anthropology and a theology of communication”³⁹ – now, with specific reference to the Internet. Along with study and research, of course, positive pastoral planning for the use of the Internet can and should go forward.⁴⁰

One area for research concerns the suggestion that the wide range of choices regarding consumer products and services available on the Internet may have a spillover effect in regard to religion and encourage a ‘consumer’ approach to matters of faith. Data suggest that some visitors to religious web sites may be on a sort of shopping spree, picking and choosing elements of customized religious packages to suit

³⁹ *Aetatis Novae*, 8.

⁴⁰ Cf. John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, n. 39.

their personal tastes. The “tendency on the part of some Catholics to be selective in their adherence” to the Church’s teaching is a recognized problem in other contexts;⁴¹ more information is needed about whether and to what extent the problem is exacerbated by the Internet.

Similarly, as noted above, the virtual reality of cyberspace has some worrisome implications for religion as well as for other areas of life. Virtual reality is no substitute for the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist, the sacramental reality of the other sacraments, and shared worship in a flesh-and-blood human community. There are no sacraments on the Internet; and even the religious experiences possible there by the grace of God are insufficient apart from real-world interaction with other persons of faith. Here is another aspect of the Internet that calls for study and reflection. At the same time, pastoral planning should consider how to lead people from cyberspace to true community and how, through teaching and catechesis, the Internet might subsequently be used to sustain and enrich them in their Christian commitment.

⁴¹ Cf. John Paul II, Address to the Bishops of the United States, n. 5, Los Angeles, September 16, 1987.

III. RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

10. Religious people, as concerned members of the larger Internet audience who also have legitimate particular interests of their own, wish to be part of the process that guides the future development of this new medium. It goes without saying that this will sometimes require them to adjust their own thinking and practice.

It is important, too, that people at all levels of the Church use the Internet creatively to meet their responsibilities and help fulfill the Church's mission. Hanging back timidly from fear of technology or for some other reason is not acceptable, in view of the very many positive possibilities of the Internet. "Methods of facilitating communication and dialogue among her own members can strengthen the bonds of unity between them. Immediate access to information makes it possible for [the Church] to deepen her dialogue with the contemporary world...The Church can more readily inform the world of her beliefs and explain the reasons for her stance on any given issue or event. She can hear more clearly the voice of public opinion, and enter into a continuous discussion with the world around her, thus involving herself more immediately in the common search for solutions to humanity's many pressing problems."⁴²

⁴² John Paul II, Message for the 24th World Communications Day, 1990.

11. In concluding these reflections, therefore, we offer words of encouragement to several groups in particular – Church leaders, pastoral personnel, educators, parents, and especially young people.

To Church leaders: People in leadership positions in all sectors of the Church need to understand the media, apply this understanding in formulating pastoral plans for social communications⁴³ together with concrete policies and programs in this area, and make appropriate use of media. Where necessary, they should receive media education themselves; in fact, "the Church would be well served if more of those who hold offices and perform functions in her name received communication training."⁴⁴

This applies to the Internet as well as to the older media. Church leaders are obliged to use "the full potential of the 'computer age' to serve the human and transcendent vocation of every person, and thus to give glory to the Father from whom all good things come."⁴⁵ They ought to employ this remarkable technology in many different aspects of the Church's mission, while also exploring opportunities for ecumenical and interreligious cooperation in its use.

⁴³ Cf. *Aetatis Novae*, nn. 23-33.

⁴⁴ *Ethics in Communications*, n. 26.

⁴⁵ Message for the 24th World Communications Day.

A special aspect of the Internet, as we have seen, concerns the sometimes confusing proliferation of unofficial web sites labeled ‘Catholic’. A system of voluntary certification at the local and national levels under the supervision of representatives of the Magisterium might be helpful in regard to material of a specifically doctrinal or catechetical nature. The idea is not to impose censorship but to offer Internet users a reliable guide to what expresses the authentic position of the Church.

To pastoral personnel. Priests, deacons, religious, and lay pastoral workers should have media education to increase their understanding of the impact of social communications on individuals and society and help them acquire a manner of communicating that speaks to the sensibilities and interests of people in a media culture. Today this clearly includes training regarding the Internet, including how to use it in their work. They can also profit from websites offering theological updating and pastoral suggestions.

As for Church personnel directly involved in media, it hardly needs saying that they must have professional training. But they also need doctrinal and spiritual formation, since “in order to witness to Christ it is necessary to encounter him oneself and foster a personal relationship with him through prayer, the Eucharist and sacramental reconciliation, reading and reflection on God’s word, the study

of Christian doctrine, and service to others.”⁴⁶

To educators and catechists. The Pastoral Instruction *Communio et Progressio* spoke of the “urgent duty” of Catholic schools to train communicators and recipients of social communications in relevant Christian principles.⁴⁷ The same message has been repeated many times. In the age of the Internet, with its enormous outreach and impact, the need is more urgent than ever.

Catholic universities, colleges, schools, and educational programs at all levels should provide courses for various groups – “seminarians, priests, religious brothers and sisters, and lay leaders...teachers, parents, and students”⁴⁸ – as well as more advanced training in communications technology, management, ethics, and policy issues for individuals preparing for professional media work or decision-making roles, including those who work in social communications for the Church. Furthermore, we commend the issues and questions mentioned above to the attention of scholars and researchers in relevant disciplines in Catholic institutions of higher learning.

To parents. For the sake of their children, as well as for their own sakes, parents must “learn and practice the skills of discerning viewers and listeners and readers, acting as models of prudent

⁴⁶ Message for the 34th World Communications Day, 2000.

⁴⁷ *Communio et Progressio*, n. 107.

⁴⁸ *Aetatis Novae*, n. 28.

use of media in the home.”⁴⁹ As far as the Internet is concerned, children and young people often are more familiar with it than their parents are, but parents still are seriously obliged to guide and supervise their children in its use.⁵⁰ If this means learning more about the Internet than they have up to now, that will be all to good.

Parental supervision should include making sure that filtering technology is used in computers available to children when that is financially and technically feasible, in order to protect them as much as possible from pornography, sexual predators, and other threats. Unsupervised exposure to the Internet should not be allowed. Parents and children should dialogue together about what is seen and experienced in cyberspace; sharing with other families who have the same values and concerns will also be helpful. The fundamental parental duty here is to help children become discriminating, responsible Internet users and not addicts of the Internet, neglecting contact with their peers and with nature itself.

To children and young people. The Internet is a door opening on a glamorous and exciting world with a powerful formative influence; but not everything on the other side of the door is safe and wholesome and true. “Children and young people should be open to formation regarding media, resisting the

⁴⁹ Ethics in Communications, n. 25.

⁵⁰ Cf. John Paul II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio*, n. 76.

easy path of uncritical passivity, peer pressure, and commercial exploitation.”⁵¹ The young owe it to themselves – and to their parents and families and friends, their pastors and teachers, and ultimately to God – to use the Internet well.

The Internet places in the grasp of young people at an unusually early age an immense capacity for doing good and doing harm, to themselves and others. It can enrich their lives beyond the dreams of earlier generations and empower them to enrich others’ lives in turn. It also can plunge them into consumerism, pornographic and violent fantasy, and pathological isolation.

Young people, as has often been said, are the future of society and the Church. Good use of the Internet can help prepare them for their responsibilities in both. But this will not happen automatically. The Internet is not merely a medium of entertainment and consumer gratification. It is a tool for accomplishing useful work, and the young must learn to see it and use it as such. In cyberspace, at least as much as anywhere else, they may be called on to go against the tide, practice counter-culturalism, even suffer persecution for the sake of what is true and good.

12. To all persons of good will. Finally, then, we would suggest some virtues that need to be cultivated by everyone who wants to make good use of the Internet; their exercise should be based upon and

⁵¹ Ethics in Communications, n. 25.

guided by a realistic appraisal of its contents.

Prudence is necessary in order clearly to see the implications – the potential for good and evil – in this new medium and to respond creatively to its challenges and opportunities.

Justice is needed, especially justice in working to close the digital divide – the gap between the information-rich and the information-poor in today’s world.⁵² This requires a commitment to the international common good, no less than the “globalization of solidarity.”⁵³

Fortitude, courage, is necessary. This means standing up for truth in the face of religious and moral relativism, for altruism and generosity in the face of individualistic consumerism, for decency in the face of sensuality and sin.

And temperance is needed – a self-disciplined approach to this remarkable technological instrument, the Internet, so as to use it wisely and only for good.

Reflecting on the Internet, as upon all the other media of social communications, we recall that Christ is “the perfect communicator”⁵⁴ – the norm and model of the Church’s approach to communication, as well as the content that the Church is obliged to communicate. “May Catholics involved in the world of social communications

⁵² Cf. *Ethics in Internet*, nn. 10, 17.

⁵³ John Paul II, *Address to the UN Secretary General and to the Administrative Committee on Coordination of the United Nations*, n. 2, April 7, 2000.

⁵⁴ *Communio et Progressio*, n. 11.

preach the truth of Jesus ever more boldly from the housetops, so that all men and women may hear about “the love which is the heart of God’s self-communication in Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, and today, and for ever.”⁵⁵

Vatican City, February 22, 2002, Feast of the Chair of St. Peter the Apostle.

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⁵⁵ *Message for the 35th World Communications Day*, n. 4.