Once encountered, the facts are hard to escape. The parish faces empty (graying) pews and busy screens. According to a recent Nielsen Survey nearly one half billion people surf the web from their home (this does not include those with access through their place of employment). Another study, released by the Pew Institute in December 2001, states that “On an average day, fifty-nine million Americans are connected to the Internet and are online,” and “twenty-eight million Americans have used the Internet to get religious and spiritual information and connect with others on their faith journeys.” By way of comparison, the study continues, “More people have gotten religious or spiritual information online than have gambled online, used Web auction sites, traded stocks online, placed phone calls on the Internet, done online banking, or used Internet-based dating services.”

The Internet is not just a passing fad, tool of white-collar workers, or province of the young. Indeed, the fastest growing segment of Internet users is senior citizens. With so many people using the Internet, hitherto unthinkable possibilities for spreading the Gospel open up. Such a wide audience would have been beyond the wildest imaginings of those who preached the Gospel before us. Just think of how many journeys Paul made and how few people in comparison he was able to reach. By any account, the growth of “religion surfers” seems to be in marked contrast with church attendance. No wonder we have seen three recent documents from Rome focus on the Internet as a tool of ministry.

The View from Rome
Pope John Paul II has issued the challenge: “I dare to summon the whole Church bravely to cross this new threshold, to put out into the deep of the Net” (Message for the 35th World Communications Day). Dramatic as this challenge may be to some, it is not new. Over a quarter century ago, Pope Paul VI wrote that the Church “would feel guilty before the Lord” if it failed to use the media for evangelization.

The seriousness of the papal challenge was underscored a few weeks later with the release of two documents concerning the Internet. “The Church and the Internet” states that “the Internet, . . . is helping bring about revolutionary changes in commerce, education, politics, journalism, the
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relationship of nation to nation and culture to culture—changes not just in how people communicate but in how they understand their lives (emphasis added). No wonder, then, that a companion document called “Ethics in Internet” emphasizes:

that the Catholic Church, along with other religious bodies, should have a visible, active presence on the Internet and be a partner in the public dialogue about its development. The Church does not presume to dictate these decisions and choices, but it does seek to be of help by indicating ethical and moral criteria which are relevant to the process—criteria which are to be found in both human and Christian values.

Certainly, these two documents offer much food for thought, particularly in their implications for parish ministry.

Response of the church community

How many in the Catholic community have thought seriously about how this technology can and should be used in the service of the Gospel, as the Church has been asking for decades? What is our response to the phenomenon of empty pews and busy screens? Current responses range from “Burying one’s head in the sand,” “Cursing the darkness,” to “Lighting a candle in the darkness.”

“Bury your head in the sand”

Some seem to think that maybe if we ignore it this thing called the Internet will go “pop” like some of the many dot-coms. In that case why waste energy on it now? Besides, it will never replace face-to-face contact.

The interesting thing about this response to the Internet is that people have been saying it is all a fad for a good number of years. But what are the facts? There is a possibility that geometrically rising rates of new subscribers may not continue at the dizzying rate of recent years. But there is no doubt “the times they are a-changin’.” The net is here to stay. We will never go back to pre-Internet days.

“Curse the darkness”

Some seem to think the Internet is the cause of all the evils of the world. One bishop was even reported to have recommended that people abstain from the Internet for Lent.

It is far too easy to condemn stereotypes. Certainly there are serious abuses of the technology involved in the Internet. That is precisely why the Pontifical Council for Communications issued its document about “Ethics in Internet” But as we shall see, that same council, and even the Pope himself, is pleading for the church community to become involved.

“Light a candle in the darkness”

This approach is certainly more challenging and requires more work but it is also more rewarding and effective in the long run. We are called to be a part of the solution by offering alternatives. Just as it is not enough to decry the evil of abortion but the causes must also be addressed and alternatives provided, so we must not let our concern over the dark side of the Internet paralyze us. We must also be concerned with providing moral alternatives.

A Sense of Urgency

Why this urgency expressed in the rapid-fire release of three Vatican documents? Simply stated, “the harvest is great.” Never before have we had such opportunities to contact people. 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! Now is the time to consider the implication of these documents for the parish and act on it. “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” (“Church and the Internet” n. 10).

A subtle, significant paradigm shift

Without much fanfare, these recent ecclesial documents present the Internet not as top-down, one-way transmission of information, but rather as a tool for weaving a web of inclusion; not as a fancy ad in an electronic Yellow Pages passively available to whoever seeks information, but as a means of building community.

This subtle, significant shift in paradigm is rooted in a theology of communion and, therefore, dialogue. We are made in the image and likeness of God—a triune God. We are a people made in the image and likeness of a community of persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The more we mirror this community, the more we will live out the meaning of the Church as sacrament, revealing God in space and time.

But community cannot exist without true and deep communication. As the document states, “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” (“The Church and the Internet,” n. 3).

This shift in perceiving the Internet is also rooted in the special character of the medium—direct, immediate, interactive, and participatory. With keen insight, the document states, “Already, the two-way interactivity of the Internet is blurring the old distinction between those who communicate and those who receive what is communicated 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 Church and the Internet,” n. 6).

Use of the Internet within the Church is a way to automate correspondence, publish bulletins, handle bookkeeping, and fund-raising appeals. It is not something to be delegated to some high schoolers or blindly outsourced to a web design company which may have little awareness of the use of technology as a tool of ministry and community.

Many large corporations in their initial rush to the net failed to understand the uniqueness of the medium. Just as the motion picture industry in the early twentieth century failed to shift its thinking during the initials stages of moving from silent movies to “talkies,” so certain companies treated the Internet as just another way of doing business as usual, a faster way to distribute their print messages. The result is what some people now disdainfully refer to as “shovel ware,” or material that was simply transferred from one medium to another without recognizing the uniqueness of the new medium.

The Internet provides a unique opportunity for today’s Church, as we incorporate its use in parish life. But not without a word of caution: the Internet is not the electronic panacea to all the concerns of the church community. As the Pope wrote in his “Message for World Communications
Day," . . . it is also true that electronically mediated relationships can never take the place of the direct human contact required for genuine evangelization. For evangelization always depends upon the personal witness of the one sent to evangelize" (cf. Rom 10:14-15).

At the same time, using the Internet for evangelization creates new challenges. How do we move beyond the initial contact to inclusion in community? Pope John Paul II asks: "How does the Church lead from the kind of contact made possible by the Internet to the deeper communication demanded by Christian proclamation? How do we build upon the first contact and exchange of information which the Internet makes possible?" ("Message for 35th World Communications Day," n. 5). The documents from Rome make some positive recommendations. These simple and practical recommendations can be found on the Vatican website at: http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/pccs/documents/rc_pc_pccs_doc_20020228_ethics-internet_en.html.

Where the rubber hits the road

The opportunities and the challenges are clear. But it will be in the parish and its ministries that the rubber hits the road. Internet technology has enormous implications for parish communities (and not just the pastor or parish webmaster). At present, we must question whether opportunities are being missed or mastered.

A survey of parish websites reveals most are still working, albeit unconsciously, with the image of the Worldwide Web as a library where the faithful find information and where all must keep quiet for fear of the "shush!" of Madame Librarian. Relatively few parishes move beyond the concept of their web site as an ad in the Yellow Pages, where we turn when we need to find something, and then, the rest of the time, let it sit on a shelf.

The graphics used on the "welcome" pages of ninety percent of parish websites feature the physical plant and the pastor, rather than images evoking a Trinitarian community of persons. A picture is worth a thousand words, but what if the picture is the wrong picture? The welcome-page graphics are unconscious statements about a theology of the parish. Few parishes have begun to seize the potential of the Internet for weaving a web of inclusion. The web is at its best as a tool for building community. But this approach requires much more than just making changes to the website even on a weekly basis.

The most basic question for anyone contemplating a parish website is not "how do I learn the technology?" but rather "what am I trying to accomplish with this site?" Hopefully parish websites are moving towards weaving a web of inclusion rather than merely opening up a library or taking out an ad in the Yellow Pages of the Internet.

Parish "best practices"

One of the best and most comprehensive examples of using a parish website to deepen communication and community is found at Fr. Pat Umberger's Holy Family Parish site (http://holyfam.com). His site has drawn more than one-hundred thousand page views in little over a year, repeating his success at a previous parish.

His morning e-mail prayer reflection goes to more than eight thousand people worldwide. Father Umberger notes, "It would be the dream of any pastor to touch the lives of people more than 40,000 times each week. Many of our members pass on our posts to family members and friends as well. This past week I received an e-mail from somebody who said: 'You don’t know
what you’ve done, but my goal was to get
closer to the church. I’ve been reading your
prayers, and I just want you to know that I
went to Mass last week for the first time in
30 years.” In addition his “C’mon back”
pages articulate the feelings of many in-
active Catholics who are beginning once
again to seek for “something more” in their
lives.

Parish events are chronicled when the
next day the photos are available on the
website. People can relive what they ex-
perienced just as they would in sharing
their own family photo albums. “I try to
design the environment just as I would a
liturgical environment: friendly, welcom-
ing, and conducive to prayer and reflec-
tion,” Father Pat is quoted to have said. He
changes the environment with the liturgi-
cal seasons and for special events.

He believes it is necessary for the Church
to be where the people are, “There are lots
of people in cyber-space, and there’s lots of
information for them there—some of it
good, some of it not so good. There are lots
of people with questions, too, and many
who are no longer practicing their faith.
Our site provides a safe place for them to
go.”

When they visit his site they are encour-
gaged to follow-up with a visit to a priest or
some other pastoral minister. Discussion
groups (some open only to members) cover
just about everything from annulments
and catechesis to cancer and grief support
groups. When one views the breadth and
depth of this site, it can stretch the imagi-
nation and flesh out the possibilities of the
papal challenge.

Functioning well in cyberspace
Education and training regarding the
Internet should be part of comprehensive
media education programs available to
members of the parish. This is especially
crucial as children begin to spend more
time on the Internet than they do watching
television.

“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 crite-
ria about what they find there, and use the
new technology for their integral develop-
ment and the benefit of others” (“Church
and the Internet,” n. 7).

Perhaps a little column in the parish bul-
letin can be devoted to these issues. Par-
ents would be delighted to know about
some of the splendid inspirational material
which is now available online. The Church
needs to bring the Christian perspective to
the Internet, beginning at the parish level.
Pope John Paul II says, “The Internet is
being put to many good uses now, with the
promise of many more, but much harm
also can be done by its improper use.
Which it will be, good or harm, is largely
a matter of choice—a choice to whose
making the Church brings two elements of
great importance: her commitment to the
dignity of the human person and her long
tradition of moral wisdom” (“Ethics in
Internet,” n. 2).

The challenge is clear. Are parish com-
unities willing to put out into the deep of
the Net?