Technology and Pastoral Life
A User’s Guide

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Two knowledgeable guides take us through that contemporary looking-glass called the Internet, introducing readers to the Pastoral Resources Portal, and offering guidance and a few cautions for making use of this valuable tool. Their words reveal the web’s potential not only for providing information, but also for serving as a supplement to our religious life.

What has Silicon Valley to do with Rome? When Christianity first began to spread beyond Palestine, it had to ask the question, “What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?” The answer was, “Quite a lot,” as the Jewish Jesus movement put on many of the cultural clothes of Athens, especially Greek philosophical concepts and language. Christianity needs to ask anew about the relationship between two seemingly disparate cultures, Silicon Valley and Rome. John Paul II has suggested that we are at another threshold moment in the history of evangelization: “. . . with the communications and information revolution in full swing, the Church stands unmistakably at another decisive gateway” (John Paul II, no. 1). The theme of the 36th World Communication Day in May, 2002, “Internet: A New Forum for Proclaiming the Gospel,” focused on this connection between Silicon Valley and Rome.

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In his address, John Paul II described the Internet as “a new ‘forum,’ understood in the ancient Roman sense of that public space where politics and business were transacted, where religious duties were fulfilled, where much of the social life of the city took place, and where the best and the worst of human nature was on display. It was a crowded and bustling urban space, which both reflected the surrounding culture and created a culture of its own” (John Paul II, no. 2). This new Internet culture provides a new place for evangelization and a new tool for pastoral ministers.

Since the Internet brings out both the best and the worst of human nature, the response of the pastoral minister to this new form of communication can at times be ambivalent. Some view the Internet as a beast that consumes more and more of our busy time. Others see it as a lifesaver, a place to quickly communicate and download a quotation or information for some project. For better or worse, the Internet has become a pervasive, at times even intrusive, means of communication that is not going to go away (Freund, 72). The pastoral minister needs to be aware of the lifeline that it offers and to develop strategies to tame the time-consuming beast. The Internet has become for some both a secular and religious community and so the church community needs to analyze and respond to the challenges that it poses.

The Internet provides unlimited access to seemingly endless information, images, and sounds. While this resource can be a treasure trove for busy pastoral ministers, it will only be useful if they are able to find information that is both timely and accurate. The problem of finding authoritative and up to date information is one faced not only by pastoral ministers but by all Internet users. Not surprisingly, then, attempts to address this problem came first of all from the secular sphere. Companies and individuals began to develop what are called “portals” to meet this need for fast access to relevant and accurate data. These portals provide filtered gateways or directed readings to information in specific fields. These portals may at first look like the average Internet home pages but they are really doorways directing the user to many different home pages with their relevant and useful information. Much as a teacher will try to point students to the best articles and books, the designers of these portals try to point the user to the best, that is, the most useful and accurate, websites. Portals have been designed for various fields and interests, everything from archaeology to home shopping.
John Freund, one of the co-authors of this article, has designed such a portal for the pastoral minister called “Parish Resources on the Internet.” This resource originated as a PowerPoint presentation and was initially developed as part of the “New Pastor’s Orientation” program sponsored by the Vincentian Center for Church and Society at St. John’s University. It was then further developed for a series of workshops sponsored by the Washington Theological Union. Most recently, it has been modified for use in the Vincentian Center’s “Acculturation For International Priests Serving in the United States.” While this portal to Parish Resources will be in a constant state of revision, a walk through it will show the pastoral minister the vast amount of information that is readily available and, even more importantly, will help the minister to begin to separate the “wheat from the chaff.”

This article will provide a user’s guide to this resource as well as a few other websites. It will also reflect on the meaning of this new and pervasive form of communication, how this “cyber faith” affects who we are as believers, and the new demands placed upon us as pastoral ministers. The Internet, for example, is providing a new forum for collaborative ministry. The Parish Resources Portal is itself a very good example of collaborative ministry since the information and input comes from many different sources. While the portal is the work of one person, John Freund, it provides access to information gathered on other sites by many other known and unknown “collaborators.” Such is the face of collaborative ministry in the Internet age!

Parish Resources on the Internet

Like most user guides to computers and the Internet, this one will work best if you take a “hands on” approach, reading along at your computer and going to the various sites that are mentioned. To begin the tour of this portal to Parish Resources on the Internet you first need to go to the website at www.famvin.org/jbf/Parish-links.html. On this homepage there is a series of headings and subheadings that deal with many topics of interest to the pastoral minister. Some of the headings are: Net Growth, Religion and the Web, Image-ing the Parish, Catholic Search Engines, Parish and Ministry Resources, Social Justice, Ethnic Ministries, Religious News, Periodicals, Parish Councils, and Religious Communities. Under these headings and/or subheadings are links to other Internet resources. If one views the Internet as one large library, then this Parish Resources Portal provides not only an index to the “best books” on pastoral ministry and daily parish life, but also takes you to the book, opened to the appropriate page. A walk through some of these headings and sites, like browsing the library stacks, will give a good idea of what is available for the pastoral minister.
Net Growth

The first main heading on the Parish Resources Homepage is “Net Growth.” Since it is safe to assume that all parishioners are influenced in some way by the Internet, pastoral ministers need to ask who is using the Internet and how this use is influencing their views of themselves, community, and religion. Under the Net Growth heading is a series of sites that help to study these questions. This section provides links to other websites that tell who is using the Internet, how often, and what they do with their time on the Internet.

A good site to go to in order to explore these issues is the PEW Internet Project (www.pewinternet.org). It provides some very useful information about the influence of the Internet on our modern culture, including our religious culture. The PEW site presents a series of online reports based on extensive polling that studies who is using the Internet, for what, and the influence that this is having on how people interact and think about relationships, the government, and their churches, mosques, and synagogues. Two of these reports, which can be downloaded from their site, are very helpful to the minister: (1) “Wired churches, Wired temples: Taking congregations and missions into cyberspace” (Larsen 2000), and (2) “CyberFaith: How Americans Pursue Religion Online” (Larsen 2001).

Religion appears to be a very popular topic on the Internet. PEW research indicates that “more people have got religious or spiritual information online than have gambled online, used Web auction sites, traded stocks online, placed phone calls, . . . done online banking, or used Internet-based dating services” (Larsen 2001, 2, 6). While this result can be viewed as a hopeful sign, it leads to the further question: Is Internet usage or “cyber faith” leading to a privatization of religion? This certainly is a possibility if the Internet becomes the only source of religious expression. Here, again, the PEW study gives some encouraging signs. This study suggests that “Religious Surfers” use the Internet to supplement, not to replace, their already deep faith commitment: “They take their faith seriously in the offline world and use online tools to enrich their knowledge of their faith and to practice their devotions” (Larsen 2001, 3, 7, 13-14). These two PEW reports not only give a good portrait of the religious surfer but also suggest some new and creative ways the pastoral minister can make use of the Internet (Larsen 2000, 3-4, 11).

Religion and the Web

The Parish Resources Portal also provides doorways to information about other Christian and non-Christian religions under the heading “Religion and the
Web.” It guides the user to the Virtual Religion Index (http://religion.rutgers.edu/vri/index.html). This site not only provides information but points to other sites on Buddhist, Hindu, Islamic, and Jewish traditions as well as sites that deal with philosophy and the psychology of religion. This Virtual Religion Index helps the pastoral minister to respond to an important need. Certainly it is imperative today for the Christian minister to become better informed about Islam to avoid caricatures and to oppose prejudice. The PEW study suggests that, after the September 11 terror attack, there was an increase in people searching the Internet for information about Islam (Larsen 2001, 2). The minister could begin from this Virtual Religion Index to find the sites on Islamic Traditions. Some of these sites, such as “Understanding Islam” (www.understanding-islam.org), offer areas for the critical discussion and the academic study of Islam.

The Parish Resources Portal also provides links to the Church’s attitude to the Internet. There are helpful documents here from the Pontifical Council for Communication. While these documents tend to be positive, they also suggest the need for vigilance and even caution. Since the Internet belongs to no one and everyone, it is difficult, if not impossible, to control what gets put on it. So parents have to control and oversee their children’s use of the computer to filter out pornography or sites that promote racial hatred. This lack of control also means that anyone can post almost anything they want on the Internet and claim that it is authoritative. Just as one should not believe everything they read, even more so they should not trust everything posted on the Internet. While a site can claim to speak the truth, be authoritative, or even to speak for the church, there is no vetting process to assure that this is so. Richard R. Gaillardetz has referred to this issue as the “new e-magisterium” (Gaillardetz 2000, 7). The pastoral minister needs, then, to be aware of what is on the Internet and to act as a mentor to guide people to good sites and steer them away from questionable sources.

**Image-ing the Parish**

The next heading on the Parish Resources Portal is entitled “Image-ing the Parish.” It provides links that look at the theology and image of the parish. This section also provides helpful resources for parishes seeking to establish or enhance their presence on the Internet. It suggests that before the homepage
designers get caught up in technical matters of HTML language they need to look at what image they want to project on this page. One of the links takes you to the homepage of one particular parish, Holy Family Parish in Arcadia, Wisconsin (http://holyfam.com). This parish website gives an example of a parish that models the “best practices” in the use of the Internet. Sites like this are helpful for parishes working to develop a profile on the Internet by suggesting what works well and what pitfalls to avoid.

The sites listed under “Image-ing the Parish” suggest that a parish’s Internet profile has a clear theological component: it says a lot about their image or model of church. Designing a parish website goes beyond aesthetics and good graphic designs. The key design question is: What image best tells the story of our parish? Does this image say what we want to say about the catholicity, the theological vision, the mission thrust of our parish? What image or model of church is presented if the home page has a picture of the church building alone or the pastor’s picture alone? While these two images seem to be the most common they are making a perhaps unintended theological statement about the parish. Since the website presents an image of the parish it is essential that the design be a collaborative effort. The Parish Resources Portal also lists a number of helpful sites under “Web assessment” to guide parishes in designing and assessing their web presence and the theological underpinnings of that presence.

**Parish and Ministry Resources**

The next heading, “Parish and Ministry Resources,” deal with various aspects of parish life (e.g., Liturgical Resources, Catechesis, Social Justice). Under this heading are links to a list of parishes in the United States, especially those that have an online presence. There are links also to a worldwide Catholic search engine that enables you to search for parishes not only in the United States but throughout the world.

If you would like to visit the library without leaving your room there is a link under the “General” subheading to a virtual theological library (www.shc.edu/theolibrary). This library of the Jesuit Spring Hill College contains online documents or links to documents covering such areas as Church, Revelation, Liturgy, Justice, Theology, Morality, Spirituality, Evangelization, and Religion. This site is a rich source for a great variety of articles on many different aspects of theology and the parish. For example, under the heading “Jesus Christ” is a link to John Meier’s article “Present State of the ‘Third Quest’” (Meier 1999) published in *Biblica*. This link takes you seamlessly to the “Biblical Studies on the WEB” homepage (www.bsw.org) where there are online versions of the journal *Biblica*. So, you can read these and other articles directly from your computer without ever having to go to the library to get the journal.

Under the heading “Catholic Search Engines” links point you to the 2001 *Catholic Almanac* and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. These search engines
present a new way of using these books since you are now able to search for words or phrases. These resources provide a great aid for class and homily preparation since they do away with the need to browse through these books. Unfortunately it also takes away those serendipitous movements of discovery that browsing provides.

Also under the Parish and Ministry Resources heading are subheadings that connect to educational and/or formational resources for catechists and religious educators. Included here are some interesting links to studies on the historical Jesus such as the PBS Frontline special “From Jesus to Christ” or Marcus Borg’s portrait of Jesus. As with most educational resources these work best when combined with other approaches. These online readings should be integrated with other directed readings as well as face-to-face contact. Both the PBS site, as well as Borg’s site, suggest the potential and even the power of online classes.

An important series of subheadings under the Parish Resources Portal deals with different ethnic ministries. A number of links are provided under the respective headings for African-American, Hispanic, and Asian Catholics. Links are provided to official statements from the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops as well as other important sites. Under the Hispanic Catholics heading are links to many sites in Spanish including El Portal Católica (www.aciprensa.com). Reflective of its “catholic” nature this site has Spanish, Portuguese, and English versions.

Finally, under the Parish and Ministry Resources heading are links to religious news and periodicals. Since anyone can publish whatever they want on the Internet it is important to look at reliable and authoritative sources. The latest news from the Vatican can be found at their official website (www.vatican.va/latest_en.htm) and from the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops at their website (www.usccb.org/comm). This section of the portal also provides links to popular publications such as America and the National Catholic Reporter.

To find accurate information the best sources are the official websites of the Vatican, the USCCB, the local diocese, even the local parish. The official Vatican Website (www.vatican.va) provides access to the latest statements by the Pope and the Pontifical Commissions. For example, on the Vatican website one can access the important document from the Pontifical Biblical Commission entitled,
“The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scripture in the Christian Bible.” This document, as most documents on this site, is found in English, French, German, Italian, and Spanish. Another important source for accurate information is the website of the USCCB (www.usccb.org). This site contains an online version of the official statements issued by the conference, streaming videos, online versions of the New American Bible, and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Finally, there are listings of the bishops and dioceses in the United States with links to the local diocesan websites.

**Religious Communities**

The next heading on Parish Resources Portal moves from parishes to “Religious Communities.” Links are provided here to most of the major religious communities (e.g., Dominicans, Franciscans, Vincentians, etc.). These links are to both the local and the international homepages of the religious groups. These homepages in turn provide a good resource to search for information and reflections on a whole host of issues such as social justice, debt reduction, and ecology. The international homepages provide a good source of information about what others are saying about the U.S. and its policies. Listening to these different viewpoints of Christians from around the world is another example of the potential for collaboration that the Internet opens up.

**Religious Surfers**

Hopefully as you have read through this article you have gone to some of the sites as they have been discussed. In closing it may be helpful to reflect on ourselves as religious surfers. The PEW study referred to in the beginning of this essay suggests that we use the Internet not as a substitute but as a supplement to our religious life. What are the strengths and the weaknesses of this approach?

Our walk through these different sites has enabled us to experience first hand the vast amount of good and useful information available on the Internet. The key to the fruitful use of this resource is not only to avoid the garbage but also to avoid having to waste a lot of time separating out the good from the bad. Hopefully a portal such as the Parish Resources for the Internet makes that task a lot easier by indicating where to look and spend your time. Still, having a lot of information does not automatically lead to knowledge, and the skills of the pastoral minister will come to the fore more than ever to use this information in insightful and integrative ways. While the Parish Resources Portal provides a useful research tool it is not an end in itself.
The walkthrough of these different Internet sites also highlights the need for a disciplined approach to our use of the Internet. One can at times get caught up in the “excitement of the hunt,” tracking down more and more links and lose the forest for the trees. As Internet users we need to keep ourselves focused on the task at hand and discipline ourselves to bring the searching and research to an end and move on. Just as one can get lost in the stacks of books in a library one can also get lost surfing the net.

Finally, while the Internet does provide the means for interactive communication through chat rooms and discussion groups it can also make people more isolated if they spend all of their time at their computer. This seems to be the new temptation facing Christian and religious life. Pastoral ministers need first of all to monitor this temptation in themselves as well as ensuring that there is always a face-to-face component in their various ministerial activities. To paraphrase Jesus: humans cannot live on the Internet alone. So, while Silicon Valley may have a lot to do with Rome, the focus and the foundation must always remain Jesus Christ (1 Cor 3:11).

References


John Paul II. “Message of the Holy Father for the 36th World Communications Day.” (Sunday, May 12, 2002). Available online at www.vatican.va.
