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Salesians and the Internet

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What is the Internet?

Searching for a definition of "Internet" is no easy matter even on the Internet. Some of the dictionaries available on the Internet do not even contain the term. The following definition was found by referring to "The Internet Society."¹

The Internet is a global network of networks, enabling computers of all kinds to directly and transparently communicate and share services throughout much of the world. Because the Internet is an enormously valuable enabling capability for so many people and organizations, it also constitutes a shared global resource of information, knowledge, and means of collaboration, and co-operation among countless diverse communities.²

The Church and the Internet

As early as 1989 Pope John Paul II alerted the Church to the pastoral possibilities that technology presented to those who had concern for young people.

Young people especially are rapidly adapting to the computer culture and its "language." It falls to them to search out ways in which the new systems of data conservation and exchange can be used to assist in promoting greater universal justice, greater respect for human rights, a healthy development for all individuals and peoples, and the freedoms essential for a fully human life. Whether we are young or old, let us rise to the challenge of new discoveries and technologies by bringing to them a moral vision rooted in our religious

¹ <http://www.isoc.org/>

Editor's Note: Addresses on the Internet and World Wide Web change frequently as individuals and organizations continually seek enhancement of capabilities and more economical venues. The addresses used in this article were current when it was prepared in July 1996.

² <gopher://info.isoc.org/00/isoc/faq/what-is-Internet.txt>

faith, in our respect for the human person, and our commitment to transform the world in accordance with God's plan. (World Communications Day, May 27, 1989)³

A simple search of the Internet using the key-word "Catholic" produces over 22,000 entries. These Catholic sites follow the familiar pattern of web-sites—a mixture of good, bad and the embarrassingly ugly. A closer examination of some Roman Catholic sites indicates that although the authors may be using the latest technology, in many cases their theology has not changed over the years. For many Catholics the Internet is a museum not a meeting place. Access to the Internet has not changed them nor their ideas.

Despite the eccentricities of some Catholic sites the Church has many impressive sites on the Internet, including the Vatican site⁴ which is at present undergoing reconstruction. On the Internet even the Church has to come to terms with change.

Religious Orders and the Internet

For many religious orders the Internet has proved a rich opportunity for publicity and for mission. Their presence on the Internet has significantly changed some orders; they have discovered new ways of carrying out their traditional apostolates. Diana Seago, a Benedictine sister who has her own page on the Internet, explains:

Being on the Internet has been a tremendous advantage for our retreat center. We have a woman coming for retreat next week from the Czech Republic. She saw the advertisement on the Internet. (She is one of many who would not have known about us except for the net.) Our vocation minister has had numerous inquiries from folks via the Internet. Lots of good will has been created between our sisters and many visitors to our site. And finally, maybe, just maybe, the presence of religious communities on the web will help humanize it a little and that won't hurt anyone! (Diana Seago, OSB—Benedictine College)⁵

Many examples of similar changes are given in an excellent article, "The Electronic Scriptorium" by Heather Millar in the American computer magazine "Wired," describing her experiences in a monastery in Chicago. The article is particularly interesting in the way a technical writer comes to terms with religious concepts and interprets them in the language of the Internet.

³ <http://listserv.american.edu/catholic/church/papal/jp.ii/computer-culture.html>

⁴ <http://www.vatican.va/main-menu.html>

⁵ <http://www.benedictine.edu/diana.html> (e-mail 7/30/96)

At first, it was the historical resonances that really intrigued me: monks with quill pens copying out Latin classics a millennium ago; monks at workstations creating computer records of those classics today. As I got deeper into the story, though, it was monastics themselves who really got under my skin. They build their whole lives around connections, with God and with each other. The on-line world is constantly buzzing about “connections,” but I’d never really absorbed what a profound idea “connection” is until I spent a few days in a monastery. At the same time, I was fascinated by these people who were so connected, so there, so in the moment and yet so very apart. They were aware of popular culture, technological advances, current events—and yet they seemed to spend very little time thinking about those things. They were very selective about the people and things they chose to connect to. Being with the monastics—especially the Monks of Jerusalem in Chicago—made me re-examine my life, my work, my relationships, the Web, and a dozen other things.⁶

Heather Millar was prepared to venture into the monastery and rethink her ideas when faced with a different world; a similar deep rethinking is required of religious when they discover the new world of the Internet. The opportunities for religious orders presented by the Internet are expressed succinctly by the Canadian Dominican Albert Judy.

It’s a new world, like the friars who returned to Spain from Columbus’ first ventures. We can only describe it as a new world filled with naked barbarians speaking strange languages and often untouched by the message of the Gospel. It is a virtual new world. We have been hosting our new web site since January and are just beginning to get beyond the “WHO WE ARE” stage and starting to explore how to exercise our ministries in Preaching, Theology and Justice.⁷

Salesians on the Internet

Salesians in many parts of the world have a significant presence on the Internet; the central office in Rome has a well established site. The eastern province of the United States of America has a dynamic site—“Salesiansmissions”⁸ which is a vast compendium of Salesian activities and history. Julian Fox in Australia continues to sustain a web-site that boasts the latest enhancements that Netscape v.3 can offer including moving pictures and music; so well-designed that the French Salesian web page, presently under construction, uses Bosconet until its own site is ready. Julian has recently produced an Internet version of the *Salesian Bulletin*, a very exciting prospect. In the light of so much progress in these prov-

⁶ http://www.hotwired.com/wired_online/4.08/scriptorium/index.html

⁷ <http://www.op.org/domcentral/> (e-mail 7/30/96)

⁸ <http://www.salesianmissions.org/>

inces one might be tempted to leave the Internet to those who discovered it first. A more responsible approach for provinces that are not yet connected would seem to be to emulate their fellow Salesians and make their *presence felt on the Internet*.

Reasons for Being There

However before Salesians rush to lay out their Internet stall it would be worth rehearsing the reasons for being there and examining the way they could exploit this new medium as an extension of their mission to young people. Why should the Salesians be on the Internet? Joe Boenzi, a Salesian who is responsible for an electronic newsletter from the Western province of the United States, has no doubt.

Marketing statistics show that 85% of “users” on the Internet are young adult males between the ages of 18 and 35. In other words, the age of the young we are serving is the same as those who are into the Internet. Even if we’re not proficient, we need to venture out there, learn the language, see what’s happening.⁹

A similar point was made by a M. Benno, a Carmelite from Austria.

For a Salesian it is probably particularly interesting, because most Internet users are young people at school or university. The Internet, e-mail, the chat rooms are great levelizers. If one conforms to the “rules of the game,” and the traditions of this growing culture, one can learn much from many people, and also contribute to others, especially the young. Two things that can be kept in mind, however, is that users like their freedom; dogmatism in this arena turns people off quicker than it does anywhere else.¹⁰

Benno has captured the spirit of the preferred Salesian way of working, the acceptance of the freedom of the young, the reluctance to be dogmatic and an openness to learn.

The nature of This Presence

The Internet would seem to offer a new and exciting presence for Salesians. There are various ways it can develop. The danger is that it could easily become a one-man mission conveniently “borrowing” the name Salesian but making no impact on the rest of the province. Steven J. Vaughan-Nichols in evaluating religious web-sites observes:

⁹ <http://www.hooked.net/users/jmrasor/> (e-mail 7/30/96)

¹⁰ [http://www.ocd.or.at/\(e-mail 7/30/96\)](http://www.ocd.or.at/(e-mail 7/30/96))

Most sites are the work of individuals who are moving onto the World Wide Web even if the groups to which they belong are still too dazzled by the Web's newness to realize that it, too, can be a path to enlightenment.¹¹

The provincial strategy for going world wide must be a strategy of involvement and education—a new presence for renewed Salesians. The word “presence” has always had a particular significance for Salesians indicating the way we work with young people. Much thought and preparation was always given to the way we should be present with youth. Thorough preparation is now needed for this new presence, lest it become the presence of a few, a weak presence exhausting those who venture there and a valuable opportunity missed.

Nicholas Negroponete, author of the best-seller “Being Digital” in a recent interview gave some cogent reasons for being digital:

Being digital means people being open, being able and willing to pursue a path through life which has the wonder of a child and the discipline of an adult. That we must become life-long learners, always ready to adapt to newly created worlds.¹²

Recommendations

The Use of e-mail

The first step might be to establish e-mail as a form of communication within the province. E-mail is more than mail; it is a totally different way of communication—so different from a phone call or a letter. For the Salesian it resembles the traditional word in the ear, the throwaway remark made spontaneously by a teacher but sustaining the educative relationships. The Anglicans in Canada carried out an informal consultation on how the Church could use electronic networking to assist its communications.

Of the comments received about communicating our message to those outside the church, the overriding message was: “We should be doing more to meet Christ’s call to minister to people where they are.” And a lot of people are in cyberspace. Respondents to this call for comments said their experience with on-line services led them to believe a lot of people are there to talk with people, perhaps they’re lonely, and many are young adults.¹³

¹¹ <http://www.cciweb.com/iway500/religion.html>

¹² <http://www.nua.ie/Internet/ANewVision/NegroponeteInt.html>

¹³ <http://anglican.org/online/canada/networking.html>

With e-mail the world becomes your playground. While it would be considered an invasion of privacy to phone total strangers and unthinkable to write to them, many people on web-sites invite e-mail and would have no hesitation in asking a question with e-mail. In education Salesians traditionally stressed the importance of making the first move in talking to children; yet so many Salesians seem to live in fear of the phone and the fax. Sadie Plant paints a picture of the man on the phone which sums up the fear many Salesians have of the telephone.

It is almost a cliché that women spent lots of time on the phone, and they use the telephone in ways which are very appropriate to the telephone. Whereas men use the telephone in a sort of grunt fashion and don't spend very much time on it, women tend to talk about being on the telephone and that's obviously what happens on the Internet as well: "Hi, where are you? Well, I'm at the computer. Oh, so am I." Whereas men have this sort of "Hmm, Hmmmmm, Hm" conversations and that's it. (An Interview with Sadie Plant)¹⁴

Bishop Michael Ingham says he has always wondered why the Church doesn't embrace such new communication tools with more enthusiasm.

I remember trying to convince the church committee not too long ago that we should get a fax machine—I couldn't convince them. Now, most of our parishes have fax machines. It was the same way with answering machines not too long ago. I think to some degree the church has been unduly suspicious of innovative technology. For some reason, people still think it's somehow unspiritual.¹⁵

One diocese discovered that there were plenty of people on the Internet who wanted to communicate via e-mail. Fr. John Nuttall:

For the diocese of Arundel and Brighton the Internet provided an important gateway, where the WebMaster (Agony Aunt) needed the patience of Job. Quite a lot of comments came from pure surfers who had drifted from the practice of their faith and wanted to be put in contact with a "sympathetic priest" who wouldn't bark at them. Secondly, it has thrown up (plus a few cranks) a lot of theological posers—Why are RC clergy celibate? What is infallibility? It looks like a Catholic Inquiry Center. "It is good to see the Church using modern media...good to see the Church producing elegant stuff."¹⁶

¹⁴ <http://www.t0.or.at/sadie/intervw.htm>

¹⁵ <http://anglican.org/online/canada/anglinet.html>

¹⁶ <http://www.roehampton.ac.uk/link/wire> (e-mail 22/7/96)

Most people need a starting point, some key of recognition. Given the international nature of the Salesians, the past-pupil link could be the starting point. There used to be a strong Salesian tradition of contact with past-pupils. While the Salesian schools still pride themselves on the number of past-pupils who drop in to see their teachers and reminisce, any attempt to regiment them into an organization proves notoriously unsuccessful. An Internet presence might well be a modern way of reviving an ancient practice. Judging from some of the web pages which contain the word Salesian there are past-pupils who are happy to include a reference to their old school in their personal details. The Salesians in the Philippines openly proclaim on their web-site their concern for past-pupils and invite them to sign in to their page.¹⁷

The Salesian Bulletin

The main instrument of publicity for Don Bosco's works in many countries is the *Salesian Bulletin*, a magazine which is published in various national editions. It would seem that an Internet site would demand a changed format and at the same time offer a valid reason to make the content reflect the work of the province. An Internet version would have to stand up as an Internet publication. Each page would have to contain sufficient eye catching material to make the surfer want to read on and to click onto the hot-spots that lead to other pages. The Australian Salesians have recently put their *Salesian Bulletin* onto the World Wide Web in such a way that it can be downloaded as a document with all the formatting of the paper version using a program called Acrobat. One of the disadvantages of this approach is that downloading takes time and although it is at present broken into three parts to reduce the time of each download, one would have to be already at least vaguely interested to spend the time downloading it. An Internet version of the *Salesian Bulletin* will have to compete with every other web site; a few religious web sites have succeeded.

Only a handful of sites—usually the ones with the highest scores—go beyond ordinary text to take advantage of the Web's graphics and links. Others have drunk too deeply of the Web's size and act more as roadblocks to faith with their multimegabyte audio files and attractive but huge graphics. Still, whether a Web site is small or ornate, each one is clearly the work of people who care about their faith.¹⁸

The renewal of the *Salesian Bulletin*, published on the Web as well as in print would make demands on the quality of the publication, both in terms of presentation as well as in content. A web page has to sell itself, the summary of a story has to be interesting enough to make the surfer want to click on a "hot-spot" (turn over a page). There would be no deception here: the work of

¹⁷ <http://www.donbosco.org/>

¹⁸ <http://www.cciweb.com/iway500/religion.html>

Salesians in Liberia, in inner city schools, in the poorest of parishes, work for those with AIDS; the stories are there if only we could learn to tell them to the world.

The Elderly

The age profile of many Salesians in English-speaking provinces is a cause of great concern. The majority are over 55. Many still want to be active, for their minds are active but age denies them a physically active apostolate. The Internet could be the new province for them, where their wisdom would be appreciated. As an article entitled "Age and Ageism," found on Motorola's website, observes:

The rapid development of technology carries with it the prospect of increasing alienation of the retired from those of working age. The retired are therefore likely to be denied the benefit of it, even though they are one of the groups which could derive most benefit from it—for example in compensating for reduced mobility.¹⁹

Julian Fox is convinced that the Salesians should be there and the older Salesians have a part to play:

Don Bosco was a communicator, a writer, a popularizer by whatever means he could achieve. The Internet today is a way of reaching millions easily, cheaply and effectively. In addition, however, I believe that the Internet has a majority of younger people on it, and indeed one could argue that it is the 15-25 year olds that dominate it; it's a natural place for Salesians to be. There is a place for elderly Salesians; they may well have the time, and the wisdom, to contribute. The technology is getting simpler at the user end. I know quite a few older Salesians who use it in this province—Bro. Peter Swain, Provincial Secretary at 75, is one example.²⁰

Volunteers

In recent years volunteers have proved a valuable growth area in the province. As many other charities are looking for volunteers it is becoming more difficult to recruit. Organizations are using the Internet as a recruitment tool. It is still too early to find data to prove its efficacy. VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America) uses the Internet, John Zelson speaks for them:

I am certain that being on the Internet has helped us find volunteers. Unfortunately, we don't have any statistics to absolutely say it. Additionally, for

¹⁹ <http://www.telecall.co.uk/proctors/motorola/ageism.html>

²⁰ <http://www.ozemail.com.au/~jbfox> (e-mail 07/29/96)

a segment of our volunteers the Internet has become an important part of how they communicate. At least in the U.S., I think most people think that the Internet is worth investing a little time learning. If your volunteer program recruits folks from universities, then explaining the program over Internet would be especially appropriate. It takes time to learn how to do things on the Internet. I'd recommend starting slow, educating your staff, and finding a very specific way of adding Internet to your overall recruitment strategy.²¹

If we cannot afford a physical presence in the universities a web presence could be a valuable alternative.

Salesian Intranet

Intranet is a private or closed network. It is becoming more and more common for businesses to use the Internet to share information, restricting access to those pages which contain internal corporate information. In this way information can be updated frequently without recourse to paper publishing. So often provincial information is published in good time for the following year and is already out of date when it reaches the printer. Much of the information we need to share could be published on web pages and made available to the province over an *intranet*.

The Cost

All new ventures involve a financial implication. Putting the province on the Internet would not be a huge cost; keeping it there alive and dynamic will mean staffing it with someone to update it at least weekly. Surfers are looking for inspiration not relics. The greater expense would be required to give the province a sense of ownership of the site and to persuade members to find their mission there. Part of the reason for the expense is that we are starting from a position of ignorance and lack of resources. The process must be seen as a retraining exercise, an empowering venture. The cost, if it succeeds, will be repaid in the sense that the new challenge could rejuvenate the province, both in terms of older members contributing more and new people encouraged to work with the province. If young people are benefiting the cost is justified.

The composition of Web pages, once a major exercise in hypertext, has now been made relatively easy by the introduction of new software packages such as Microsoft Frontpage and Adobe's Page Mill. The simplest way of estimating the cost of bringing computers into Salesian communities is to budget for £2000 (US\$3000) per machine, £500 (US\$750) for new phone lines and on-line fees, and two days training for each Salesian. The minimum rate of introduction

²¹ <http://libertynet.org/~zelson/vweb.html> (e-mail 09/04/96)

would be at least ten Salesians per year. Costs would diminish as Salesians gain confidence and become trainers. Given that the present software standard for the province is based on Microsoft, it would be best to stay with Microsoft for network software.

Conclusion

A new mission so often means taking people from their present work and moving them to a new location where they must painfully learn a different job. The proposals made here are, in a sense, self-financing and self-staffing; they do not involve moving people but moving information. With e-mail, members will be asked to communicate differently and communicate more. The changes in the *Salesian Bulletin* should publicize the province's successes and reinforce the good work. Young people have high ideals and may be glad to be associated with success if this inspires them. Internet involvement could open up the communities and change them. Craig Martin, describing the scope of his magazine "Areopagus," clarified the opportunities offered by the Internet.

As in ancient Athens, I want this to be a safe place for people to discuss new and personal ideas. In this virtual community you have a greater chance of reaching the people who have waited a long time to hear the very things that you are saying.²²

There is the temptation to play safe, to wait. Is this an investment in the ephemeral, a fool's errand? Listen to Seamus Heaney:

On you go now! Run, son, like the devil
And tell your mother to try
To find me a bubble for the spirit level
And a new knot for this tie.²³

²² <http://www.catalog.com/lionsden/areo/areo1.html>

²³ Seamus Heaney, *The Spirit Level* (London: Faber and Faber, 1996), 54.