THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND INTERNET USE: AN EVOLVING PERSPECTIVE
FROM POPE JOHN PAUL II TO POPE BENEDICT XVI

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By

Agnes Mae D. Solatan, B.A.

Georgetown University
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Agnes Mae D. Solatan, B.A.

Mentor: Frederick Ruf, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

In twenty-first century society there are so many ways to connect and engage with one another that it is seemingly impossible to become disconnected or unreachable. We can communicate via telephone and teleconferencing, text messaging, e-mail, video conferencing, social media sites, online chat rooms and online instant messaging. With so many ways to communicate, there is less need to meet face-to-face. New technologies allow us to be more efficient with our time and accomplish more tasks simultaneously and faster. In addition to maintaining relationships with people in person, we maintain relationships online as well. We are members of online communities as well as offline communities. Within our current social climate, it is interesting to consider the effects that communication technology, particularly Internet use, has had on a traditional religion like Roman Catholicism, a faith whose foundational belief is centered around gathering together in communion, to remember, reflect, celebrate and witness God’s love for His followers.

This thesis will discuss how the Roman Catholic Church through the leadership and direction of its head, the Pope, has accepted, incorporated and continues to encourage Internet use as an invaluable tool for communication, evangelization and teaching
without compromising its belief that “direct human relations should always remain fundamental for the transmission of the faith”. The Church embraced Internet use and views this technological advance as a gift from God. Over the years, the Church’s views on certain aspects of Internet use have evolved but it is clear that the Church has worked hard to maintain a strong presence in society that is relevant and far reaching amidst societal and cultural changes in communications and has appropriately adjusted its views and concerns accordingly. Through papal messages and official Church documents, the Pope is leading the Church toward a Christian presence online. As changes to society continue today, the Church, through Pope Benedict XVI, continues to be challenged to find ways to remain inspiring and encouraging while also relevant and relatable to its followers.

The Catholic Church, scholars and religious followers collectively acknowledge that the Internet provides great opportunities for the institution and its followers while at the same time realizing the challenges that come along with being present online. As more people turned to the Internet for religion during the first decade of the 21st century, the views of the Catholic Church evolved with society’s needs. For Roman Catholics, through the Pope’s messages, letters and documents, we were able to witness the evolution of the Church’s position regarding Internet use as it has caused changes to social communication through the years. With technology at most people’s fingertips, Internet use has allowed its users to be bound more closely to one another, their communities and their religion. However, with a closer bond between the Church and its
followers, the Catholic Church and its leaders need to work harder to maintain the core beliefs of Catholicism both in the physical world and online.

In a bold move that broke with tradition, Pope Benedict announced his resignation from the Papal position on February 11, 2013. The last time that a Pope resigned was six hundred years ago. In my opinion, this brave decision on the part of Pope Benedict shows his deep care and concern for the Catholic Church and its followers. While some may criticize his decision to resign, it in fact once again shows the Pope's complete and utmost awareness of himself and the needs of the Church. The event of Pope Benedict's resignation only gives hopes to the many Catholic followers that the Church is always evolving with modern times and will not be left behind. It is my belief that the Catholic Church under the leadership of a new Pope will fearlessly continue the work of both Pope John Paul and Pope Benedict and will strive to maintain relevance amidst an ever changing and evolving digital society.
DEDICATION

To my parents, Romeo and Evelina Solatan, thank you for your love and support.
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CHAPTER I
THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND THE INTERNET

INTERNET USE IN THE UNITED STATES

In the United States during the 1990’s, Internet use began to surge into all levels of society. Internet access became available to federal and state governments, public and private businesses, non-profit organizations, political entities and religious institutions. Communication companies opened up e-mail gateways and communicating via e-mail quickly became a novelty to corporations and organizations across the United States. In 2005, 68.1% of Americans were using the Internet; by June 2010, this percentage increased to 77.3%.1 Providing global connectivity and bringing together millions of people and thousands of organizations all over the world is the Internet’s most attractive feature. The Internet has helped achieve the “death of distance”2 and geographic proximity as a barrier has been overcome.

Today, for many in the United States, Internet use has become a routine of daily life. Internet access is available in private homes and through mobile devices in addition to governments, businesses and organizations. The Internet is used as a tool to complete tasks such as obtaining information (news, weather, traffic, sports), communicating (e-mail, instant message and internet calling), conducting business (buying and selling products and banking), socializing (social networks, blogs and entertainment sites) and


even for education—(earning college degrees online). Internet technology has undoubtedly impacted and enhanced American lives on every level and has helped us manage our lives more efficiently.

In twenty-first century society there are so many ways to connect and engage with one another that it is seemingly impossible to become disconnected or unreachable. We can communicate via telephone and teleconferencing, text messaging, e-mail, video conferencing, social media sites, online chat rooms and online instant messaging. With so many ways to communicate, there is less need to meet face-to-face. New technologies allow us to be more efficient with our time and accomplish more tasks simultaneously and faster. In addition to maintaining relationships with people in person, we maintain relationships online as well. We are members of online communities as well as offline communities. Within our current social climate, it is interesting to consider the effects that communication technology, particularly Internet use, has had on a traditional religion like Roman Catholicism, a faith whose foundational belief is centered around gathering together in communion, to remember, reflect, celebrate and witness God’s love for His followers.

**RELIGION ONLINE AND ONLINE RELIGION**

The studies on religion and the Internet have been conducted in “waves of research.”Stephen O’Leary began the first wave in the mid 1990’s when access to the Internet was just beginning to extend throughout the United States. Internet use and

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accessibility was still considered a new innovation and the scope of the research from the first wave was focused mainly on the potential and possibilities Internet use could offer religion. The potential opportunities that seemed available were surreal in the 1990’s. The second wave begun after the turn of the century, when Internet accessibility was reaching all levels of American society in the early 2000’s. Religious communication grew online and more religious activities began to take place online. Scholars who wrote during the “second wave” shared new insight gained from having observed the effect that Internet accessibility had thus far to religious institutions and individuals. In 2000, Christopher Helland, a professor at Dalhousie University in Canada, proposed that there is a difference between religion online and online religion and presented a clear distinction between the two. He defined religion online as “the provision of information about and/or services related to various religious groups and traditions…this includes web sites established by congregations, mosques, temples and synagogues as well as the larger religions institutions of which these are a part. Commercial sites selling religious books, products and supplies also fell under the rubric of religion online.”\[^{4}\] In contrast, online religion “invites Internet users to participate in religious practices; “These practices may range from online prayer and meditation to ritual observance of Catholic Mass and the Hindu puja.”\[^{5}\] It is important to understand the difference between religion online and online religion in order to distinguish between the various activities and levels of activity that are allowed online by different religious traditions. Traditional religions

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5. Ibid.
such as Roman Catholicism provide religious information online and do not conduct online rituals, sacraments or masses in order to preserve the essence and value of these experiences in person.

Religious institutions began to establish an online presence in the 1990's. Today, all of the Abrahamic faiths--Christianity, Judaism and Islam are present online as are other world religions such as Buddhism, Hinduism and Paganism. The Pew Internet and American Life Project, of the Pew Research Center (a nonpartisan, nonprofit “fact tank”) has researched how religious groups and individuals have used the Internet for religious purposes since 2000. The reports by Pew prove that the religious, along with everyone else, were eager to take advantage of what the Internet had to offer when once it began to become more accessible. Internet use provided congregations with a new way to communicate among the clergy and between clergy and their congregations. It has helped connect religious people; not only from state to state but also from continent to continent. The Internet became the new place to find information on one’s own religion as well as the religious beliefs of others. Internet use was immediately recognized by the Catholic Church and other denominations as a new tool for evangelization; and, according to the most recent report by Pew, the Internet helped the religious to remain active and engaged with their church communities as well as within their own neighborhood communities. The results from the Pew surveys conducted in 2000 and 2004 adequately prove that Internet use has enhanced the experience of religious followers, non-religious and those seeking information on religion by providing “religion online” through congregation websites.
This thesis will discuss how the Roman Catholic Church through the leadership and direction of its head, the Pope, has accepted, incorporated and continues to encourage Internet use as an invaluable tool for communication, evangelization and teaching without compromising its belief that "direct human relations should always remain fundamental for the transmission of the faith". The Church embraced Internet use and views this technological advance as a gift from God. Over the years, the Church’s views on certain aspects of Internet use have evolved but it is clear that the Church has worked hard to maintain a strong presence in society that is relevant and far reaching amidst societal and cultural changes in communications and has appropriately adjusted its views and concerns accordingly. Through papal messages and official Church documents, the Pope is leading the Church toward a Christian presence online. As changes to society continue today, the Church, through Pope Benedict XVI, continues to be challenged to find ways to remain inspiring and encouraging while also relevant and relatable to its followers. “For evangelization always depends upon the personal witness of the one sent to evangelize.”

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THE LEADERSHIP STRUCTURE OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND
WORLD COMMUNICATIONS DAY

The Lord Jesus, after praying to the Father, calling to Himself those whom He desired, appointed twelve to be with Him, and whom He would send to preach the Kingdom of God; and these apostles He formed after the manner of a college or a stable group, over which he placed Peter chosen from among them. 8

The Catholic Church has a simple hierarchical leadership structure that is important to detail in order to understand the roles and functions of both its leaders and followers. At the head of the Catholic Church is the Roman Pontiff or Supreme Pontiff, also known as the Pope, who serves as the universal leader and direct successor of St. Peter, the apostle of Jesus. In addition to serving as the leader of the Church, the Pope also serves as the Bishop of the Diocese of the city of Rome and as the Parish Priest at St. John Lateran Basilica on a daily basis. The Pope is the only leader within the Catholic Church to hold three positions (universal leader, Bishop and parish priest). Underneath the Pope are the bishops who are appointed by the Pope. Bishops serve as heads of dioceses as well as parish priests in their local churches. Bishops from around the world, regardless of the size of their diocese have equal ranking alongside other bishops and alongside the Pope. Bishops only have power over the priests inside their dioceses and all bishops report to the Pope. Underneath the bishops are the priests who are in charge of a single parish. Priests answer to both their local bishop and the Pope. Therefore, the flow of direction and information travels down from the Pope to his bishops; the bishops

communicate to parish priests who then impart Papal messages and guidance to Catholic followers. The Pope, as the ultimate head of the Catholic Church, uses the departments of the Roman Curia, which perform duties in his name and with his authority. Within the Roman Curia are several councils that have specific areas of concentration, consulting and working with the Pope. For the purposes of this thesis, the Pontifical Council of Social Communications will be referenced. When any of the councils within the Roman Curia are referenced, it is to be understood that one is ultimately referencing words and direction from the Pope.

The Pontifical Council for Social Communications was established in 1948 under Pope Pius XII and was originally called the Pontifical Commission for the Study and Ecclesiastical Evaluation of Films on Religious or Moral Subjects. In 1964, under Pope Paul VI, the Commission was transformed into the Pontifical Commission for Social Communications and became responsible for “dealing with all the problems raised by the cinema, radio, television, and the daily and periodical press in relation to the interests of the Catholic religion.” Pope Paul VI also approved the audiovisual transmission of ceremonies and places directly under the Holy See. In 1989 the Commission was renamed as the Pontifical Council for Social Communications as an office under the Roman Curia. In 1989 its responsibility became to “deal with questions concerning the instruments of social communication, so that also by these means the message of

salvation and human progress may serve the growth of civilization and morality." Since 1989, the Council has produced several documents on selected pertinent issues of society such as pornography and Internet use that communicate the formal viewpoint of the Catholic Church regarding these issues to Catholic followers and the world. In addition to formal documents, World Communications Day is celebrated annually as a culmination from reflection and study on a particular theme of study by the Pontifical Council for Social Communications during that year. It has been celebrated since 1967 and the Pope delivers a message that is based on the theme.

PROCLAIMING THE GOSPEL IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Pope John Paul II’s message from World Communications Day in 2000 was the first message to foreshadow the dawning of a new era in communication. The title of Pope John Paul II’s message on the 34th World Communications Day was Proclaiming Christ in the Media at the Dawn of the New Millennium and his message began with a reference to the feast of Pentecost. The feast of Pentecost celebrates an event that took place fifty days after Jesus’ resurrection into heaven. The Holy Spirit descended upon the apostles and blessed them with the gift of tongues, the ability to translate the Word of God into any language across the world. Catholics celebrate the feast of Pentecost by remembering the gift of tongues (or the blessing of communication) and our duty to continue to proclaim the good news that Christ arose from the dead. In his message the Pope drew our attention to the feast of Pentecost to remind us that “the history of

10. Ibid.

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communication is a kind of journey”\textsuperscript{11} that is centered on Jesus. In his message the pope said “proclaiming Christ therefore leads to a meeting between people in faith and charity at the deepest level of their humanity; the Risen Lord himself becomes a medium of genuine communication among his brothers and sisters in the Spirit.”\textsuperscript{12} The pope reminded us that the apostles continued to spread the Gospel even under the fear of persecution. As they fled for their lives and were scattered and divided, the apostles managed to continue to preach the Word to whoever was willing to listen. The Pope used Pentecost to remind his audience that the same urgency of continuing to proclaim Christ still exists. We must remember to continue to preach the Gospel in our own day and age. In addition to the need for spreading the Gospel, the Pope also outlined three important points. First, the Pope stated that “direct, personal proclamation – one person sharing faith in the Risen Lord with another – is essential; so are other traditional forms of spreading the word of God.”\textsuperscript{13} But second, and more relevant to this thesis, he acknowledged that the impact of media in today’s world cannot be ignored and that many people experience life through media. He said, “for many, the experience of living is to a great extent an experience of the media”\textsuperscript{14} and that “the proclamation of Christ must be a


\textsuperscript{12} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.
part of this experience."\textsuperscript{15} The acknowledgement of the role of media in society is significant because it proved that the Pope and the Catholic Church remain conversant and knowledgeable regarding the changing trends in society and, in particular, what these changes could bring to ways that we communicate. The third significant point was this: "The Church must make energetic and skillful use of her own means of communication — books, newspapers and periodicals, radio, television, and other means. And Catholic communicators must be bold and creative in developing new media and methods of proclamation. But, as much as possible, the Church also must use the opportunities that are to be found in the secular media...Christian communicators should also seek out ways to speak explicitly of Jesus crucified and risen, of his triumph over sin and death, in a manner suited to the medium used and to the capacities of audiences."\textsuperscript{16}

The Pope’s message from 2000 was precise and timely for this moment in time. Reminding Catholics of the duty to spread the Gospel was particularly applicable, timely and forward-looking and demonstrated his awareness of the apparent changes that were occurring in communication during that time. Looking back at the Pope’s message today, we realize that he foresaw issues regarding communications technology that were fast approaching. The Pope sensed the tide shifting and crafted a message that served as a starting point or gateway to the development of the Church’s outlook on new media and the Internet.

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.
2000 Pew Survey on Internet Use by the Religious

In the same year, the Pew Internet and American Life Project released a report based on results from its initial research titled Wired Churches, Wired Temples: Taking Congregations and Missions into Cyberspace. Research was done by survey and responses came from 1,309 Christian, Jewish and Unitarian Universalist congregations from 49 states in the United States. The congregations responded to an e-mail survey conducted by Pew which described this preliminary research as “the first extensive quantitative effort to discover how churches and synagogues in the United States use the Internet.” The religious breakdown of the respondents was as follows: 87% were Christian (of those, 3% were Roman Catholic), 7% were Jewish and 6% were Unitarian Universalist. Among the questions asked in the survey were whether the use of Internet tools has helped the spiritual and everyday life of their members and how the congregation and its leaders used e-mail. The findings showed that the Internet was used by congregations to “strengthen the faith and spiritual growth of their members, evangelize and perform missions in their communities around the world, and perform a wide variety of pious and practical activities for their congregations.” The report stated that with the “always-on” presence of the Internet, congregations can provide a thorough depiction of themselves to those who might be too shy to enter the sanctuary or ask


18. Ibid.
questions directly of members of the congregation.”  

The Internet allows congregations to display information on their web sites about their faiths, staff and members and their activities. They can also attach links to other reputable web sites that can offer more in depth information about their denomination’s beliefs, sacraments, and doctrine without having to create the content themselves. Congregations’ web sites also helped attract new visitors and also allowed former members to stay in touch.

The report from 2000 stated “21% of Internet users (about 19 million to 20 million people) have used the Internet to seek spiritual and religious information.” On a typical day online in 2000, more than two million people were getting such material.”

In the subsequent reports by Pew in 2001 and 2004, the reported number of Americans seeking religious information online increases dramatically. The percentage increases to 25% of Internet users (twenty-eight million people) by 2001 and the percentage jumped to 64% (eighty-two million people) by 2004. While the report from 2000 only represents a small fraction of the congregations within the United States, it served as an initial indication that, Internet use, mainly “religion online” (congregations posting mission statements, sermons, links regarding the faith denomination and faith-related sites and the like), helped enhance relationships between religious followers and leadership as well as relationships inside the Church through increased communication.

19. Ibid.

20. Ibid.

21. Ibid.
THE FUTURE OF INTERNET USE BY THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

It is clear from Pope John Paul II's message from 2000 that he recognized Internet use was beginning to become incorporated into the workings of the Catholic Church. The Pope made clear that "direct, personal communication"22 is essential, but he also knew that Internet use was impacting society and is something that could not be ignored by the Church. The survey by Pew proved that religious people have already begun to become aware of the advantages of Internet use. The Pope encouraged us to be bold and creative in our methods of proclamation as it is our duty to continue to proclaim Christ and preach the Gospel. It is my belief that the Pope's instruction in 2000 to "be bold and creative" points directly to religion online by making religious information available to those who seek it. In 2000, the realization that a new venue exists for proclaiming Christ and preaching the Gospel was quite clear to the Pope as was proven by results from the Pew survey. The survey results showed us that, by 2000, approximately 19-20 million people already go online to seek spiritual and religious information. Pope John Paul II's outlook toward the advances in technology and communication of that time was greatly in tune with society while being simultaneously progressive and forward moving for the Church. The Pope's message was a sign that the Church would not be left behind by technology and that it planned on maintaining a presence and taking full advantage of the new innovations as another means of spreading the Gospel and proclaiming Christ.

two years later in 2002, the Pope’s message delivered on World Communications Day brought the key role of Internet use to communication and evangelization into realization.

**Thesis Roadmap**

Chapter II will look at Pope John Paul II’s message delivered on World Communications Day in 2002 and discuss the main points from his message. The points from the 2002 message contrast with views from Dr. Brenda Brasher’s book from 2001 titled *Give Me That Online Religion*. We will also look at one of two documents released by the Pontifical Council for Social Communications from 2002 titled *The Church and Internet*. The Pope’s message from 2002 and *The Church and the Internet* explicitly express the Church’s early ideas and outlook regarding the Internet and communication. *The Church and the Internet* outlines why Internet use should become an important tool for the Church, Catholic leaders and followers. Jean-Nicholas Bazin and Jerome Cottin echo some of the same views in their book *Virtual Christianity* published in 2004. We are able to see similarities in the views between the Church to those of Bazin and Cottin.

Chapter III will examine one of Pope John Paul II’s final messages from 2005 that relate to Internet use (an Apostolic Letter titled *The Rapid Development* directed to individuals working in communication). The Pope outlines five points in his Apostolic Letter and three of the five points are of significance. We will look at an essay written by Christopher Helland and the research results from the Pew survey from 2004.

After Pope John Paul II’s death in 2005, Pope Benedict XVI was inaugurated as the new Roman Pontiff. In Chapter IV we will look at Pope Benedict’s messages delivered on World Communications Day from 2009, 2010, 2011 and 2012 through
which the Pope expands on his predecessor's ideas and goes into detail about the responsible use of the Internet by individuals and especially those who work in media. We will analyze the Pope's messages and evaluate the growing areas of concern regarding the changes in the way society communicates because of increased Internet use around the world. We will contrast Pope Benedict's view with Noreen Herzfeld's views from her book titled *Technology and Religion: Remaining Human in a Co-created World* (published in 2009). We will also discuss Brad Kallenberg's views from his book *God and Gadgets* (published in 2011).

Chapter V will summarize the evolved views of Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI, the mentioned scholars and the results from the Pew surveys about the religious using the Internet. We will discuss the Church's persistent and continued work to accept and incorporate Internet use and how the Church has been in support and encouraged its use as a tool for the Church from its inception.
CHAPTER II

THE INTERNET AS A TOOL FOR COMMUNICATION, EVANGELIZATION AND EDUCATION

INTERNET: A NEW FORUM FOR PROCLAIMING THE GOSPEL 1

The Church in every age continues the work begun on the day of Pentecost, when the Apostles in the power of the Holy Spirit, went forth into the streets of Jerusalem to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ in many tongues.2

-Pope John Paul II, Internet: A New Forum for Proclaiming the Gospel, 2002

In 2002, Pope John Paul II’s message on World Communications Day focused specifically on the Internet. His message looked favorably toward Internet use for communication and evangelization while also pointing to areas of concern.

The Pope references the feast of Pentecost in the opening of his message as he did in the message from 2000 and he notes that the Church’s work of evangelization over the centuries has overcome not only geographical distance but it has also crossed technological thresholds such as the Renaissance era which gave way to the printing press and the Industrial Revolution. He equated the Internet to a public space in ancient Rome where various types of business, political and social meetings and everyday transactions took place. In 2002, the Pope said that the Church now faced a

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2. Ibid.
communications and information revolution. He referred to the Internet as a new “forum” for proclaiming the Gospel and said:

Like the new frontiers of other times, this one too is full of the interplay of danger and promise, and not without the sense of adventure which marked other great periods of change. For the Church the new world of cyberspace is a summons to the great adventure of using its potential to proclaim the Gospel message.3

While the Pope’s views from 2000 to 2002 on the Internet and cyberspace remained optimistic, there was a sense of caution in his tone. The Pope said that the Church’s approach to the Internet is “with realism and confidence”; confidence that the Internet can undoubtedly be a valuable tool for communication and evangelization by the Church and realism regarding potential effects that Internet use may have towards one’s ability to think, the need for reflection and the potential for causing greater social inequality through a widening communications gap. The one resounding point throughout this message is that nothing can replace real world face to face contact.

On communication via the Internet, Pope John Paul II believed that the Internet can provide information and stir interest in individuals, like the youth, and, for some, this may be their initial encounter with the Catholic Church. The Pope said that the Church should encourage those who connect via the Internet to come and join the real world community of the Church. He said “it is important, that the Christian community think of very practical ways of helping those who first make contact through the Internet to move

3. Ibid.
from the virtual world of cyberspace to the real world of Christian community.”

In this, we can conclude that the Pope remained committed to the position he presented in 2000 that real world or personal witness experiences with the Church and her community should remain the Church’s focus and goal for its followers. He leads us to believe that religious information put online, “religion online”, is an acceptable and practical way of using the Internet by the Church. Religious information that is posted online serves as a road sign that can point individuals in the Church’s direction. The Pope directly speaks to “religion online” and states, “like other communications media, it is a means, not an end in itself.”

On evangelization, the Pope elaborated his viewpoint regarding the use of the Internet as a forum. On the positive side, the Pope acknowledged that the Internet has enormous potential for good and that it can provide support for evangelization purposes since society and culture are so unsupportive of Christian living. However, he goes back to his earlier point that Internet communication should not take the place of personal witness. He said:

While the Internet can never replace that profound experience of God which only the living liturgical and sacramental life of the Church can offer, it can certainly provide a unique supplement and support in both preparing for the encounter with Christ in the community, and sustaining the new believer in the journey of faith which then begins.

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4. Ibid.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid.
The Internet can offer extensive information on the Catholic faith, but it cannot teach values.

The Pope expressed his concern regarding our ability to obtain answers from via the Internet instantaneously. He stated that the Internet "radically defines a person’s psychological relationship to time and space" and that our attention is "riveted on what is tangible, useful, instantly available; the stimulus for deeper though and reflection may be lacking." The Internet offers us answers, quickly and easily, but it does not show us the methods or paths to take that lead to those answers. He said:

Understanding and wisdom are the fruit of a contemplative eye upon the world, and do not come from a mere accumulation of facts, no matter how interesting. They are the result of insight which penetrates the deeper meaning of things in relation to one another and to the whole of reality.

Another concern is that while the Internet may contain information that is helpful and good, the reality is that it also contains "degrading and damaging ways." One of the questions that the Pope poses is "how can we ensure that the information and communications revolution which has the Internet as its prime engine will work in favor of the globalization of human development and solidarity, objectives closely linked to the Church’s evangelizing mission?"

7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
Pope John Paul II hoped that religious leaders would bring Christ’s message and voice to the Internet for all who are willing to see and hear it. He dared us to “bravely cross this new threshold” as to further highlight the Glory of God. The message from 2002 contrasted to the message from 2000 showed a significant move towards facing the challenge of accepting and making use of the Internet by the Church. Regarding communication and evangelization, the Pope recognized the potential that Internet use could bring to the Church, to its followers and to those who seek to join the Church.

**Preserving Religion Online**

In Dr. Brenda Brasher’s book, *Give Me That Online Religion*, from 2001, she notes a clear distinction between the Internet and cyberspace. She defines the Internet as the “world-spanning conglomeration of interconnected computer networks”\(^\text{12}\) and said the Internet “flattens hierarchies establishing a social area where people regardless of status or rank can exchange ideas and opinions.”\(^\text{13}\) Cyberspace, she says, is “the imaginary space/time one occupies when engaged in computer-mediated communication.”\(^\text{14}\) She compared the invention of the printing press and the incorporation of its use to that of the Internet. Changing economic and social conditions brought about the innovation of the printing press just as the Internet. The printing press altered the norm of what constituted a public forum during the fifteenth century and,

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13. Ibid, ix.

similarly with the invention of the Internet, the space of public forum again has been altered.

Dr. Brasher views cyberspace as a place where history can “vanish in a nanosecond”\textsuperscript{15}, where everything is present but where traditional religions like Christianity work to maintain a tight connection between in-person activities and the contents of websites. Concerning traditional religions in today’s world where Internet use and being online is the norm, Dr. Brasher wrote about traditional religions:

These religions excel in constructing and perpetuating particular memories. They bring to the Web well-honed talents in preserving the past. For traditional religions, a tight relationship exists between normal, face-to-face activities and the content of Websites.\textsuperscript{16}

Although traditional religions are representing themselves online, Brasher says that they do not consider themselves to be of it. Traditional religions make use of the latest communication tools while also maintaining that there are some things that do not change like remembering Jesus’ life, suffering, death and resurrection every Sunday during mass. Being present online serves as a guide and as a reminder about the core beliefs of a religion. Dr. Brasher wrote:

The Web pages associated with traditional religions are signposts displaying stories and experiences that constructors believe must not be left behind, even in cyberspace. These Web pages are a virtual anchor to the past. As such, online religion introduces depth and stability to the virtual environment.\textsuperscript{17}

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 25.

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 26.
While an online presence is both necessary and useful, religious work and study does not stop there. One can seek answers to questions about religion online but you will not find the reasoning behind the answers online nor will the Internet challenge you to think. However, because people seek answers on the Internet to their religious inquiries, is a sign that as humans we still have spiritual yearnings and a need to connect and better understand the transcendent. Christianity has accepted the challenge to incorporate this new innovation and become present in this new forum.

"THE CHURCH AND THE INTERNET" 18

May Catholics involved in the world of social communications preach the truth of Jesus ever more boldly from the housetops, so that all men and women my hear about the love which is the heart of God’s self-communication in Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, and today, and forever! 19

To express the Church’s outlook on the Internet to Catholic followers, Pope John Paul II offered a written overview that was further elaborated by the Pontifical Council for Social Communications in two documents that also were released in 2002— Ethics in Internet and The Church and the Internet. Ethics in Internet provided the Catholic view of the Internet and The Church and the Internet considered the Internet’s implication for religion and the Catholic Church.

Fundamentally, the Church has stated an overall positive approach to and view of the Internet. First and foremost, it considers media such as the Internet to be a “gift from


19. Ibid.
God” 20 that can help “unite men in brotherhood and so help them to cooperate with His plan for their salvation.” 21 The Church also feels that the Internet can “contribute greatly to the enlargement and enrichment of men’s minds and to the propagation and consolidation of the kingdom of God.” 22 The Council said that the Church has two aims regarding the Internet. The first is to encourage the “right” development and “right” use of the Internet. By “right” the Church means right for human development, justice, peace, for building up society (locally, nationally and on the community level). The second aim points inward to the Church that it should make an effort to understand the Internet, (its purposes, procedures, forms and genres, internal structures and modalities) and to offer support and encouragement to those involved in work with the Internet. Within this document, the Council explained, in depth, the opportunities and challenges that Internet use brings to the Church.

Three areas where it is advantageous for the Church to use the Internet are for communication, evangelization and education. Pope John Paul II mentioned the first two in his message on World Communications Day. With communication, the Internet and email can serve as vital tools for communication within the Church, amongst clergy within churches and also between churches and between clergy and parishioners. Email communication allows for work, daily activities and duties to be completed more efficiently while also allowing the Church to communicate its teachings.

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20. Ibid.
21. Ibid.
22. Ibid.
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 time; 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.  

The Church can use the Internet for things such as to share news, post inspirational messages, religious events and announcements, offer religious information and can be a helpful tool for individuals who are homebound by connecting them to the Church.

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 Church will have to face the challenge of learning and understanding how the Internet works in order to be able to communicate effectively within and outside the Church.

23. Ibid.

24. Ibid.
The Internet could be an invaluable tool for the evangelization of new followers and re-evangelization of former members or followers who are looking to reconnect with the Church as well as for missionary work, catechesis, pastoral counseling and spiritual direction. It can attract non-believers to the church and be a tool to current followers who can use the Internet as a supplement to daily mass, prayer and reflection. Also, with the use of email, the Internet allows for two-way communication between priests, followers and parish staff. The *Church and the Internet* stated:

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.\(^\text{25}\)

Concerning education, the Council wrote that churches should provide media education and training for seminarians, priests, religious and lay personnel, teachers, parents and students. Also, in schools and through community programs, education through media can serve as a supplement to traditional means of instruction for students. Young people especially need to be taught how to be good Christians when using media tools like the Internet. The Council wrote:

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.\(^\text{26}\)

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\(^\text{25}\) Ibid.

\(^\text{26}\) Ibid.
Using the Internet for communication, evangelization and education benefits the Church but challenges also exist that can undermine the Church’s mission. The Church stated that “media can sometimes seem indifferent and even hostile to Christian faith and morality” and the presence of hate sites devoted to attacking the Catholic Church are problematic. The Church believes that there should be regulations in place on the Internet where boundaries are set along with reasonable limits to what can be posted, without infringing on one’s right to free expression. Also, websites that call themselves Catholic but are actually unofficial groups can be confusing to those who are new to the faith. The Church fears that individuals seeking religious information online may pick and choose rules to follow that are easy or most convenient for them to obey (an existing problem for all Catholics). Another concern for the Church is that the more time that people spend online and in virtual realities, then the harder it becomes to bring people into church to experience “true community.” The Church said:

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 the 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.27

In addition, parents should also learn more about the Internet so they can guide and supervise its use by their children to protect them from sexual predators and pornography. Young people and children are considered to be the future of the Church. They must be

27. Ibid.
taught to understand that the Internet is a tool that can help them learn and accomplish work. It is not just for entertainment and consumer gratification. The Council wrote:

The Internet places a 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.28

Parents should pay close attention to the websites and groups that their children use online in order to teach and reinforce healthy and productive use of the Internet and to keep them away from inappropriate websites and online predators.

It is my belief that the Church has a fair amount of optimism when it considers the changes and efficiency Internet use brings to the areas of communication, evangelization and education. The Church is not intimidated by technology, it embraces it. However, the Church also is fully aware that it must adjust its own thinking, sometimes, while simultaneously not being led astray from the Church's mission.

In this document, the Council essentially welcomes the challenges that Internet use brings because it also recognizes the greater good that can come from educating oneself in its properties and taking full advantage of its use. Communication, evangelization and education are the three main areas where, if the Church decided not to move forward with technology, the Church itself would suffer, fall behind and lose touch with its followers. Not only would the Church lose touch but its views on morality and peace would be silenced.

28. Ibid.
Beyond its technological aspects, the Internet is indeed a world, a new world that is coming into being. In the space of just a few short years, it has already transformed our way of communicating, our language, our attitude to writing, our social relationships, our relationship with space and time, our way of learning and much more.29

In the book *Virtual Christianity: Potential and Challenge for the Churches*, Jean-Nicholas Bazin and Jerome Cottin wrote that churches should not ignore Internet use for both external and internal reasons. Externally, churches should not allow themselves to be excluded or cut off from a society that is adopting new communication technologies more and more every year. Churches need to stay in touch with society and follow societal trends in order to know first-hand the best way to connect with and serve society. The church can stay relevant by providing religion online. Internally, the church can use the Internet for online religion to encourage participation from its followers and help keep its congregation actively involved in the church community. Online religion can help churches revitalize their congregations and grow a greater sense of community.

Bazin and Cottin described three main ways in which the Internet may benefit the Church. They wrote that the Internet could be used as (1) a tool for information, dialogue and exchange and as (2) a tool for enlightenment and (3) as a tool for maintaining a presence in the world. Their view on information closely resembles the Catholic

Church’s view regarding communication in the sense that the Internet can be used to place religion online. As a tool for information Bazin and Cottin wrote:

The Web is nothing more than a sort of giant, virtual notice board that is continually updated. It is a matter of communicating as much information as possible, that is as up-to-date as possible, to as many people as possible, and of being able to reach the people who might be interested in that information in their homes. 30

The Internet is most commonly used as a tool to find answers and information and it is most useful in this capacity when the information that is put online is consistently maintained and updated. This view echoes the view expressed in The Church and the Internet.

As a tool for dialogue and exchange, Bazin and Cottin believe the Internet can be useful to the Church (both internally and externally). While the Catholic Church looks favorably upon Internet use for internal communication, it did not address using the Internet for dialog and exchange externally in The Church and the Internet. It is my opinion that the Catholic Church simply does not have enough bandwidth to be able to maintain, yet address questions, comments or concerns from the entire networked community.

As a tool for enlightenment or presence in the world, Bazin and Cottin wrote that the Internet could serve as a tool church followers could use to help strengthen their faith or for encouragement by providing religion online. One can look online to read bible verses online for enlightenment and strength. They wrote:

30. Ibid., 62.
If used well, the Internet can be a formidable tool to allow believers to strengthen their faith and help them to tackle on a daily basis the spiritual questions that they have and the answers to those questions that help them to live their lives.\textsuperscript{31}

In addition, they also view online religion to be useful as well. They wrote that the Internet also serves as a useful tool to reach outsiders (those who are not members of the church in order to encourage membership). They wrote:

\begin{quote}
The Internet is indeed thought by many people in the church to be a means of enabling our communities to grow, of spreading the Gospel, of bringing more people together, of reaching a different audience from those is usually addresses.\textsuperscript{32}
\end{quote}

While Bazin and Cottin speak to enlightenment, the Catholic Church refers to evangelization (in \textit{The Church and the Internet}). The views are almost in agreement but not quite. However, Bazin and Cottin wrote the following on evangelization,

\begin{quote}
The Internet can help the church to fulfill its role of reaching as many people as possible. The role of the church is first of all not to guard the flame of a small number of followers, but to speak to the world, to speak to everyone. Christianity necessarily has a missionary vocation. It is not modeled on a closed community or a secret society but on a open community visible to all, that addresses as many people as possible.\textsuperscript{33}
\end{quote}

The ideas expressed by Bazin and Cottin on information closely resonate with the views on communication expressed by the Council in the \textit{Church and the Internet}. It is clear that regarding communication, the Council, the Pope and the Catholic Church’s views are basically in accord with Bazin and Cottin. On dialog and exchange, Bazin and

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 63.

\textsuperscript{32} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., 89-90.
Cottin’s views were in line with the Church regarding internal communications, but such does not seem to be the case concerning external communications. The Catholic Church can be in agreement with Bazin and Cottin’s views regarding enlightenment; however, only to the degree that it is sought after through religion online. The Church is more in line with their views on evangelization, where the Internet can be quite useful for spreading the Gospel.

It is clear that the Catholic Church in 2002 had already made their position quite clear in regards to the Internet. The Church was well-informed and prepared to continue to use the Internet for its work in communication, evangelization and education while facing the challenges associated with Internet use; however, it did not seem ready to use the Internet for the role of online religion.
CHAPTER III
SUSTAINING A CHRISTIAN PRESENCE ONLINE

2005: THE END OF A PAPACY

The Internet is... instantaneous, immediate, worldwide, decentralized, interactive, endlessly expandable in contents and outreach, flexible and adaptable to a remarkable degree... The Internet can serve people in the responsible use of freedom and democracy, expand the range of choices available in diverse spheres of life, broaden educational and cultural horizons, break down divisions and promote human development in a multitude of ways.¹

On April 2, 2005, Pope John Paul II passed away and his pontificate came to an end after twenty-seven years, one of the longest in the history of the Catholic Church. During his tenure the Pope had more meetings than any of his predecessors or any leaders of nations. More than 17,600,000 people have heard the Pope during his weekly masses every Wednesday.² Over the course of his tenure, he met with numerous government personalities during 38 official visits, 738 audiences and meetings held with Heads of State, and 246 audiences and meetings with prime ministers. Pope John Paul II established World Youth Day and there were 19 World Youth Day celebrations during his pontificate during which, he brought together youth from around the world. He was also successful in encouraging dialogue with representatives from the Jewish faith and


with representatives of other religious groups and invited them to prayer meetings for peace. Given the level of communication efforts, it is no surprise that during his pontificate, Pope John Paul II worked relentlessly in support of advances in technology that expanded communication. From his World Communications Day speech in 2000 in which he foreshadowed the changes being made to the way we communicate, to the documents produced by the Pontifical Council for Social Communications regarding the Internet in 2002 to his last year in 2005, the Pope continued his work and support of the Internet and Internet use from a religion online standpoint. Pope John Paul addressed those responsible for communications in an Apostolic Letter titled "The Rapid Development". The Pope expressed his continued commitment to beliefs that the Catholic Church, Catholic followers and those working in mass media all share responsibility in the ethical and moral use of the Internet for communication and particularly of religion online.

**THE RAPID DEVELOPMENT**

Pope John Paul II began the Apostolic Letter titled "The Rapid Development" by referencing the Decree of the Second Vatican Council titled *Inter Mirifica* in which Pope Paul VI said:

> Man's genius has with God's help produced marvelous technical inventions from creation, especially in our times. The Church, our mother, is particularly interested in those which directly touch man's spirit and which have opened up new avenues of easy communication of all kinds of news, of ideas and orientations.³

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³ Pope Paul VI, "Inter Mirifica" Decree on the Media of Social Communications Solemnly Promulgated by his Holiness Pope Paul VI, December 4, 1963.
These words from the Decree, according to the Pope John Paul, appear to be even more pertinent today. The Pope’s letter contains five main points of which the first three will be discussed. The first point addresses the progress of the Church regarding its incorporation of communications media. The second point addresses the Internet as a tool for reflection and for spreading the Gospel, and pastoral and cultural revision is addressed by the third point. The first three points are the most significant points of this letter because the Pope’s views toward religion online and online religion are expressed.

In the first point, *Fruitful Progress in the Wake of the Decree “Inter Mirifica,”* the Pope acknowledges that the use of techniques and technologies such as the Internet have now become an integral part of the mission of the Church in the third millennium and that the Catholic Church has taken big strides to use communications media to conduct religious communication, evangelization and education (catechesis). He said, “the communications media have acquired such importance as to be the principal means of guidance and inspiration for many people in their personal, familial, and social behavior.”

Since society has come to rely so heavily on mass media, the Pope urged that mass media must promote justice and solidarity, report events accurately and truthfully and provide forums for different opinions. He wrote, “An authentically ethical approach to using the powerful communications media must be situated within the context of a

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mature exercise of freedom and responsibility, founded upon the supreme criteria of truth and justice."5 In my opinion, by making this point, the Pope is emphasizing that the responsibility of this task needs to be shared by not only Christians and religious leaders as he has mentioned in past speeches but the responsibility should equally shared by those who work in mass media. This responsibility is directly tied to religion online in the sense that Christians, religious leaders and those working in mass media must always use the Internet justly, respectfully and most importantly truthfully and honestly when using it as a tool for information. With no single appointed administration to monitor information placed on the Internet, the Pope’s urging is simply for fairness and honesty on the parts of those who post information on the Internet for the sake of those who rely on the Internet for information. The first point of this letter also seemed to be foreshadowing the speech that he delivered for World Communications Day in 2005 which is titled The Communications Media: At the Service of Understanding Among Peoples, his first speech regarding Internet use directly addressed to those who work in mass media.

The second point of the letter is Gospel Reflection and Missionary Commitment in which the Pope further reinforces the use of religion online. The Pope says, “the world of mass media also has a need of Christ’s redemption.”6 He acknowledges that mass media provides an opportunity to reach people everywhere and that barriers of time, space and language no longer exist. Faith can be offered to all who are in search of it and

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid.
to all who wish to enter into dialogue with God. He goes on further to say that “we can ask the Lord to help us understand how to communicate with God and with other human beings through communications media.” Through these statements it is my belief that the Pope was continuing to show the Church’s commitment to use the Internet through religion online. He states that communications media like the Internet can “intensify communion and render a more penetrating proclamation of His (God’s) word.” Using the Internet as a tool to find religious words of inspiration online can offer believers a supplement during any time of need. You no longer have to wait to attend mass in order to hear the Word of God. One can turn to the Internet to find solace in the words that one typically could only hear on Sunday. The Internet is a good tool for spreading the Word and for individual reflection. The Pope points out, “He [Jesus] explains the Scriptures, expresses himself in parables, dialogues within the intimacy of the home, speaks in the squares, along the streets, on the shores of the lake and on the mountaintops” and that our encounters with Him stimulate us to imitate Him. “What I say to you in the darkness, speak in the light; what you hear whispered, proclaim on the housetops.”

In the third point titled “A Change of Mentality and Pastoral Renewal” the Pope talks about the Church being impelled into pastoral and cultural revision and adjusting to keep abreast with the current media culture because of increasing technological advances.

7. Ibid
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
in mass media. He acknowledges that it is not an easy mission to spread the Gospel and religious values despite the fact that the Church already uses communications media and says that those who work in Church communities who have technological expertise should be encouraged to do good work with "pastoral prudence and wisdom". The Pope says "Everything possible must be done so that the Gospel might permeate society, stimulating people to listen to and embrace its message" and emphasizes that religious leaders should be particularly responsible. He says:

New technologies, in particular, create further opportunities for communication understood as a service to the pastoral government and organization of the different tasks of the Christian community. One clear example today is how the Internet not only provides resources for more information, but habituates persons to interactive communication.

The Pope noted that many Christians are already using the Internet creatively and exploring its potential to assist with evangelization, education, internal communication, administration and governance. While the content can be adapted to the needs of different groups, the Pope said, "the goal must always be to make people aware of the ethical and moral dimension of information."

Do the Pope’s words from his third point sound like an opening to online religion? By saying "everything possible must be done so that the Gospel might permeate society, stimulating people to listen to and embrace its message," it sounds like a plea

11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
from the Pope that more can be done to allow God's message to be heard. Perhaps the Pope knows that online religion can offer advantages to the Church by inviting people to take part in witnessing the presence of God and the Holy Spirit. It could also be argued that the Pope sees online religion as a threat to the Church since more and more people are relying on mass media and using it in many different ways. While it is hard to tell if the Pope in 2005 still saw religion online as the clear cut way to use the Internet for the Catholic Church, it is interesting to note that the view expressed in his third point could be interpreted to favor online religion. This points to a Church that is exploring new ways of connecting with its followers.

A GIFT OR A CURSE

Christopher Helland, who gave us the definition of religion online and online religion wrote an essay titled Popular Religion and the World Wide Web: A Match Made in (Cyber) Heaven in 2004. The essay discusses the online presence of traditional religious groups like the Roman Catholic Church and how having an online presence is viewed as a tool for such groups but can also prove to be a disturbance. He believes that popular or unofficial religions have a greater presence online versus their traditional or official counterparts and says that the Internet is "a new place where a freedom of religious expression rules supreme."15 Helland points to a distinction made by another religious scholar, Mcguire, and says "official" religion "is a set of beliefs and practices

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prescribed, regulated and socialized by organized, specifically religious groups.”\textsuperscript{16} Unofficial religion or popular religion he says “is a set of religious or quasi religious beliefs and practices that is not accepted, recognized or controlled by official religious groups.”\textsuperscript{17} While official religions were quick to create an online presence in the 1990s, Helland writes that websites created by unofficial religious groups pose a threat to those groups who are official simply because they exist and outnumber the official ones. He also goes further to say that what is even more damaging than unofficial religious websites is the existence of websites that were created by members of \textit{official} religious groups who post material that is not in alignment with official doctrine. He said, “doctrines and teachings that were once centralized and controlled can now be openly challenged, contradicted, or ignored through a medium that is accessed by hundreds of millions of people every day.”\textsuperscript{18} Helland’s points about the dangers to official religions posed by unofficial religious websites and those created by members of official religious posting unauthorized views is parallel to the Pope’s first point from \textit{The Rapid Development} in which the Pope talked about individuals and those who work in media sharing the responsibility of posting information online that is correct, honest and just. The Pope message was in agreement with Helland’s view.

Helland also draws attention to the fact that official religions use the Internet as a tool. Helland believes that because official religions like Catholicism view the Internet as

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid.
solely a tool for religion online, that they will “not have the ability to meet the religious needs of those who want more from the medium”\textsuperscript{19} and “in this case, it is the popular (unofficial) religious sites that are providing the preferred environment for the online practitioners.”\textsuperscript{20} He gives an example by comparing the Vatican website and Partenia. Partenia is a website created by former Bishop Jacques Gaillot who received disciplinary action by Pope John Paul II for expressing views that were not in line with the Church. Helland points to the differences between the two websites. The Vatican website offers information while Partenia provides an online environment for “people to talk about their religious beliefs, and practices, as challenging questions, concerning their faith, and participate in a safe environment where they can open up and share religious feelings and concerns.”\textsuperscript{21} Catholics who feel estranged from their faith can enter into dialogue with devout Catholics; practicing and non-practicing Catholics can all be a part of the dialogue on this site. Helland believes that the Internet is capable of being much more than a tool for official religions and says “it is becoming an environment—a place—where people can ‘be’ religious if and when they choose to be.”\textsuperscript{22} However, in my opinion, it seems Pope John Paul II would approve of online forums since he urges mass media to provide forums for different opinions in his first point from \textit{The Rapid Development}. Since the Pope is in support of interreligious dialogue with other religious groups, it seems as

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid.
though he also was being confronted with considering interreligious dialogue to now take place online which also points to his third point from the Rapid Development where the Pope calls for *A Change of Mentality and Pastoral Renewal* and says "the Internet not only provides resources for more information, but habituates persons to interactive communication".  

In the conclusion of his essay, Helland says that the Internet is an "open and developing religious environment that caters to people who wish to be religious and spiritual on their own terms" and "individuals can either create or simply find what they require religiously." It is my belief that the Pope would not entirely agree with Helland’s point. While the Internet is certainly a place to find what one may need spiritually, it should not be the means to an end. The Church thus far has found a way to maintain a Christian presence online without compromising its most important tradition—the witness of the celebration of the Eucharist during mass, which is a part of the faith in which one cannot fully participate online.

**THE SEARCH FOR FAITH ONLINE**

Nearly two-thirds of the adults who use the Internet in the United States have used the Internet for faith-related matters. That represents nearly 82 million Americans.  

A year before *The Rapid Development*, the third report by the Pew Research Center titled *Faith Online* was released in April 2004. In 2004, 64% (nearly 82 million)

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of the 128 million Internet users in the United States were using the Internet for spiritual or religious matters. Of those surveyed, 26% sought information about the religious beliefs of others. The report described these 82 million people as “devout and more likely to be connected to religious institutions and practices than other Internet users.” From 2001 to 2004 the number of religious or those seeking religious information increased from 20 million to 82 million, a 410% increase. The study found evidence that, for various people who were already actively engaged in traditional religious contexts and bodies, the online environment also facilitated religious interactions. The report stated if individuals begin to exercise autonomy in matters of faith, then the Internet might come to play an increasingly important role in providing resources for those seeking religious information (taking users outside of formal religious traditions).

Regarding overall technology, religiously active Americans use the Internet, email, broadband, cell phones and social media platforms at similar rates to other Americans. Of those active in religious groups, 79% used the Internet, 86% used cell phones, 75% used email, 46% used social networking sites like Facebook and 9% used Twitter. By 2004, Internet use was becoming increasingly part of the daily lives of Americans and to American society as a whole and it has equally affected religious institutions and religious individuals. It helped religious organizations run their congregations more efficiently by keeping members connected and informed and served as a new tool to spread the messages of faith and belief in God as well as a tool for expression of our faiths and beliefs. Using the Internet has allowed us to satisfy our own curiosities about our religious beliefs and the beliefs of others. We have learned to rely
on the Internet to look for religious information that can help supplement what we receive from our churches, synagogues and mosques. The points made by the Pope in 2005 and the points made by Helland show a direct correlation to the results reported by Pew in 2004. The Pope’s address which highlighted those working in mass media, Gospel reflection and a call for a change in mentality was appropriate since these individuals and areas needed to be addressed during this time. Helland’s points were likewise applicable and the results from Pew also confirm that more and more people are relying on the Internet for religious and spiritual needs.

COMMUNICATE AND PROGRESS

The Pope’s Apostolic Letter from 2005 acknowledges that many Catholics have learned to rely on the Internet for religious inspiration to supplement what is heard during mass on Sundays. The letter was essentially a call to examine the way that we connect with one another on religious matters and compares well with Christopher Helland’s essay from 2004. The 2004 report from Pew represented the overall attitude religious people had towards the Internet and showed the shift made by society toward using communication technology like the Internet. Therefore, the essence of Pope John Paul’s Apostolic Letter was most fitting during 2005 and was in tune with society’s communication culture. All of Pope John Paul II’s work in support of incorporating Internet use by the Catholic Church and its followers helped position the Church in such a way that it could not be viewed as being left behind by technology but instead viewed as relevant and ready to face the changes to come while maintaining its most sacred traditions.
CHAPTER IV
CONTINUED PROGRESS IN INTERNET USE

THE 265TH SUPREME PONTIFF: POPE BENEDICT XVI

On April 24, 2005 the Catholic Church formally inaugurated as its Supreme Pontiff, Pope Benedict XVI. Elected by the College of Cardinals after the death of Pope John Paul II, Pope Benedict XVI is viewed by all Catholics as the next successor of Peter the Apostle of Jesus. In Pope Benedict’s first message as the Roman Pontiff, addressed to the members of the College of Cardinals, Pope Benedict expressed homage to the work of his predecessor, Pope John Paul II, by saying:

He leaves a Church that is more courageous, freer, more youthful. She is a Church which, in accordance with his teaching and example, looks serenely at the past and is not afraid of the future. With the Great Jubilee she entered the new millennium, bearing the Gospel, applied to today’s world through the authoritative rereading of the Second Vatican Council.¹

In full accordance with Pope John Paul II who, fearlessly lead the Church into the new millennium, Pope Benedict continued in his predecessor’s footsteps in regards to the Church’s view of the Internet and digital technology. Pope Benedict’s messages from World Communications Day in 2009, 2010, 2011 and 2012 carried with them the same core views from Pope John Paul II but each message was more targeted to certain groups and with certain themes. 2009’s message addressed the youth and the Internet and priests

and the Internet were addressed in 2010. The message from 2011 discussed engagement in social networks and in 2012 Pope Benedict’s message brought up the theme of silence and reflection; a theme previously discussed by Pope John Paul as well. Pope Benedict continued the visions of his predecessor while also providing guidance to specific groups on relevant topics in our digital culture. Each of the following messages builds on ideas originally expressed by Pope John Paul II and also goes into specific detail with direction on how to make good use of the Internet in Christian manner.

"NEW TECHNOLOGIES, NEW RELATIONSHIPS: PROMOTING A CULTURE OF RESPECT, DIALOGUE AND FRIENDSHIP"\(^2\)

In 2009, Pope Benedict delivered the 43\(^{rd}\) World Communications Day message and the themes of his message echoed those of his predecessor from four years previous. The Pope directly addressed young people, those who constitute the “digital generation”\(^3\) (Pope Benedict, 2009). Young people in our current times “have grown up with the new technologies and are at home in a digital world.”\(^4\) The Pope reiterated the enormous potential of the new technologies and today’s young people’s grasp on its capacity to seek information and news and a place to share ideas and opinions. Today’s “culture of communication”\(^5\) and use of the Internet fosters connectedness and communication with


\(^3\) Ibid.

\(^4\) Ibid.

\(^5\) Ibid.
existing friends and can also be a means to meet new friends and form communities and networks.

The need to keep in touch with our friends and the desire to meet new friends is part of human nature. The pope said, “the desire for communication and friendship is rooted in our very nature as human beings and cannot be adequately understood as a response to technical innovations.”6 According to the Pope, when we are drawn to other people, then we are “responding to God’s call—a call that is imprinted in our nature as beings created in the image and likeness of God, the God of communications and communion.”7 When we open ourselves to others, we fulfill a deep need and become more fully human. The act of loving was designed by God and is part of God’s primary commandment to us—“You must love God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and with all your strength” and “You must love your neighbor as yourself.”8 The point that the Pope was making is that our focus should not solely be on the extraordinary capacity that the Internet provides to connect people, but, instead, the focus always should be on the quality of the connections that we make and the quality of the content that we put online. The Pope encouraged young people to commit themselves to a culture of respect, dialogue and friendship by urging them to respect the dignity of other individuals and to avoid sharing words and images that are degrading, promote hatred and intolerance, debase human sexuality or exploit the weak and vulnerable. We need to share content that is respectful and not offensive.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid.
The capacity to connect in so many ways has opened up the opportunities for dialogue among people from different countries, cultures and religions. Cyberspace is the new venue for these dialogues and the Pope said, “encounters, if they are to be fruitful, require honest and appropriate forms of expression together with attentive and respectful listening.” One should be genuine in their search for truth and be mutually respectful to others in order to promote understanding and tolerance.

Friendship is one of the greatest experiences that a human can have. The way keep in touch and meet new friends has been renewed through social networks that have emerged in recent years. The Pope said, “it is through our friendships that we grow and develop as humans.” However, we should be careful not to trivialize the experience of friendship. We should not allow our on-line relationships to cause us to neglect our off-line relationships with families or interfere with work. Engaging and convenient, virtual realms and constant connectedness can become addictive and can interfere with or hinder healthy off-line experiences and relationships. When used in a healthy and productive manner, social networks can promote human solidarity, peace and justice, human rights and respect for human life and can facilitate cooperation between people despite geographical location or cultural differences. The Pope is in support of tools like the Internet and social networks being available to all people in order to truly foster a greater sense of community.

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9. Ibid.

10. Ibid.
He wrote:

It would be a tragedy for the future of humanity if the new instruments of communication, which permit the sharing of knowledge and information in a more rapid and effective manner, were not made accessible to those who are already economically and socially marginalized, or if it should contribute only to increasing the gap separating the poor from the new networks that are developing at the service of human socialization and information.\textsuperscript{11}

The digital world of the Internet and social networks, while shared by a great majority, still remain inaccessible to many. We should all strive to make the digital world open to all.

In closing the Pope urged young people to work as heralds in the digital world by sharing their faith and values on the Internet to introduce the Good News of Jesus into the culture of the digital world in a way similar to how the Apostles spread the story of Jesus to the Greeks and Romans. Young people in particular play a significant role since they possess the knowledge and savvy to navigate the digital world and to apply new technologies. The Pope calls young people to be responsible for the evangelization of the “digital continent” and said, “the greatest gift you can give is to share the Good News of a God who became man, who suffered, died and rose again to save all people.”\textsuperscript{12} The underlying points of Pope Benedict’s message were that the following are of the utmost importance when communicating online: the quality of our connections and not the quantity, fruitful and productive encounters and a healthy balance between our

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid.
engagement in virtual realms versus real life. The Pope’s message from 2009 does not
differ greatly from previous messages of Pope John Paul II however; we are able to see
that this Pope recognizes the importance of addressing young people, who are now at the
forefront of many of the social communications made in today’s society. By urging
young people to focus on the quality of connections that they make online and the quality
of the content that they post, he is not only asking young people to remain respectful and
not offensive, but the Pope is clearly looking at Internet use only through a “religion
online” sense and only takes into regard the information that gets posted online. The
message sounds similar to that of Pope John Paul’s message from 2005 that was directed
towards those who work in mass media (only this time, a bit more evolved for and
focused on the youth of today).

**ONLINE CONNECTIONS AND RELATIONSHIPS**

Many if not most young people today engage in some form of social media such
as Facebook, Twitter and Tumbler. With more than a billion users, Facebook is one of
the most popular online venues for posting information and connecting with old and new
Co-created World*, she questions if the new communication technologies really represent
a breakthrough in how we relate to one another. Some of Herzfeld’s observations
regarding communicating online mirror those of Pope Benedict. Herzfeld wrote,
“language is foundational to our ability to relate to one another.”

Conshohocken, Pennsylvania, Templeton Press, 2009), 79.
Internet have changed the nature of oral communication but have not improved our oral communication.

The new technologies both add and take away from our ability to communicate. While reach and speed are extended with online communication (email allows one to communicate with others across the globe in an instant) authenticity is compromised. Social networks encourage utter transparency, which is facilitated by being able to post “statuses” that allow one to see up-to-the-minute updates on what others are doing. Herzfeld wrote, “the tendency toward self-exposure and over transparency also encourages dissemblance.” Individuals can present or misrepresent themselves in many different ways when online. Herzfeld also wrote that our “friends” on social networks are not always on the same level of friendship as the friends we have in the physical world. She wrote:

Online communication is often truncated to short posts, text messages, or email. It cannot occur as quickly as in a direct conversation. It also tends to be more superficial. Without the clues given by tone of voice, body language, and the clarifications that are easy to make in a face-to-face conversation, we are reluctant to move to the same level of intimacy and self-revelation. It is a way to maintain friendship without having to make any effort whatsoever.\(^\text{15}\)

The quote speaks directly to the Pope’s words about the quality and content of our connections and about having fruitful encounters versus just the sheer number of connections that we make.

\(^{14}\) Ibid, 81.

\(^{15}\) Ibid, 83.
Herzfeld also speaks to the Pope’s words about friendships and engaging in virtual realms. Herzfeld discusses “lifestyle enclaves” a term originally used by sociologist Robert Bellah. Herzfeld wrote that while the Internet allows us to widen our circle of acquaintances, it also has a limiting effect. Real-world interactions expose us to people from both similar and different backgrounds and, sometimes physical proximity forces us to interact with people whom have different backgrounds than our own. Online, people tend to gravitate towards others with similar backgrounds, interests or other commonalities (went to the same college, member of the same club etc.) and this leads to segmentation in online communities. It is easy to engage on the Internet with people who have similar backgrounds and interests, but Internet engagement also can take away from the many potential new people and experiences that we could have. It is easy to become pigeonholed into comfortable social spheres online; however, when they limit our experiences or cause us to neglect our real-world relationships, these activities can become unhealthy. Herzfeld’s views online communication and friendships as second best to those that we make in real life. Her views sound like those of Pope John Paul II from his World Communications Day message in 2000 where declares “direct personal proclamation—one person sharing faith in the Risen Lord with another—is essential. Both Herzfeld and the Catholic Church favor direct human contact above indirect forms of communication.
“The Priest and Pastoral Ministry in a Digital World: New Media at the Service of the Word”

On Friday, June 16, 2009, a few days before the feast of the Solemnity of the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus, Pope Benedict decided to inaugurate a “Year for Priests” on that feast day. Lasting until the same time of the following year, this year was “meant to deepen the commitment of all priests to interior renewal for the sake of a stronger and more incisive witness of the Gospel in today’s world.” In line with the Year for Priests, Pope Benedict’s speech on the 44th World Communications Day was directed towards all priests. The Pope’s message to priests was focused on digital communications and discussed new ways that priests can carry out their ministries. The tremendous growth in digital communications and its impact on society is especially important for priests to keep their ministry efforts fruitful.

Priests as leaders in the Church have been called to proclaim the Word and therefore have a greater responsibility to face the challenge of learning how to use the new communications technologies because they serve their congregations from the front lines. To stay relevant, priests need to be focused, efficient and compelling in their ministry efforts. The Pope said, “Priests stand at the threshold of a new era: as new technologies create deeper forms of relationship across greater distances, they are called to respond pastorally by putting media ever more effectively at the service of the


17. Ibid.
Priests should have education and training in digital communications from their formative years in the seminaries in order to be successful in their goal of leading, teaching, engaging and communicating.

Using the Internet and digital technologies in support of pastoral ministry requires more than posting information about the faith and its teachings online including on Church websites. Priests are encouraged also to be present and engaging online, beyond passively posting information. The Pope said, “this will not only enliven their pastoral outreach, but also will give a ‘soul’ to the fabric of communications that makes up the ‘Web’.”

A pastoral presence online serves as a reminder to all “that God is near; that in Christ we all belong to one another.” As men of God, priests are in the best position to develop (and put into practice) the use of digital communications for pastoral outreach. By being present online, priests can address the spiritual needs of the men and women of our digital age to sense God’s presence and to grow nearer to him. The Pope said:

Thanks to the new communications media, the Lord can walk the streets of our cities and, stopping before the threshold of our homes and our hearts, say once more: “Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will enter his house and dine with him, and he with me.”

As the Pope mentioned in his speech from the previous year, promoting a culture online is everyone’s responsibility. Being present online allows priests to be the example in

18. Ibid.

19. Ibid.

20. Ibid.

21. Ibid.
promoting a digital culture that is respectful to all people. In addition, the pastoral presence online not only gives priests contact with believers in the faith but it also puts priests in contact with non-believers, people from every culture, those disheartened by faith and those searching for faith. This exposure requires priests to be sensitive to the needs of all people and this is an added challenge to the way that priests communicate, relate and engage. The Pope said, “No door can or should be closed to those who, in the name of the risen Christ, are committed to drawing near to others.”

Building on his message from 2009, Pope Benedict framed his case in support of the Internet as a tool for all and specifically spoke on behalf of the pastoral ministry in 2010. In order for priests to fulfill their mission, they must make God concretely present in today’s world and within our digital culture; they must face the challenges of keeping up with technological advances and remain present online in a way that accurately teaches us about God’s love. The Internet and digital communications offer far-reaching possibilities and offer a way to build a vast and real fellowship.

**Cyber-Evangelism**

Pope Benedict’s message from 2010 served two purposes. Since the Pope declared a year for priests, the message was directed solely towards all priests and pastoral ministry. Pope Benedict took an old message and made it new. Encouraging and challenging priests to find creative ways to spread the Gospel while also encouraging them to create a presence so that all followers as well as newcomers to the faith will be welcomed to ask questions and learn was the message from Pope Paul II. Pope Benedict

22. Ibid.
took this message and made it relevant to this day and age and social climate. Pope Benedict expanded Pope John Paul’s message by asking priests to take their ministries to the Internet. He challenged them to do more than post religious teachings and Bible verses online but also to go online and create a pastoral presence online.

Brad Kallenberg points to how cyber evangelism can become a problem, in his book God and Gadgets: Following Jesus in a Technological Age. Kallenberg argues that the Pope does not realize what he is asking for. He wrote that because of a shift in how people use the Internet, the Pope is opening up a new can of worms. The Web initially was viewed as an online extension of information that already existed in hard-copy text. Text authored and posted online in the past could not be easily altered by just anyone. Pages could be viewed but not altered. Today, we have websites like Wikipedia where information can be viewed and altered by anyone. Kallenberg quoted a blogger who wrote:

> Putting a message over the Internet is exactly the same thing as losing total control of your message. People take it up, they republish it, they make fun of it, they re-contextualize it. The simple message becomes incredibly complex.²³

Kallenberg’s view suggests that it is not enough to simply post the Gospel online, because the message can be altered and taken out of its original intended context and it may not be adequate when online users have a question. Kallenberg is a traditional

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viewpoint and believes that interactivity is needed—eye contact, body language and
dialogue are needed in order to provide context.

While the Pope's promotion of priest's presence online are based upon good
intentions, the concerned view from Kallenberg is worth considering. The Pope's
evolving view toward online religion shows us that the Church is willing to connect with
people both offline and online, but do priests have the capacity to maintain a fruitful
presence online while simultaneously maintaining a fruitful presence in real life?

"Truth, Proclamation and Authenticity of Life
in the Digital Age" 24

Pope Benedict's message on the 45th World Communications Day in 2011
focused on how changes in communication have affected cultural and social change. The
Pope's message was similar to his message from 2009 and was again directed mostly to
young people regarding their presence and use of social networks. Not only have the
ways of communicating changed but communication itself has changed. Communication
is not only an exchange of data but it is also a form of sharing. We have seen how social
networks have influenced interpersonal relations and self-awareness of young people who
are greatly involved in these public digital forums. The Pope's message focused on how
young people portray themselves online.

The Pope is in support of engagement of social networks. The online social
networks provide a venue for meeting new people where confines of space and culture do

not exist and where there is a whole new world of potential friendships. While this is a significant social development, it comes with dangers unique to online engagement. The Pope warns that young people should be virtuous and truthful online regarding how they represent themselves. He said, “in the search for sharing, for “friends”, there is the challenge to be authentic and faithful, and not give in to the illusion of constructing an artificial public profile for oneself.” Social networks allow people to share and exchange information about their views of the world, their hopes and their values. The Pope reminds us that there exists a Christian way of being present online. Our communications should be honest and open, responsible and respectful of others. We should express the values, choices and judgments that are consistent with the Gospel teachings. As Christians, we are challenged to proclaim and live by our beliefs. The Pope said, “even when it is proclaimed in the virtual space of the web, the Gospel demands to be incarnated in the real world and linked to the real faces of our brothers and sisters, those with whom we share our daily lives.”

As humans we have a natural desire for relationships and community. The Pope invites Christians to join the network of relationships that have been made possible in our digital era because these digital networks have become an “integral part of human life” but he also reminds us, “the truth of Christ is the full and authentic response to our human desire for relationship, communion and meaning” and the “one in whom all things find their fulfillment.” As believers we should make good use of our online presence.

25. Ibid.

26. Ibid.
"Silence and the Word: Path of Evangelization"27

The focus of Pope Benedict’s message on World Communications Day in 2012 was unlike his messages from previous years. The message was less focused on the Internet and communications technologies but rather its focus was on an aspect of the process of communication that is often times overlooked and under discussed—silence. In fact, the focus of this message resembles the second point from The Rapid Development in which Pope John Paul II talks about Gospel reflection. Pope John Paul II said that the Internet can “intensify communion and render a more penetrating proclamation of His word.”28 Pope Benedict describes silence and word as two aspects of communication that should be kept in balance, alternating and integrating in order to achieve productive and authentic dialogue between people. When both silence and word compliment one another communication can acquire value and meaning. In today’s digital world we are inundated with messages, information and news by the minute that the Pope’s message reminds us of the importance and need for silent reflection in our daily lives.

The Pope recognizes that in today’s world, we rely heavily on the Internet as a tool for almost everything. The Internet has become a forum for ideas, advice and answers to our questions, and search engines and social networks have become the main


starting point of communication and expression for many people. Amidst all of our communication technologies, the Pope reminds us that “silence is and integral element of communication; in its absence, words rich in content cannot exist.” Silence affords us the opportunity to listen and understand ourselves. It also gives us to time to reflect on the words and messages that our communicated to us. In silence one can observe the most authentic communications taking place; in gestures, facial expressions and body language, many feelings and expressions are communicated. We can express and communicate love, joy, anxiety and suffering all in silence. It is when we observe communications and expressions in silence that we fully become witness and feel the emotion or sentiment behind the communication. The Pope said:

When messages and information are plentiful, silence becomes essential if we are to distinguish what is important from what is insignificant or secondary. Deeper reflection helps us to discover the links between events that at first sight seem unconnected, to make evaluations, to analyze messages; this makes it possible to share thoughtful and relevant opinions, giving rise to an authentic body of shared knowledge.

The Pope proposed that we should learn to develop a balance between silence, words, images and sounds. Dialogue and exchanging ideas helps people talk through and discuss answers to questions but silent reflection permits people to dig deep within themselves and become open to new paths of knowledge.


30. Ibid.
According to the Pope, our constant search for truths and endless questions about our human existence proves that, as human beings we are not content with superficial exchanges. We possess a natural longing for sharing, communion and truth. Some websites, applications and social networks can help people find time for silent reflection, prayer and meditation and these types of places and tools should be made apparent to those who seek to deepen their faith and to those who seek to learn about God. The Pope said:

If God speaks to us even in silence, we in turn discover in silence the possibility of speaking with God and about God. We need that silence which becomes contemplation, which introduces us into God’s silence and brings us to the point where the Word, the redeeming Word, is born.  

While the Pope’s focus is on silence and reflection, this message also seems to suggest that the Church could welcome online religion in some way. Pope Benedict’s message from 2012 was unlike any of his messages that we have discussed so far but it is not unlike anything we have heard previously. His message is a call for reflection. The Pope challenges us to be silent and to allow our minds to absorb the word of God and listen to how He speaks to us in our hearts. In today’s social climate we often feel a need to always be “on”, to be connected and to be heard. It is fitting to be reminded that we also need to “turn off”, disconnect, be silent and just listen.

31. Ibid.
CHAPTER V
CATHOLICS ONLINE TODAY

FINDING FAITH ONLINE

The Catholic Church, scholars and religious followers collectively acknowledge that the Internet provides great opportunities for the institution and its followers while at the same time realizing the challenges that come along with being present online. As more people turned to the Internet for religion during the first decade of the 21st century, the views of the Catholic Church evolved with society’s needs. For Roman Catholics, through the Pope’s messages, letters and documents, we were able to witness the evolution of the Church’s position regarding Internet use as it has caused changes to social communication through the years. With technology at most people’s fingertips, Internet use has allowed its users to be bound more closely to one another, their communities and their religion. However, with a closer bond between the Church and its followers, the Catholic Church and its leaders need to work harder to maintain the core beliefs of Catholicism both in the physical world and online.

At the beginning of the new millennium, Pope John Paul’s message on World Communication Day set an important precedence regarding Internet use for all Catholics that resounded throughout the rest of his papacy and continued on through Pope Benedict during his years as Pope. Pope John Paul’s reference to the feast of Pentecost in his World Communications Day speech from 2000 showed followers that Internet use should be viewed as a gift. Just as the apostles were given the gift of tongues, we in today’s age, have also been afforded a “modern day” gift of tongues in the Internet. The Internet

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allows us to bring the Word of God to anyone, anywhere in the world. Barriers of time and space no longer exist and it is our responsibility as Christians to continue the work of the apostles who were the first to be blessed with the gift of tongues. While the Church in 2000 had a positive outlook towards Internet use, its view was still broad and unfocused. Overall the Church valued the Internet and all of its possibilities but its view was immature. It was too early in the Church’s relationship with the Internet to be fully aware of possible dangers that also come along with Internet use. However, the most significant point to make about the Church’s view of the Internet from this time was that it viewed this technological advance as a gift and the Church compared it to the Holy Spirit’s gift of tongues to the apostles at Pentecost.

Looking back at the survey by Pew from 2000, we can also tell that this research developed from a one-sided view toward Internet use by the religious. The research only asked about Internet use from a religion online perspective partly because perhaps interactivity online was not available or as common as it is today but also because during the early 2000’s, the Internet was used by most for gathering information more than anything else. Although the perspective of the survey is one-sided, it did significantly prove that Internet use has helped to enhance the relationships local church leaders and their congregations both externally and internally.

Indications that the Church’s view toward Internet use was evolving could be seen by 2002. By this time, the Pope was referring to the Internet as “a new forum for proclaiming the Gospel” and the Internet undoubtedly became viewed by the Church as its new tool for communication and evangelization. With the acceptance of the Internet
as a new tool also came some concern. By 2002 the Pope realized that seeking answers through the Internet can stop individuals from seeking through deeper inner reflection because the Internet is able to give quick answers to questions; however, it does not offer much stimulus for reflection. The Church continued to remind us that nothing can take the place of real world witness within the Church and community. Dr. Brenda Brasher’s views on the Internet and cyberspace mirrored some of the views of the Church in the sense that she agreed that the Catholic Church successfully uses the Internet to place religion online and create an online presence. However, the Church community does not solely exist online. Dr. Brasher points out that Sunday mass (which takes place in person) remains a core tradition of the Church and that the use of the Internet as a tool for the religious helps anchor the religious to the history of the Church. While still a useful tool for the Church, especially in the religion online sense, the Church knew that guidelines for understanding the Internet and Internet use needed to be established.

**DEFINING THE CATHOLIC PRESENCE ONLINE**

The release of *The Church and the Internet* in 2002 gave a better sense of the Church’s view toward the Internet and Internet use by explaining in greater detail the areas where Internet use would be advantageous to the Church. The three areas were communication, evangelization and education. By this time, the Church was already using the Internet for communication within its parishes and for religion online, but by now, the Church fully realized how essential a tool the Internet had become as more and more people began to rely on the Internet. For evangelization, the Church believed that the Internet could help attract new followers as well as maintain the ones that it already
had. By indicating that Internet use could now play a role in evangelization, the Church was showing that it was now willing to participate in the different ways society was making connections. As long as connections made online eventually led to real life, in-person participation in Church, the Church was accepting of Internet use for evangelization. Educating seminarians, priests religious and lay personnel, teachers, parents and students through Internet use was also believed to be another critical way to use the Internet to the Church’s advantage. However, the Church also showed how much it has learned about the Internet up until that point because the document stated that the Church was in favor of having regulations in place that set limits to what individuals can post online (without infringing on one’s right to expression). It also warned against unofficial religious groups who can cause confusion to those who are just beginning to learn about religion, and the Church now fears that, for many, the Internet may allow individuals to pick and choose beliefs and practices from various faiths as if religion was being served a la carte in order to make religion convenient to one’s lifestyle. By outlining the good and the bad that come with Internet use, the Church showed a willingness to continue its work towards creating a Catholic identity online.

Bazin and Cottin’s view on using the Internet for dialogue and exchange (from their book *Virtual Christianity: Potential and Challenge for the Churches*) is a view worthy of consideration by the Catholic Church. Up until that point in time, the Church used the Internet in one way—through religion online, by putting information regarding faith online and making it accessible to all who wanted it. Bazin and Cottin pushed the issue further by suggesting that the Internet could be used in an interactive way, allowing
people to participate in dialogue with Church leaders in order to ask questions and receive answers. We will see the issue of interactivity arise again in the upcoming years. In the meantime, the Church’s approach toward Internet use has been conservative and cautious.

**Leading by Example**

During Pope John Paul’s final year, he wrote an Apostolic letter that contained three significant points regarding the Church’s use of the Internet up until 2005. Pope John Paul believed that the Church was progressive in its use of the Internet, which by now was an integral part of Church operations and for the lives of many followers around the world. With a keen understanding of Internet use, the Pope directed a very pointed message to those who work in media: instructing them to work with honestly and fairness for the sake of those who turn to the Internet for guidance and answers. He urged individuals to use the Internet to acquire religious inspiration and to foster reflection, and he also called for a change in mentality on the part of those who work for the Church. The most poignant statement of this Apostolic letter was the Pope stating “everything must be done so that the Gospel might permeate society, stimulating people to listen and embrace its message.” The Pope’s letter from 2005 seemed to take a bigger step toward online religion. Interestingly, also in the same year, the Vatican established its own YouTube channel (a move that also demonstrated a move toward online religion and the Church’s continued willingness to stay connected to its followers and society). On the Vatican YouTube channel, one can watch the news and activities of the Pope and the Catholic Church through posted videos. Posting videos online is the closest that the
Church has come to participating in online religion and in my opinion is a big step. Without compromising the core values of the faith, the Church once again proved that it could advance with the times.

**PROCEEDING WITH CAUTION**

Christopher Helland’s opinions on Internet use by what he defined as “official” religious groups gave us new perspectives to consider. He believed more harm would come to official religions from “unofficial” religions online, since they outnumber the official ones online. Members of official religions who create websites that contain material that is not in line with official doctrine is also a big problem for official religions online. Helland’s concerns are noteworthy however, it is my belief that the Church already considered those points in 2002 when Pope John Paul urged for the creation of an overseeing administration for the Internet. From *The Church and the Internet* and *The Rapid Development* it seems to me that the Church knew that being present online was not going to be a project that could simply run itself once information got posted; but instead, the Church seems to know that it needs to monitor its own online presence very closely. Helland also criticized the Church for using the Internet solely as a tool for posting religion online and believed the Church would not be able to meet the needs of individuals who knew the Internet to be more than just a medium for postings. The Church has not been swift to join each new media trend and it is my belief that such an approach is smart. The Church’s presence online needs to be well calculated since everything that is posted online can not be removed and is ‘eternal’. If one looks back at posts from ten years ago, the posts should be accurate reflections of the events of that
time. We will see the Church become present in more social communication arenas in years to come, but it is my belief that a cautious approach to use Internet use is the Church’s best practice. Pope John Paul’s cautious work towards understanding and incorporating Internet use helped set guidelines for the Church and prepared it to evolve with society and technological change.

**PROMOTING A CHRISTIAN INTERNET CULTURE**

Pope Benedict XVI was chosen to become the next Bishop of Rome after the death of Pope John Paul II in 2005. The themes from Pope Benedict’s speeches on the World Communication Days from 2009 through 2012 did not present new ideas but instead expanded on ideas presented in past speeches. Pope Benedict addressed groups more closely, particularly young people and their social needs and concerns as they relate to Internet use. For example, Pope Benedict’s messages from 2009 and 2011 were directed to young people and talked about friendship, the human need to connect and the use of social networks. The messages sounded like previous messages from Pope John Paul in which he asked individuals to take greater responsibility for their presence online and the quality of their relationships online; however, on both occasions, Pope Benedict’s messages were specifically directed towards young people. In doing so, the Pope showed his awareness of how much exposure the young people of today have to the Internet and social media. It seemed that the Pope believed it important enough to direct his concern to the future generation of young people as a way to show that he recognizes the social trends and recognizes the way that today’s youth connect with each other and the world. In addition, the opinion of Noreen Herzfeld on the quality and content of online
communications was in agreement with the Pope. We are seeing that the opinions of the Pope and religious scholars are almost always aligned and when they are not then it is simply because the Church may not be ready to move as fast as the rest of society moves.

The Pope directed his message in 2010 to all priests in honor of the “Year for Priests”. The Pope shifted the focus of that speech to priests because they are responsible for seeing that the God’s mission of spreading the Gospel is carried out. It was particularly important to speak directly to priests about their involvement on the Internet. In the message, the Pope challenged priests to increase their exposure to today’s digital world and to keep up with technological advances because not only will this enable the Church to connect more fully with its followers, it allows the Church to open doors to reach new people, those who may be seeking religion.

Brad Kallenberg wrote that a pastoral presence online is not enough because online posts can be altered and taken out of context by anyone and that interactivity is needed. It is my belief that Kallenberg was correct in 2010. Interactivity of some sort by the Church was needed by then. The Church could have become interactive online years earlier but it did not. While it is unfortunate that the Church did not move to become interactive by 2010, it is my opinion that the Church’s non-interactive position did not pose a major threat to the Church at that time. Being interactive online requires one to be “always on” and, for those in leadership roles within the Church, this may have been both impractical and impossible at that time.
THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND THE INTERNET IN 2012

After targeting young people and priests and discussing how we communicate online in the previous years, it was refreshing to see the Pope’s focus circle back to silence and reflection in his World Communications Day speech from 2012. The Pope once again showed how in-tune he is with society by reminding us of the importance of having a balance between communicating and listening. He knew that, in today’s world, we are constantly being inundated with messages—from television, radio, email, blogs, text messages, Facebook statuses, Tweets and so on. With so much in our daily lives stimulating us to react and speak, the Pope urged us to be silent, listen and take time to reflect. He said that the Internet can help with stimulating reflection and meditation. That being said, in December 2012, Pope Benedict joined Twitter. His handle, (@Pontifex) has been translated into different languages, and while the person behind the tweets may not necessarily be from the Pope himself, it was a bold move to join a social network after so many cautionary references to them in past speeches. Joining Twitter showed that the Pope and the Catholic Church can do much more than simply talk about social networks, the Pope has become the example about which he has spoken about. With only five tweets so far from December 12 to February 11, the Pope is already showing us how to balance an interactive presence with a physical one. Joining Twitter also showed a break in tradition for the Catholic Church by finally proving that interactivity online is possible by the Church. It provides an example for Catholic churches and priests around the world to follow and provides encouragement to join as well (for the benefit of individuals within their congregations).
In another bold move that broke with tradition, Pope Benedict announced his resignation from the Papal position on February 11, 2013. The last time that a Pope resigned was six hundred years ago. In my opinion, this brave decision on the part of Pope Benedict shows his deep care and concern for the Catholic Church and its followers. While some may criticize his decision to resign, it in fact once again shows the Pope’s complete and utmost awareness of himself and the needs of the Church. The event of Pope Benedict’s resignation only gives hopes to the many Catholic followers that the Church is always evolving with modern times and will not be left behind. It is my belief that the Catholic Church under the leadership of a new Pope will fearlessly continue the work of both Pope John Paul and Pope Benedict and will strive to maintain relevance amidst an ever changing and evolving digital society.
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