

DISPUTED QUESTIONS:

PREACHING AND THE INTERNET

The Internet is an indispensable part of modern life, and discussions of the New Evangelization speak about it endlessly. The Pontifical Council for Social Communications has released two documents about it, Ethics in Internet (2002) and The Church and Internet (2002), and both John Paul II and Benedict XVI have spoken about its use. Over the summer, Pope Benedict even sent his first tweet. But how is the Church to make use of this conflicted medium? What is the role of the Internet in evangelization?

MEETING CHRIST ON GOOGLE

Clement Dickie, O.P.

Every Dominican is familiar with the story of St. Dominic and the innkeeper. Holy Father Dominic spent all night talking with an innkeeper in what is now southern France until the man converted from the Cathar heresy to the true faith. The need to spread the Gospel by personal engagement remains in the modern world, but now the Internet has replaced the inn and the marketplace of the past as the locus for informal exchanges of ideas. If we are to share the faith with modern men in developed countries, the Church must be online.

A preacher's online presence should have at least one of three goals: helping people to learn about God, helping them get to church, and exhorting them to holiness. All of these goals can be accomplished with a little hard work. However, oftentimes Christians online provide a counter-witness to the Gospel or develop an interior focus that narrows our thinking and causes us to lose sight of others' souls. Above all, the online preacher must remember that, as with St.

Dominic in the inn, sharing the Gospel means making a personal connection.

The Internet is fast becoming the first place people go to find answers for their questions about basically everything. There is no question—at least in the developed world—that many people use the Internet to satisfy their initial curiosity about God. But the Catholic Church has yet to fully accept the evangelical challenge of the Internet; for instance, even though Catholics believe that the Church has been entrusted with the revelation of God to his people, Google searches for ‘God’ and ‘Jesus’ yield no Catholic results on the first page. In order to help people come to know God, we have to be the ones providing answers to the ultimate questions online.

But this evangelical imperative must be balanced by a sober awareness of the limits of the Internet. Simply put, it is not possible to worship God *on* the Internet, because the Internet is not really a place. By using analogies to physical things, we intuit how to use this vast system of computers wired together with a series of complicated switches. We talk of ‘sites’ having ‘addresses’ that we can use to ‘visit’ them. We call this amalgamation of files ‘cyberspace’ and order goods by ‘placing’ them in ‘shopping carts.’ All of this can sometimes lead us into thinking that there is an online world as real and substantive as the ‘brick and mortar’ world around us. However, the Internet is only a metaphorical place. When I visit a bulletin board on the Web, I am really alone in the computer room, not surrounded by a full room of interlocutors.

Why does this seeming technicality matter? Because it reminds us that our emphasis on the Internet has been about communicating the Gospel and providing tools that believers can use to bring them closer to Christ in the real world. Creating a virtual sacred space is of little value, since a person cannot be virtually saved. Healthy online interaction with the Church should lead to in-person interaction with other Christians, with the Mass, and with the sacraments.

Catholic sites that are working on this project do exist, but this is an area that could use more work. Catholic Answers (catholic.com) and New Advent (newadvent.org) are prominent examples of suc-

cessful Catholic evangelization online. The two sites illustrate the great range of possibilities for Catholics making informational use of the Web, and the limits of current models thereof.

Catholic Answers is specifically engaged in apologetics, and seeks to answer frequently asked questions about Catholicism. Someone new to the faith, or just learning about the faith he has had since childhood, can learn quite a bit, quickly. However, question-based resources are usually exhausted just as quickly.

New Advent, at the opposite end, mostly provides undigested but comprehensive resources for Catholics by hosting digitized texts that are out of copyright, including St. Thomas' *Summa Theologiae*, the old *Catholic Encyclopedia*, and works of the Fathers. The Vatican's own website functions this way for recent (since Pope Leo XIII) magisterial documents. Providing easy electronic access to information about the faith is a great step toward a new evangelization, but these texts do not always speak for themselves. The Church faces the perennial task of interpreting the great tradition of Catholic literature for the needs of the present day.

There is also a need to provide organized information in accessible, digested prose for the mass market, a field that remains under-represented. Beyond specifically Catholic apostolates, there is also a need for committed Catholics to contribute to open sources of information like Wikipedia and Yahoo Answers.

But the Church's evangelical task will fail if it stops at mere apologetics. The Internet should facilitate an encounter with Jesus Christ in the sacraments. It should be a door that opens into real-world practice of the faith, not just an interesting mental picture that people stop to debate about before moving on.

The Church's ability to make this real-world connection has thus far been inadequate. For instance, getting accurate information from local parish, shrine, and convent websites is generally a superhuman task; oftentimes the front pages are so woefully out-of-date that you aren't even sure if the church is open any more, let alone whether Mass is still at 7. Attentiveness to these practical matters is a *sine qua non* of effective Internet evangelization, which should always end by moving people from the computer to the pew.



POPE BENEDICT XVI SENDS HIS FIRST TWEET (AP PHOTO)

The third use for the Internet is exhorting to holiness. I mean for this to be a broad category, including both direct exhortation and demonstrations of the possibility of living in relationship with God. If the work of preaching on the Internet does not enkindle or increase a burning desire for God in the hearts of those who see it, it will fail in its goal. The life of holiness must be integrated, and must give body and soul to the love of God, so fidelity in this realm is bound up closely with fidelity in the other two dimensions of online preaching.

The true Internet preacher must engage in all three of these activities. He must inform, facilitate, and exhort seamlessly. While each of these roles, taken individually, involves mainly providing resources, preaching is a personal task. Online preaching must engage rather than disconnect the preacher from his audience.

The preacher should take advantage of the opportunities for personal contact available in social media like blogs, Facebook, Google+, etc. The standard static website creates an air of stiffness appropriate

for conveying facts, not for connecting with people. Moreover, the social media offer tools that everyone can use to spread the Good News. When anyone reads a good article or a good blog post or hears about a good event, he can instantly share it with everyone he knows. This technique actually adds to the effectiveness of online communication, because the work of the online preacher is being passed along by personal connections, from friend to friend, or at least acquaintance to acquaintance.

Effective preachers make connections between the spiritual and the temporal. Blogging, which relies heavily on links, is all about making connections. Online preachers have the perfect forum to show people the spiritual reality behind what they see around them. Connections between the news and Jesus Christ are just the beginning of what is possible.

Movements of the heart require a personal touch. It is for this reason that the social Web is a more fertile ground than more formal websites. The ability to reach people one-on-one across the globe is a great tool, even if nothing online can substitute for contact in the real world.

There are, however, some real pitfalls when entering the online discussion, of which would-be Internet preachers should be aware.

Most people engaged in online ministry use re-purposed content either in whole or in part. Priests post their Sunday homilies, magazines their articles, and lecturers their videos, all of which were originally made for a different format. All of these things can be good in moderation, but true online content requires a different approach.

Re-purposed content can be the beginning of something interesting for the Web, but it will have to be translated into the snappier, more personal style suitable for digital readers. People don't spend time with an online text. Online there are myriad distractions, and blobs of text have a way of washing over the user. The competition for attention is fierce. Content for the Internet should get the point across quickly and repeatedly while remaining interesting.

But the biggest danger is losing perspective. The World Wide Web,

the most visible part of the Internet, may allow for truly global communication, but that does not mean that the whole world is actually listening. Speaking analogously, most Internet users travel between a few virtual small towns. Only a few sites have a broad audience online, while most fill a tiny niche—the so-called “long tail.” Even some of the most popular sites—Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, etc.—can be thought of as amalgamations of many smaller user bases. On Facebook you see what your ‘friends’ have posted, and on YouTube the videos recommended for you. A responsible approach to the Internet needs to understand this dynamic of online audiences.

Because there are so many online content producers, most serve a narrow audience, with each niche having its own relatively major and minor players, who will be unknown to those outside. For example, Fr. John Zuhlsdorf, the blogger behind *What Does the Prayer Really say?*, may seem to be ubiquitous to the connected Catholic blogger. He is often cited (a simple Google search reveals more than 27,000 links to posts he has written and Alexa reports that 1,140 separate sites link to his), and he consistently wins Catholic blog awards that are based on audience votes.

Yet mention Fr. Z. outside of the Internet and most Catholics would have no idea who you are talking about. It’s not hard to figure out why. Fr. Z.’s website is ranked 160,770th on the Internet and 47,343th in the US according to Alexa. While that is pretty high given that there are millions of websites out there, it still makes him a marginal media figure at best.

Why do I mention this? Certainly not to belittle the work of Fr. Zuhlsdorf, who has built up quite a following over the years, but to emphasize that when we engage in the online conversation, we are talking to a narrow slice of the world, even if that small slice can contain a large number of people in aggregate (Fr. Z.’s website counter has logged over 17 million visitors).

The self-selecting members of the Catholic blogosphere need to be preached to and reminded of the saving gospel of Jesus Christ, but those preachers need to recognize that their audience is probably less intellectually diverse than 7 AM mass at a suburban parish. As Fr. Zuhlsdorf himself put it, “We who live in echo chambers, and blogs,

should have a care not to think we are being universally affirmed.”

The social Internet—that is blogs, Facebook, My Space, Twitter, bulletin boards, and the more old-fashioned usenet groups and chat rooms—tends to create networks of like-minded readers (and often their direct opposition), who develop linguistic shorthand, common perceptions about the larger world, and converging opinions about various matters of taste. More importantly this loyal readership knows everything that is going on in these online spaces. An idea might originate on one site and be commented on in dozens of blogs and hundreds of Facebook pages. The echo-chamber effect makes these ideas seem more popular than they are, and makes their originators seem more prophetic and important than they really are.

As a result, pettiness, cliquishness, and gossip are also real risks within the ‘walls’ of an online social community. Open forums seem to suffer from this particularly. ‘Flame wars’ can break out between narrowly separated factions that cause positive harm to the reputations of both the issue at hand and the hosting website. Anyone opening such a forum should be mindful of these dangers and monitor postings closely.

Should every preacher have a blog? Of course not. The proliferation of vanity blogs is not a laudable phenomenon. Fortunately vanity blogs tend to die of their own weight. Anyone who isn’t going to update regularly with interesting content shouldn’t create a blog. But preachers with a unique perspective and with accessible prose can make a real contribution by entering into the online dialogue. The holy desire to avoid the vanity and distraction that come with modern communication must be mitigated by a zeal for our contemporaries’ salvation.

Commenting on the YOUCAT, the new Youth Catechism, Pope Benedict XVI urges young people to “study it in the quiet of your room; read it with a friend; form study groups and networks; share with each other on the Internet. By all means continue to talk with each other about your faith.” This simple exhortation should stand as a guide to Internet preachers about how their ministry can truly change the world: by informing people about the faith, guiding

them to Mass and the sacraments, and exhorting them to holiness, we can transform the small villages of Internet Catholicism into vibrant communities of the faithful who share ideas on the Internet and share their lives in the world, brought by true personal contact into unity in the eternal presence of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Clement Dickie entered the Order of Preachers in 2009.

SURFING THE NET FOR JESUS?

Innocent Smith, O.P.

A good way to begin a fight among Catholics of a certain perspective would be to declare: “If Chesterton were alive today, he would be a blogger.” Notice what dangerous ground we are on, treading the delicate fissure between our imagined visions of Chesterton the conservative, who stands up for everything good and holy and decadent, and Chesterton the innovator, the journalist of Fleet Street who disgorges daily essays of higher or lower quality using the latest media technology. Which side of our Chestertonian self-projection will prevail when it encounters “the Internet”? Regardless, what stance are we to take ourselves? Are we to use this technology, or to shun it?

We might make a few distinctions immediately. First, we should consider our own state in life: a religious, such as myself, may have a different prudential response to technology than a layman or a cleric. We should make further subdivisions within each category: with religious, for instance, between those who have a primarily contemplative charism, those who have an active charism, and those who may be blessed with a synthesis of the two. If the Internet gives us the opportunity of virtually traversing the globe and communicating freely with anyone else who happens to have an Internet connection, the proper mode of use will be different for one whose vocation

is indeed to travel the globe than for one who is called to holiness in a very particular place, and not primarily to a verbal proclamation of the faith.

In this essay I will not dare to proclaim the proper use of the Internet for everyone, or indeed anyone, but will merely offer some reflections on the role of the Internet and other tools of mass media in the Church's task of preaching.

Vatican II, the only ecumenical council to be conducted within the era of modern communication technology, explicitly urges pastors to use instruments of communication in service of their mission of instructing and guiding the faithful: "Pastors should hasten, therefore, to fulfill their duty in this respect, one which is intimately linked with their ordinary preaching responsibility" (*Inter mirifica* 13; cf. IM 3). The Council thus clearly indicates that we are justified in using technology as an aspect of our preaching mission. This affirmation leads us to a deeper consideration of what preaching is in itself, which will in turn give us further indications on the role of technology within this effort.

THE MANDATE TO PREACH

Before his Ascension, Jesus gave the apostles the mandate to "go into all the world and preach the gospel to the whole creation" (Mk 16:15). We can see at once that this mandate challenges us to envisage the task of preaching as having a wider scope than we might expect; our preaching is not restricted to those who are immediately on hand, but should rather be extended to everyone whom we might possibly encounter. Vatican II reminds us that "the influence of the mass media passes beyond national boundaries and makes individuals, so to speak, citizens of human society as a whole" (IM 22); "through better means of communication, distances between peoples have been almost eliminated" (*Apostolicam actuositatem* 8). Modern communication methods are thus invaluable if we are to preach to the whole of creation as St. Paul exhorted Timothy: "Preach the word, be urgent in season and out of season, convince, rebuke, and exhort, be unfailing in patience and in teaching" (2 Tim 4:2).

PREACHING AND THE SPOKEN WORD

In the present context of discussing the role of the Internet in preaching, it is important to reiterate that the primary medium of preaching is the spoken word heard in person. For St. Paul, “faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes by the preaching of Christ” (Rm 10:17). Christ, like Socrates and Pythagoras, preached to his disciples by word and example, not by writing. The purpose of Christ’s preaching was to imprint his doctrine upon the hearts of his hearers, and to spread the message of salvation to the Gentiles by means of his Jewish apostles. As St. Paul writes to the Corinthians,

You yourselves are our letter of recommendation, written on your hearts, to be known and read by all men; and you show that you are a letter from Christ delivered by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts (2 Cor 3:2-3).

Christ “published (*promulgavit*) [the gospel] by his own lips, to be a universal source of saving truth to all peoples” (*Dei Verbum* 5). Christ instituted his disciples as witnesses to his spoken word, instructing them, as we have seen, to repeat this word throughout all the earth. Thus, “the apostles handed on, by their own preaching and examples and by their dispositions, whatever they had received from Christ’s lips, his way of life, or his works, or had learned by the prompting of the Holy Spirit” (DV 7). This preaching of Christ was handed on by the apostles both through the appointment of successors who could continue to hand on the faith by their own word and example, and through committing the message of salvation to writing under the interior guidance of the Holy Spirit.

SCRIPTURE AND TECHNOLOGY

In our present context, we might emphasize that the act of writing out the message of Jesus with pen and ink was a decision to utilize the best contemporary means of communication. St. Paul supplemented his oral preaching by writing letters to the Christian communities, writing out (or dictating) his ideas under the guidance

of the Spirit in a script accessible to his readers and transmitted to them by whatever systems of distribution he may have had at hand. Although we are not blessed with the same infallible guidance of the Spirit when we use technical means to convey the message of Jesus, we are nonetheless engaged in the same task of preaching Christ using whatever means are available.

On the other hand, despite the infinite riches the scriptures contain, they could not reveal everything that their human authors desired to convey. Take for instance Paul's acknowledgment in his First Letter to the Thessalonians that he has been "praying earnestly night and day that we may see you face to face and supply what is lacking in your faith" (1 Thes 3:10). In his Second Letter to the same community, he urges the Thessalonians to "stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by letter" (2 Thes 2:15).

Although he offers much insight in his two letters to this community, there are some aspects of the faith that he seems to want to communicate in person rather than through the written word. The apostle John likewise writes in one letter that "though I have much to write to you, I would rather not use paper and ink, but I hope to come to see you and talk with you face to face, so that our joy may be complete" (2 John 12), and in another that "I had much to write to you, but I would rather not write with pen and ink; I hope to see you soon, and we will talk together face to face" (3 John 13-14).

Just as writing was at times too limited for the level of intimate communication desired by the apostles, so too, in our more limited context, there are many aspects of the faith for which technology cannot serve as an adequate medium. The deposit of faith "includes everything that helps the people of God to live a holy life and to grow in faith. In this way the church, in its teaching, life, and worship, perpetuates and hands on to every generation all that it is and all that it believes" (DV 8). The transmission of the faith is not exhausted by the transmission of the verbal content of the faith, for life and worship are best taught by example.

Here we might recall the remark of Cardinal Lustiger that "there is no Christian existence without the sacraments and the liturgy;

without them, Christianity becomes only an ideology.” This is very important for the question of the use of technology in ministry. If the digital aspect of the presentation of the faith comes to dominate or displace the sacramental life of the Church, then Christianity will soon devolve into an ideology.

This is a particular danger, ironically, when it is a question of media related to the liturgy or the sacraments, for instance a blog that reports about beautiful liturgies with sumptuous photography, or a television channel that broadcasts exemplary liturgies; reporting of this sort has a proper role, but there is a constant danger that it may inadvertently (or sadly, in some cases, intentionally) lure its readers away from actual participation in the liturgy: they don’t celebrate the Mass beautifully where I live, so I would rather just skip the liturgy and look at pictures of a better one on the Internet.

THE USEFUL AND THE SELF-INDULGENT

The documents of the Second Vatican Council reveal a nuanced view of the media: “The Church recognizes that these media, if properly utilized, can be of great service to mankind, since they greatly contribute to men’s entertainment and instruction as well as to the spread and support of the Kingdom of God. The Church recognizes, too, that men can employ these media contrary to the plan of the Creator and to their own loss” (IM 2).

Despite this inherent danger, the Council clearly teaches that these tools of communication are to be used within the work of evangelization:

The Catholic Church, since it was founded by Christ our Lord to bear salvation to all men and thus is obliged to preach the Gospel, considers it one of its duties to announce the Good News of salvation also with the help of the media of social communication and to instruct men in their proper use (IM 3).

After making this affirmation, however, the Council makes an important clarification: “It is, therefore, an inherent right of the Church

to have at its disposal and to employ any of these media *insofar as they are necessary or useful* for the instruction of Christians and all its efforts for the welfare of souls” (IM 3).

Technology is not an end in itself, but a tool, and is to be employed not universally and in every circumstance, but in ways that are in accord with the actual needs of a particular situation. Thus, it is perpetually important to reevaluate our own use of technology, to make sure that we are using these media insofar as they are truly necessary or useful, and not insofar as we are amused or distracted by their delights. In this regard, it is significant that the *Constitutions of the Order of Preachers* states that “the brothers may have books and equipment (*instrumenta varia*) for personal use” (LCO 38, §1), but warns that “the brothers should beware of acquiring novelties (*novitatibus*) or comfortable life-styles” (LCO 34, §1).

This is not to say that we cannot ever use the Internet in a recreational way, by reading articles, listening to music, or watching YouTube videos about cats, but we should be sensitive to the boundaries between recreational Internet use and ministerial use. The line might sometimes be blurry—if I contribute to a debate on a Catholic blog that I am reading, there might be something of both at work—but it is important to be honest with myself about which form of use I am presently engaged in. The reason for this is to avoid self-deception about the extent of my actual ministry: I might feel like I’m doing “work,” but may simply be indulging myself.

THE INSTRUMENTS OF TRAVAIL

It is important for individuals engaged in preaching on the Internet to carefully evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the various tools available and to adjust their use accordingly. Many Internet content platforms allow for a direct interaction between the author and the reader that is unlike any other form of media. This has certain advantages: it can help a writer to focus his content on what his readers are most responsive to, or to address questions that arise about a particular topic.

It also has disadvantages: the time necessary to moderate and respond to comments can be extensive, and often comment boxes be-



VIKTOR HERTZ - SURFING THE WEB

come cesspools of gossip and ignorant pronouncements. These factors should be carefully weighed to see whether the costs outweigh the benefits in an individual case.

Another distinctive feature of the Internet is that it allows one to mix many different forms of media: video, text, music, and so forth. This can allow for dynamic and engaging presentations, but it also has the danger of leading the preacher to focus more on the form than the content of his message, and it can render his contributions prematurely obsolete because of subsequent advances in technology. Why should I listen to a preacher who has such a primitive editing technique for his YouTube video? Can someone who still has a moving gif on his website possibly have something relevant to say to me?

A related factor is the extent to which a preacher uses the various statistics that are available for different types of websites: views for a video, incoming links for a blog, and so forth. Like comments on a website, these too can be helpful tools, but also have the danger of leading the preacher to focus on superficially measurable results over less tangible effects such as the conversion of hearts. Although these tools can tell me if *no one* has read or watched my piece, they themselves can't tell me whether my contribution has actually helped anyone or not. Further, the preacher must be careful that these statistics not become a point of pride. If I am constantly concerned with how many hits I am getting, I should ask myself whom I am writing for: the people, or myself?

We should recall the warning of St. Paul: "Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for edifying, as fits the occasion, that it may impart grace to those who hear" (Eph 4:29). We are to preach the word whether the time is opportune or inopportune, but our mode and message should always be well ordered in relation to the actual needs of the situation, and should never devolve into self-indulgence.

In this regard, we should remember that proper boundaries are always necessary in ministry, and thus we should be wary of crossing lines in our ministerial use of the Internet that we would be more careful about in the context of our official duties at a parish or apostolate—for instance by inappropriately focusing attention on our own

personality or activities. We must bear in mind, as the Council acknowledges in a different context, that “not all knowledge is helpful” (IM 5).

For the priest or religious engaged in the apostolate of preaching, the Internet offers us many useful tools that should not be ignored, but it also imposes limitations and burdens that must be carefully considered. Above all, it is necessary to develop a synthesis in which technology assists the whole ministry of the priest, rather than becoming an end in itself that diminishes the vital link between the ministry of the word and the ministry of the sacraments. Preaching for the salvation of souls is a true ministry; surfing the net is not.

Innocent Smith entered the Order of Preachers in 2008.