Summary of the Document - The Church and the Internet

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THE CHURCH AND INTERNET

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I.   **INTRODUCTION**

The Church's interest in the Internet is a particular expression of her longstanding interest in the media of social communication.

What is the media?

- An *outcome of the historical scientific process* by which humankind 'advances further and further in the discovery of the resources and values contained in the whole of creation'. (John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens*, n. 25; Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 34).
- They are '*marvellous technical inventions*' (Vatican II, *Inter Mirifica*, no. 1) that already do much to meet human needs and may yet do even more.
- 'The Church sees these media as '*gifts of God*' which, in accordance with his providential design, unite men in brotherhood and so help them to cooperate with his plan for their salvation.'(Pope Pius XII, Encyclical, *Miranda Prorsus*, 1957; Pastoral Instruction on the Means of Social Communications, *Communio et Progressio*, 1971, n. 2).
- The modern media of social communication are *cultural factors of progress* insofar as it can contribute to the better ordering of human society (Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 39).
- They '*contribute greatly* to the enlargement and enrichment of man's minds and to the propagation and consolidation of the kingdom of God (Vatican II, *Inter Mirifica*, n. 2).
- 'Modern media *offer new ways of confronting people with the message of the Gospel*' (Pastoral Instruction on the Means of Social Communications, *Communio et Progressio*, 128). The Church 'would feel guilty before the Lord' if it failed to use the media for evangelization' (Pope Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, n. 45).
- It is 'the first Areopagus of the modern age'. 'It is not enough to use the media simply to spread the Christian message and the Church's authentic teaching. It is also necessary to *integrate that message into the 'new culture'* created by modern communications' (John Paul II, Encyclical, *Redemptoris Missio*, n. 37).
- It offers important *benefits and advantages from a religious perspective* (Pontifical Council for Social Communications, *Ethics in Communications*, n. 11). 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.

Today this applies in a special way to the internet, which is helping bring about revolutionary changes in commerce, education, politics, journalism, the relationship of nation to nation and culture to culture – changes not just in how people communicate but in how they understand their lives.

The Internet's implications for religion and especially for the Catholic Church

The Church's two-fold aim with regard to the media:

a. To ***encourage their right development and right use*** for the sake of human development, justice and peace – for the upbuilding of society at the local, national, and community levels in light of the common good and in a spirit of solidarity.
b. The Church seeks '***honest and respectful dialogue with those responsible for the communication media***' – a dialogue that relates primarily to the shaping of media policy (Pontifical Council for Social Communications, Pastoral Instruction, *Aetatis Novae*, on Social Communications on the 20th anniversary of *Communio et Progressio*, n. 8).

II.   **OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES**
      Opportunities

Announcing the Good News to people formed by a media culture requires taking carefully into account the special characteristics of the media themselves. ***The Church now needs to understand the Internet – in order to communicate effectively with people – especially young people*** – who are steeped in the experience of this new technology and also to use it well.

The ***Internet is relevant to many activities and programs of the Church*** – evangelization, including both re-evangelization and new evangelization and the traditional missionary work *ad gentes*, catechesis and other kinds of education, news and information, apologetics, governance and administration, and some forms of pastoral counselling and spiritual direction. But the virtual reality of cyberspace cannot substitute for real interpersonal community.

The Holy See has been active in this area for several years and is continuing to expand and develop its Internet presence. ***Church-related groups that have not yet taken steps to enter cyberspace are encouraged to look into the possibility of doing so at an early date.*** There should be exchange of ideas and information about the Internet among those with experience in the field and those who are newcomers.

The Church needs to understand and use the Internet as a tool of internal communication. The technology is new, but the idea is not. A two-way flow of

information and views between pastors and faithful is needed for the expression of public opinion (Pontifical Council for Social Communications, *Ethics in Communications*, n. 26). The Internet provides an effective technological means of realizing this vision.

Education and training are another area of opportunity and need. More than just teaching about techniques, ***media education helps people form standards of good taste and truthful moral judgment*** (Pontifical Council for Social Communications, *Ethics in Communications*, n. 25).

Education and training regarding the Internet ought to be part of comprehensive programs of media education available to members of the Church e.g., ***in the formation of seminarians, priests, religious, and lay pastoral personnel as well as teachers, parents and students*** (Pontifical Council for Social Communications, *Aetatis Novae*, n. 28).

Young people need to learn how to function well in the world of cyberspace (*Communio et Progressio*, n. 107).

The wide range of choices regarding consumer products and services available on the Internet may have a spillover effect in regard to religion and ***encourage a 'consumer' approach to matters of faith***.

Challenges or special problems for the Church

- The world of the media can sometimes seem ***indifferent and even hostile to Christian faith and morality***.
- The presence of ***hate sites*** devoted to defaming and attacking religious and ethnic groups. Some of these target the Catholic Church. Like ***pornography and violence in the media***. While accepting free expression up to a point, industry self-regulation – and where required, intervention by public authority – should establish and enforce reasonable limits to what can be said.
- ***The proliferation of web sites calling themselves Catholic creates a problem*** of a different sort. Church-related groups should be creatively present in the Internet. But it is confusing, not to distinguish eccentric doctrinal interpretations, idiosyncratic devotional practices, and ideological advocacy bearing a 'Catholic' label from the authentic positions of the Church.
- There should be continued research and study including 'the development of an anthropology and a theology of communication' – (Pontifical Council for Social Communications, *Aetatis Novae*, n. 8) now, with specific reference to the Internet. ***There should be positive pastoral planning for the use of the Internet*** (John Paul II, Apostolic Letter, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, n. 39).
- The '***tendency on the part of some Catholics to be selective in their adherence*' to the *Church's teaching*** is a recognized problem in other contexts; but more information is needed about whether and to what extent the problem is encouraged by the Internet.

- *The virtual reality of cyberspace is no substitute for the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist*, the sacramental reality of the other sacraments, and shared worship in a 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. Here is another aspect of the Internet that calls for study and reflection.

III.   **RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION**

Religious people need to *adjust their own thinking and practice with regard to the Internet.*

People at all levels of the Church should *use the Internet creatively* to meet their responsibilities and help fulfil the Church's mission. *Hanging back timidly from fear of technology or for some other reason is not acceptable*, in view of the many positive possibilities of the Internet.

To Church leaders:

- They need to *understand the media*, apply this understanding in formulating pastoral plans for social communications (Pontifical Council for Social Communications, *Aetatis Novae*, nn. 23-33) together with concrete policies and programs in this area, and make appropriate use of media.
- Where necessary, they should *receive media education* themselves 'The Church would be well served if more of those who hold offices and perform functions in her name received communication training.' (Pontifical Council for Social Communications, *Ethics in Communications*, n. 26).
- They are obliged to use 'the full potential of the 'computer age' to serve the human and transcendent vocation of every person. They ought to *employ this remarkable technology in many different aspects of the Church's mission*.
- With regard to the sometimes confusing proliferation of unofficial web sites labelled 'Catholic,' – a system of voluntary certification at the local and national levels under the supervision of representatives of the Magisterium might be helpful in regard to material of a specifically doctrinal or catechetical nature. This is not to impose censorship but to *offer Internet users a reliable guide to what expresses the authentic position of the Church*.
  To Pastoral Personnel (Priests, deacons, religious, and lay pastoral workers):

- They should have *media education*. This will help them acquire a manner of communicating that speaks to the sensibilities and interests of people in a media culture.
- *Training regarding the Internet*, including how to use it in their work.
- They can also profit from *websites offering theological updating* and pastoral suggestions.
- Church personnel directly involved in media must have professional training. But they also need doctrinal and spiritual formation.
  To Educators and Catechists:

- There is the 'urgent duty' of Catholic schools to ***train communicators and recipients of social communications*** in relevant Christian principles (*Communio et Progressio*, n. 107).
- Catholic universities, colleges, schools, and educational programs at all levels should ***provide courses for various groups*** – 'seminarians, priests, religious brothers and sisters, and lay leaders… teachers, parents and students' (Pontifical Council for Social Communications, *Aetatis Novae*, n. 28) – as well as more advanced training in communications technology, management, ethics, and policy issues for individuals preparing for professional media work or decision making roles, including those who work in social communications for the Church.
  To Parents:

- For the sake of their children, as well as for their own sakes, ***parents must 'learn and practice the skills of discerning viewers and listeners and readers***, acting as models of prudent use of media in the home' (Pontifical Council for Social Communications, *Ethics in Communications*, n. 25).
- Though children and young people are often more familiar with the Internet than their parents, however, ***parents are seriously obliged to guide and supervise their children in its use*** (John Paul II, Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Familiaris Consortio*, n. 76). If this means learning more about the Internet than they have up to now, that will be good.
- ***Parental supervision*** should include making sure that filtering technology is used in computers available to children when that is financially and technically possible, to protect them from pornography, sexual predators, and other threats.
- ***Unsupervised exposure to the Internet should not be allowed.***
- ***Parents and children should dialogue together about what is seen and experienced in cyberspace***; sharing with other families who have the same values and concerns.
- The fundamental parental duty here is to ***help children become discriminating, responsible Internet users and not addicts of the Internet***, neglecting contact with their peers and with nature itself.
  To Children and Young People:

- The ***Internet is a door opening on a glamorous and exciting world*** with a powerful formative influence; ***but not everything on the other side of the door is safe and wholesome and true***.
- They should ***be open to formation regarding media, resisting the easy path of uncritical passivity, peer pressure, and commercial exploitation*** (Pontifical Council for Social Communications, *Ethics in Communications*, n. 25).
- They owe it to themselves – and to their parents and families and friends, their pastors and teachers, and ultimately to God – to ***use the Internet well***.
- The Internet places in their grasp 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.
- They are the future of society and the Church. ***Good use of the Internet*** can help prepare them for their responsibilities in both. But this will not happen automatically. ***The Internet***

is not only a medium of entertainment and consumer gratification. It is also a tool for accomplishing useful work.
 To all Persons of Good Will:

- There are some *virtues that need to be cultivated* by everyone who wants to make good use of the Internet (prudence, justice, fortitude, temperance).
- *Prudence* is necessary in order clearly to *see the implications* – the potential for good and evil – in this new medium and to respond creatively to its challenges and opportunities.
- *Justice* is needed, especially justice in working to *close the digital divide*, that is, the gap between the information-rich and the information-poor in today's world (Pontifical Council for Social Communications, *Ethics in Internet*, nn. 10, 17). This requires a commitment to the international common good and the 'globalization of solidarity'.
- *Fortitude*, courage is necessary; that is, *standing up for truth* in the face of religious and moral relativism, for altruism and generosity in the face of individualistic consumerism, for decency in the face of sensuality and sin.
- *Temperance* is needed – a *self-disciplined approach* to this remarkable technological instrument, the Internet, so as to use it wisely and only for good.
  Christ is 'the perfect communicator' (*Communio et Progressio*, n. 11) – the norm and model of the Church's approach to communication, as well as the content that the Church is obliged to communicate.