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404 Error: The Digital Literacy Page Cannot Be Found

Katherine G. Schmidt

Despite recommendations for media training in 2002, American Catholic church leaders have yet to implement such training into pastoral formation.

Some masses are better than others. This has always been true, but the global pandemic in 2020 gave it a new dimension: some virtual masses are better than others. Faced with the somewhat sudden suspension of masses in many dioceses, pastors and lay ministers scrambled to deliver virtual ministries to their socially-distant parishioners. For some parishes, the transition was simple, given that they had been livestreaming or recording masses before the pandemic. For most, however, the transition was more complicated. Some transitions were better than others.

One gets the sense that many, many pastors were caught off guard and were relatively unable to navigate digital spaces with the degree of comfort now required of them. The pandemic has had a revelatory power on both the national and global scale, and it has revealed much for the Church as well.

Parish priests are not media moguls, nor should they be. But one wonders why the switch to online ministries should be fraught with so much anxiety, given how many years such technologies have been a regular part of greater American and global culture. More to the point ecclesially, however, one

wonders why the pastoral responses in this transition should be so varied given the Church's own long-standing recommendation.

In 2002, the Pontifical Council for Social Communications (PCSC) released *The Church and Internet*. In this relatively short document, the Council expressed a measured optimism about the relationship of the Church's mission to internet technologies, at that point in their young adolescence. *The Church and Internet* (2002) demonstrates a clear understanding of the "opportunities and challenges" of the internet at the time. It also demonstrates a clarity about internet technologies that allows them to anticipate the various benefits and pitfalls that would come with social media.

The document has recommendations for all members of the Church, even "young people." But the recommendations begin with "Church leaders." The Council recommends:

People in leadership positions in all sectors of the Church need to understand the media, apply this understanding in formulating pastoral plans for social communications together with concrete policies and programs in this area, and make appropriate use of media. Where necessary, they should receive media education themselves; in fact, "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, 2002).

Here, the Council quotes two of its other documents, *Aetatis Novae* (1992) and *Ethics in Communications* (2000). One thus gets the sense that their recommendations are not simply one-

time musings on a fleeting cultural moment. They quote Pope John Paul II from his World Communications Day speech in 1990, saying that “Church leaders are obliged to use ‘the full potential of the computer age to serve the human and transcendent vocation of every person, and thus to give glory to the Father from whom all good things come’” (John Paul II, 1990). *The Church and Internet* goes on to make the specific recommendation that, priests, deacons, and religious and lay pastoral workers should have media education to increase their understanding of the impact of social communications on individuals and society and help them acquire a manner of communicating that speaks to the sensibilities and interests of people in a media culture. Today, this clearly includes training regarding the internet, including how to use it in their work (Pontifical Council for Social Communications, 2002).

I read this part of the document very closely with my undergraduate students before we do an analysis of parish websites. I do not select the parishes ahead of time, and I usually ask students to volunteer the names of local parishes they know. Without fail, we come upon Catholic parish websites with mass times buried (or completely hidden), broken links, and unusable pastor email addresses.

Parishes have limited budgets, and thus might not be able to hire developers for fancy websites. But general issues like broken links and poor interface are not a matter of money, they are a matter of literacy. The PCSC recommendations apply to all ministers, lay and cleric alike. However, given the relative uniformity of seminary formation, these curricula seem particularly well-suited to including the kind of basic digital literacy that is required for pastoring a parish church in the 21st century.

In the eighteen years since *The Church and Internet (2002)*, the Program of Priestly Formation issued by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops has been revised twice: the fifth edition released in 2005 and the sixth to be released in 2020, after a delay (Schuth, 2016, p. 24). In the fifth and current edition, then, what do we find with regard to the training recommended by the Pontifical Council? In short, not much. The most promising mention of digital culture — of the two mentions in the 153-page document — is that seminarians should cultivate “a cultural-critical attitude that discerns the positive and negative potentials of mass communications, various forms of entertainment, and technology, such as the internet” (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2006, p. 33). This “positive and negative” framework is similar to almost every ecclesial document on media and technology, but one wonders how exactly seminarians and other pastoral students are meant to cultivate a truly cultural-critical attitude. The other mention is about life in formation with regard to media: “seminarians should develop discerning habits in reading, the use of various media, the internet, and entertainment in general” (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2006, p. 87). Indeed, some seminaries have policies regarding the use of social media for their pre-theologians and theologians that reflect this effort to develop discerning habits.

Casting the internet as a means of entertainment is disconcerting for two reasons. First, it gives the impression that being a pastor in the 21st century does not require that one participate in digital culture. Surely, one could minister without watching movies or television. One cannot, however, minister without being online, at least in some limited capacity. The second follows from the first: Categorizing the internet as

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entertainment encourages us to see it as optional or additional to ecclesial life at best, and as an obstacle to holiness at worst.

I propose that all bishops take the recommendations of the Pontifical Council seriously and implement digital literacy training in their dioceses, particularly at the seminary level. Furthermore, I propose digital literacy training requirements *from a theological perspective*. Thankfully, the Catholic tradition is well-versed in thinking about the richness and possibilities of mediation. The Church needs to think as carefully about digital culture as it does about church history, sacramental theology, and moral theology. Digital life is not additional to modern life; it is an integral part of it. All leaders in the Church — lay and cleric alike — must be able to navigate their ministry with a critical awareness of the mediated spaces in which they are received, translated, and lived out. May we use this moment of crisis to engage digital culture “to serve the human and transcendent vocation of every person, and thus to give glory to the Father from whom all good things come” (John Paul II, 1990).

Katherine G. Schmidt is assistant professor of theology at Molloy College in New York. She writes on the intersection of theology and digital culture. Her book, *Virtual Communion*, is forthcoming from Lexington Press.

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