

# Digital Media at the Service of the Word: What does Internet-mediated Communication offer the Theology of Revelation and the Practice of Catechesis?

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DIGITAL MEDIA AT THE SERVICE OF THE WORD: WHAT DOES INTERNET-  
MEDIATED COMMUNICATION OFFER THE THEOLOGY OF REVELATION AND THE  
PRACTICE OF CATECHESIS?

a dissertation

by

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submitted in partial fulfillment  
for the degree of  
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# **Digital Media at the Service of the Word: What does Internet-mediated Communication offer the Theology of Revelation and the Practice of Catechesis?**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Internet-mediated communication is undoubtedly shaping our culture, especially the way we access, gain, produce, share and understand information. The Internet, a vast resource of content is also taking form as a social communication network, where online content mediates the presence of people animating this network, who are accessing, contributing to, sharing and connecting over information. This movement toward the social web has significant implications for the way we go about communicating, sharing knowledge and making meaning as a whole, giving way to an overall more participatory culture, both on and offline.

Commissioned to go and proclaim the Good News to the world, the Church continues to hold the communication of the faith as one of its essential tasks. This cultural shift in communication thus demands the attention the Church, presenting new opportunities and challenges for its evangelizing mission, while inviting a greater dialogue between evangelizing faith and digital culture. This dissertation engages the Church in this dialogue, focusing especially on what the present cultural shift wrought by Internet-mediated communication may mean for the theological foundations of communication in divine revelation, and the practice of the transmission of revelation in the context of the catechetical ministry. The dissertation offers a theological and ministerial foundation for exploring Internet-mediated communication, and the ways it may continue to evolve and shape our culture.

To narrow in scope my investigation of the Church's dialogue with Internet-mediated communication, the dissertation approaches the Church's evangelizing mission as an expression

of the theology of revelation concretely exemplified in catechesis, the religious education process concerned with facilitating conversion to Jesus Christ. This process of catechesis fueled by the theology of revelation encounters the socio-cultural phenomenon of Internet-mediated communication as its context. For the greater dialogue between the evangelizing faith and digital culture, all three of these elements, the theology, the ministerial process and the socio-cultural context receive careful analysis. After exploring each of these three constitutive elements, the dissertation suggests new directions and possibilities for revelation and catechesis in light of this dialogue.

Chapter I introduces Internet-mediated communication and describes its relevance both from an ecclesial and socio-cultural perspective, focusing especially on the Church's clear intention to take social communications media seriously, as articulated through a series of ecclesial documents. Chapter II investigates the theology of revelation and Chapter III examines catechesis, and both of these chapters highlight the particular dynamic of communication operative in both revelation and catechesis as one that emphasizes both relational presence and informational content. Chapter IV on Internet-mediated communication also continues to address this dynamic of communication, offering both revelation and catechesis a new model for integrating the relational and the informational in one process of communication. Chapter V concludes the dissertation by exploring the theological and ministerial implications of this integrated model of communication that the Internet as social network offers, while suggesting new directions especially for the practice of catechesis.

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*Maminak,  
Isten szeretetét és pedagógiai készségemet Tőled örököltem*



## ABBREVIATIONS FOR ECCLESIAL DOCUMENTS

- AG – *Ad Gentes*: Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity (1965)
- AN – *Aetatis Novae*: Pastoral Instruction on Social Communications on the Twentieth Anniversary of *Communio et Progressio* (1992)
- CI – The Church and Internet (2002)
- CP – *Communio et Progressio*: Pastoral Instruction on the Means of Social Communication (1971)
- CT – *Catechesi Tradendae*: On Catechesis in Our Time (1979)
- DF – *Dei Filius*: First Vatican Council Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith (1870)
- DV – *Dei Verbum*: Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (1965)
- EN – *Evangelii Nuntiandi*: On Evangelization in the Modern World (1975)
- GDC – General Directory for Catechesis (1998)
- IM – *Inter Mirifica*: Decree on the Mass Media (1963)
- LG – *Lumen Gentium*: Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (1964)
- NDC – National Directory for Catechesis (2005)
- RM – *Redemptoris Missio*: On the Permanent Validity of the Church's Missionary Mandate (1990)
- RCIA – Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (1988)
- RD – The Rapid Development: Apostolic Letter on Social Communications (2005)
- SC – *Sacrosanctum Concilium*: Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (1964)





## **Chapter I : Internet-Mediated Communication: The New Medium for Sharing the Faith?**

### **Introduction: Pope tells Priest to Blog in January 2010 Message**

“For God’s Sake, Blog! Pope Tells Priests” read one creative headline published among many similar ones in late January, 2010.<sup>1</sup> Benedict XVI’s encouragement of the use of new forms of communication technologies intrigued the popular media, and generated wide coverage in newspapers and online media outlets. Tongue in cheek in tone, the media expressed surprise in reporting on Benedict’s message. Beneath the lighthearted commentary, the subtext of these reports revealed an essential fascination by the encounter of two seemingly contradicting cultural elements: the Church, symbolic in popular culture of all that is conservative, traditional and slow, and the fast-paced, ever changing, cutting edge communications network of the Internet. That the Pope would consider engaging the newest communications technologies for the mission of the Church challenges stereotypes on both sides. By inserting the Church in the most current cultural trend and harnessing the Internet, long debated for having social and psychological demerits<sup>2</sup> to do God’s work, the Pope’s message demands our attention and invites analysis that delves beneath the lighthearted news-feature.

Pope Benedict delivered his January 24th, 2010 message in preparation for the 44th annual World Communications Day, traditionally commemorated since the promulgation of

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<sup>1</sup> Philip Pulella. “For God’s Sake, Blog! Pope Tells Priests.” International Business Times, January 23, 2010. <http://www.ibtimes.com/articles/20100123/for-gods-sake-blog-pope-tells-priests.htm>. Accessed February 9, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> For a critical look at the effect of technology on culture, including the disembodied, isolating potential of Internet-mediated communication, see Richard R. Gaillardetz, Transforming Our Days: Finding God Amid the Noise of Modern Life (Liguori MO: Liguori, 2000). For the dangers of Internet addiction, see Patrice Klausung and Kimberly Young. Breaking Free of the Web: Catholics and Internet Addiction. (Cincinnati: St Anthony the Messenger Press, 2007).

*Inter Mirifica*, the Second Vatican Council's 1963 document on social communication.<sup>3</sup>

Coinciding with "Year of the Priest" as the current theme in focus for the Vatican, the 44th World Communications Day addresses "The Priest and Pastoral Ministry in a Digital World: New Media at the Service of the Word." To this end, the Pope emphasizes in his January 24th message the duty of priests to proclaim Jesus Christ as the incarnate Word, and to communicate the content of the faith. He notes that "increased availability of the new technologies demands greater responsibility on the part of those called to proclaim the Word."<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, Benedict challenges priests and pastoral workers not only to establish a presence on the Internet, but to actively seek to use the Internet and its latest generation of audiovisual resources for the Church's greater mission of evangelization and catechesis.

Adding to the weight of the Pope's message is that it is no mere directive. The Vatican has taken active measures to practice what it preaches in this regard, and is demonstrating how to engage with these latest generation of audiovisual resources. The Pope's January 24<sup>th</sup> message forms the centerpiece of the Vatican-created website [www.pope2you.net](http://www.pope2you.net), a new portal presenting a variety of multimedia and social networking features organized around news and happenings at the Vatican and throughout the Catholic world. The Vatican is no stranger to having a strong online presence as its own website active since 1996, [www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va), hosts news services and information about the Vatican, and is also a vast resource bank of tens of thousands of documents and works of art. [Pope2you.net](http://www.pope2you.net), however, is different in that its essential focus is less on the wealth of content housed at the Vatican, and more on the persons of faith seeking to be connected to Catholicism. The success of this website, as well as that of the Church's

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<sup>3</sup> *Inter Mirifica* 18

<sup>4</sup> Benedict XVI. "The Priest and Pastoral Ministry in a Digital World: New Media at the Service of the Word." January 24, 2010. [http://www.pope2you.net/download/44\\_GMCS\\_Eng.pdf](http://www.pope2you.net/download/44_GMCS_Eng.pdf). Accessed February 9, 2010.

evangelizing efforts through digital media will depend on how well it is integrated into the socio-cultural habits that characterize Internet-mediated communication. Therefore, pope2you.net is enthusiastically presenting its message to young people, using media-applications by which they are most likely to encounter it: YouTube, Facebook, Flickr, and an iPhone app. The website features all four of these, tailored specifically to staying connected to Catholic happenings. In addition, the website offers “Pope2You View”, a multimedia player that broadcasts Catholic news in nine languages, as well as a live feed of St. Peter’s Square in Rome.

Beyond engaging the latest technological means of disseminating information, pope2you.net showcases the truly interactive potential of Web 2.0 and takes steps toward inviting the participation of the site’s visitors in multiple ways. The Facebook application allows users to share the Pope’s messages as well as Catholic postcards in that social networking platform, but a sharing gadget allows for direct connection to and posting on more than forty other social networking sites, including Twitter, MySpace, Blogger, Bebo and more. The “World of Peace 2010” feature invites users to contribute their own images to a digital collage of the world displayed on the website. However, it is the simple banner encouraging the site’s visitors to “Promote Pope2You!” that sums up the best this seemingly newfound effort to enlist and encourage the direct participation of young people in the proclamation of the Word. Instead of just providing the digital world with a vast resource pool of information as vatican.va does, pope2you.net recognizes the potential that online social interaction offers the Church’s evangelizing efforts, and showcases the tools to facilitate this through various platforms.

If the heavily informational website vatican.va exemplified Web 1.0, then pope2you.net, and other interactive multimedia websites take the Church's online presence into Web 2.0.<sup>5</sup> The surprise and intrigue of the media at this, however, fails to take note of the consistent trajectory that the Church has been on in terms of social communication for the past four decades. The proclamation of the Word as the essential mission of the Church lends itself to a special interest in communication, the use of media and the means of social communication for carrying out this mission.<sup>6</sup> The Church's interest in Internet-mediated communication, and this latest focus on Web 2.0 technologies is thus rooted in the Church's foundational evangelizing mission, and follows in line with the use of printed medium, the arts, radio and television throughout the history of the Church to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ. The use of the Internet to continue the evangelizing mission of the Church introduces the latest chapter in this long story of how to the Church has sought to proclaim God's Word effectively and to as many people as possible.

By virtue of the relative novelty of this medium, Internet-mediated communication needs ongoing and thorough analysis in order for it to best reinforce the Church's evangelizing mission. The aim of this dissertation is to contribute to the Church's ongoing look at Internet-mediated communication, a process clearly demonstrable through recent ecclesial documents that have treated the question. These documents repeatedly encourage the use of the social media, including the Internet, for carrying out the mission of the Church, and provide a doctrinal and ethical foundation for doing so, along with pastoral directives for implementation. By and large, though, these ecclesial documents meant for the global Church are painted in broad

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<sup>5</sup> Web 1.0 and Web 2.0 are terms used to describe the evolution of the Internet from an information resource to an interactive communications space. For more on the emergence of these terms, see the "Web 1.0 to Web 2.0" under "Defining Internet-Mediated Communication" later in this chapter.

<sup>6</sup> For a discussion of evangelization as the essential mission of the Church, see for instance: *Ad Gentes 2*, *Evangelii Nuntiandi 14*, or *Redemptoris Missio 4*

strokes, and assume the continued conversation of those engaged in theology and ministry to flesh out more specific points. This dissertation is one such voice in this conversation.

Internet-mediated communication in service of the Church's evangelizing mission is a key focal point for the broader dialogue between faith and culture. More specifically, it is a pastoral process founded on and fueled by a certain theology, which encounters a particular social phenomenon as its context. All three of these elements: the theology, the pastoral process, and the social phenomenon merit careful analysis, in order to best participate in this dialogue and to glean new understanding. Subsequent chapters of this dissertation are devoted to each of these elements. Before taking apart the question at hand and focusing on its constitutive elements, this first chapter provides an overview of the significance of Internet-mediated communication, both from the Church's perspective, and from socio-cultural observation. In providing this overview, I seek to establish the relevance of the question. As such, the dissertation first turns to contextualize Internet-mediated communication in the Church's four-decade trajectory dealing with social communication. Doing so reveals the consistent threads and themes that form the parameters that enable the Church to make fruitful use of digital media for evangelization.

Although proclamation of the Word through various media has engaged the Church throughout its history, its recent interest in specifically social communications media that include all channels of communications with the capacity to reach large numbers of people such as radio, television, film, journalism and the Internet, has generated a series of documents analyzing the impact of these on culture. Beginning with the Second Vatican Council's 1963 *Inter Mirifica* (Decree on the Mass Media) the Church has continued to comment on evolving communications technologies, in *Communio et Progressio* (1971), *Aetatis Novae* (1992), *Church and Internet* (2002), and *The Rapid Development* (2005), as well as in sections of differently focused

documents, including *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (1975) and *Redemptoris Missio* (1990). In preparation for our subsequent analysis of the Internet, a brief survey of the social communication documents (*Inter Mirifica*, *Communio et Progressio*, *Aetatis Novae*, *The Church and Internet*) and the evangelization documents with special focus on social communication (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, *Redemptoris Missio*, and *The Rapid Development*) reveals an open and optimistic approach to new media, along with an overall concern to engage these for the Church's mission to evangelize.

## **Ecclesial Documents on Social Communication**

### ***Inter Mirifica***

Though not on the initially proposed list of topics to be discussed at the Second Vatican Council, the topic of social communication nonetheless received attention through the work of one preparatory commission, the Secretariat for the Press and Entertainment.<sup>7</sup> This commission, established in 1960, drafted a provisional text about the Church's doctrine on the instruments of social communication, moral and ethical issues concerning the use of media, and the use of specific media for evangelization.<sup>8</sup> Due in part to the exigent deliberations over *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, and the Council Fathers seeking to follow it with something lighter, the work of this Secretariat received the unexpected attention of the Council early on, and became a conciliar decree after one round of revisions. Although criticized by some scholars as being "worthy neither of the Council nor of the learned world," and cited for having failed to perceive the nature of the world about it, neither embodying the spirit of *aggiornamento* nor the subsequent ecclesiology developing out of the Council, this Decree on the Mass Media (*Inter Mirifica*)

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<sup>7</sup> Franz-Josef Eilers, *Church and Social Communication: Basic Documents*. (Manila: Logos /Divine Word, 1997) . 56.

<sup>8</sup> Karlheinz Schmidthus, "Decree on the Instruments of Social Communication" in *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II, Volume 1*. Ed. Herbert Vorgrimler (Herder&Herder, 1967) 89.

nevertheless introduced social communication into official Church vocabulary.<sup>9</sup> As Franz-Josef Eilers points out: “It is the first time in the history of the church that an ecumenical council discussed the means of social communication, and came up with a respective document.”<sup>10</sup> In other words, however hurriedly and poorly, the topic of social communication was now on the table.

More than this, the Decree had other merits, including the creation of new and helpful terminology in “social communications,” a phrase indicative of not just the technical means of transmission of communication but also as a process that takes place between humans.<sup>11</sup> *Inter Mirifica* also initiated continuing conversation around social communication in establishing an annual day addressing this topic (18), a pontifical council (19), regional offices focused specifically on social communication (21), and finally, calling for a pastoral instruction, or a more extensive ecclesial document to elaborate on the topic (23).

Thematically, *Inter Mirifica* is more pastoral than theological. After briefly locating the relevance of social communication in the Church’s evangelizing mission to announce the Good News (3), it raises awareness of the need for a certain moral and ethical disposition when using the media. It then offers a twofold pastoral teaching directed to agents of communication in the secular world and in the Church. The decree concludes by establishing the ways to ensure the viability of this topic, through the avenues outlined above.

As its overall accomplishment, *Inter Mirifica* ignited a spark. Hurried and transitional as it was, it nevertheless introduced social communication as a relevant topic for the Church seeking reform and renewal. In addition to establishing the topic, it also initiated some important threads that still define the Church’s approach to social communication and new media,

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<sup>9</sup> For a detailed history of the document including its criticism, see Schmidthus 92-95.

<sup>10</sup> Eilers 57

<sup>11</sup> Ibid

including an overall optimistic tone and a consistent emphasis on evangelization and catechesis as beneficiaries of social communication. To set its optimistic tone, *Inter Mirifica* refers to “marvelous technical inventions” as fruits of human genius (1) and “considerable benefit to humankind”(2). While acknowledging their potential for misuse, the document focuses not on *whether* but on *how* to go about using these. It deems the means of social communication “necessary or useful for the formation of Christians and for pastoral activity”, and chief among its aims is “to announce the Good News” and “to teach people how to use them properly”(3). As the document is more pastoral, the doctrinal foundations presented consist of this pithy statement on evangelization, a topic to be elaborated in on in *Communio et Progressio*.

### ***Communio et Progressio***

Answering *Inter Mirifica*'s call for a pastoral instruction, the newly established Pontifical Commission for the Means of Social Communication produced the 1971 pastoral instruction *Communio et Progressio*, to elaborate on the themes presented in the conciliar Decree in greater detail. From the creation of the Pontifical Commission in 1964 to the document's publication in 1971, a complex process engaging a large team of bishops and communication experts took place producing, after four major revisions, the text to be approved by the Pope. Continuing the positive and optimistic tone set forth in *Inter Mirifica*, *Communio et Progressio* takes very seriously the opportunities offered to the Church and to the world with the evolution of communication technologies, and presents a thorough theology of communication on which to base its subsequent pastoral practices. As such, *Communio et Progressio* is considered the

“‘Magna Charta’ of Christian communication and a document with the most positive, professional and concrete approach to communication and church.”<sup>12</sup>

Like *Inter Mirifica*, *Communio et Progressio* perceives social communications media as “gifts of God” (2), but the true optimism of the pastoral instruction emerges as it analyzes social communication and appraises it in the most positive way. Above all, the most important aims of social communication according to the document are to unite people and to promote dialogue, understanding, exchange of ideas and progress.<sup>13</sup> *Communio et Progressio* then connects these aims to the theology of communication, which ultimately seeks to further communication into becoming true communion, in the image and likeness of the Trinitarian God (12). Rooted in God’s Trinitarian self-giving and receiving in total communion (8), and exemplified best in God’s gift of self in the Incarnation (10), the theology of communication emphasizes that to communicate means “at its most profound level, the giving of self in love”(11). Christ as Perfect Communicator, “through his Incarnation, utterly identified himself with those who were to receive his communication, and he gave his message not only in words, but in the whole manner of his life”(11). In laying out this theological foundation, *Communio et Progressio* grants profound significance to the investigation of social communications and media for the sake of evangelization and catechetical purposes. The reason to consider social communications and media, initially a practical way to reach as many people as possible, now becomes an expression of moving communication toward communion in the image of the Trinitarian God as expressed fully in Jesus Christ.

Evangelization flows naturally out of this Trinitarian theology of communication. As God communicates Godself in Jesus Christ, the disciples were called to imitate God’s gift of self in

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<sup>12</sup> Eilers 71

<sup>13</sup> See *Communio et Progressio* 18-20, 24, 100

love, and to communicate the Good News to the rest of the world (10). In line with the Church's evangelizing mission, *Communio et Progressio* points to the potential of social media to help the Church "reveal herself to the modern world, foster dialogue within the Church, make clear to the Church contemporary opinions and attitudes" (125). More than this, the social media are able to facilitate this exchange in new ways on a grand scale. Commanded by Christ to announce the Good News in all places and all times as a fundamental mission, this greater potential for communication created by the social media cannot be missed by the Church. "Indeed it would be difficult to suggest that Christ's command was being obeyed unless all the opportunities offered by the modern media to extend to vast numbers of people the announcement of his Good News were being used"(125). Among the most effective contexts to carry out evangelization through the social media, the document gives special attention to faith education.

The social media can serve the education of faith in several ways. On one hand, as a great resource pool of information, the social media can be "invaluable help to Christian education" (128), where it advises that in order to "make the teaching of Christianity more interesting and effective, the media should be used as much as possible"(130). For teaching the faith, this implies taking advantage of the social media for greater resources on content, and presentation of information in ways relevant and habitual to contemporary people. Concern for education also implies creating media access and media literacy both within and outside of the Church. In order for people to be able to dialogue, exchange ideas, facilitate progress, and contribute to the Church's evangelizing mission, they have to first be able to participate in the conversation. The media, as far reaching as they are, can profoundly alienate those lacking access, and one significant reason for this is the inability use the media comfortably. Therefore, the Church's concern for education seeks to create media literacy to enable people to participate in the

conversation to not only glean the benefits of social communication, but also to more fittingly proclaim the Gospel in today's digital culture. *Communio et Progressio* thus stresses the need for media literacy training both as an essential element of the process of education (66) as well as of religious formation (111).

Overall, the most significant contribution of *Communio et Progressio* is the articulation of the theology of communication, connecting both the social phenomenon of communication and the Church's evangelizing mandate to God's self-communicating Trinitarian essence, as revealed to us most fully in the Incarnate Word. This locates evangelization and its particular expression as catechesis in a theological context of God's self-communication, and primed for dialogue with new forms of social communications media, including the Internet. In addition, the document's emphasis media literacy and the necessity of participation in the flow of social communication paves the way for catechesis to take the means of social communication seriously, as it forms people in the faith to become proclaimers of the Gospel in today's world.

### *Aetatis Novae*

In 1992, the Pontifical Council for Social Communication issued its second pastoral instruction, *Aetatis Novae*, to commemorate the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *Communio et Progressio*. The practical incentive to produce this document, however, seems to be to keep the conversation around social communication going, especially in light of the vast expansion of human communications and revolutionary technological changes (1). In short, the document advances the Church's position on social communication along with the times.

From the beginning, *Aetatis Novae* takes on a tone of absolute necessity and urgency about the Church's participation in social communication, pointing to the extent of the influence

social communication has on present culture. No longer is social communication a “lighter topic” to follow a substantial theological one, as it did at Vatican II. Neither is social communication a radical, new and alternative way to think about the means of evangelization. *Aetatis Novae* makes clear that in 1992, “much that men and women know and think about life is conditioned by the media” (2), including what they perceive reality itself to be (4). The social communications media have become so integral to everyday life that they have come to shape understanding and meaning. It is no longer appropriate to consider the particular media as tools for communication – they have instead redefined what communication itself is.

*Aetatis Novae* is the first of the Pontifical Council’s documents to mention computers and digital technology (2), although its focus remains on the media in general, and does not discuss specific implications of computer-mediated communication.<sup>14</sup> Overall, *Aetatis Novae* is a reiteration of the doctrinal and pastoral elements of *Communio et Progressio*, with a slight change in the optimistic tone of previous documents of about social communication. *Aetatis Novae* does not negate the previous optimism, still maintaining the media to be gifts of God and expressions of human genius (13, 22). However, the moral value of social communications media is at best neutral, as the document provides a more balanced approach to discussing both their potential and their limitations. “The media can be used to proclaim the Gospel or to reduce it to silence in human hearts” (4).

With this more balanced approach to the positives and the negatives that the social communications media can yield, *Aetatis Novae* provides perhaps even more encouragement to claim these media and use them for the good. True, that the “can’t go wrong” attitude about social media may have been accompanied by more enthusiasm, but the “proceed with caution”

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<sup>14</sup> John Paul II’s brief Message for World Communications Day 1990 “The Christian Message in a Computer Culture” predates this document and gives some focus to computers and digital technology.

tone of *Aetatis Novae* demands more analysis, creative thought and experiment on the part of those engaged with the media for pastoral purposes. In terms of the Church's evolving relationship to social communications media, this development demonstrates maturation, and a coming to terms with the doctrinal foundations presented in these documents as true guideposts for further implementation, however the technology may advance.

Despite this shift in tone, the pastoral focus of *Aetatis Novae* echoes the concerns of the documents preceding it. There is consistent concern for education, as the documents re-articulates evangelization and catechesis as special beneficiaries of social communication (11), and stresses the need for media training and literacy both within and outside of the Church (18). Although far from a thorough analysis, *Aetatis Novae* does elaborate on evangelization, underscoring the essential role the use of the media now play in this. Created in the wake of John Paul II's 1991 *Redemptoris Missio*, which heralded the need for new evangelization,<sup>15</sup> *Aetatis Novae* specifically notes the social media's role in this re-energized approach to the Church's evangelizing mission, in proposing that in evangelization, the use of the media is not about particular tools, but about the "Church's active, sympathetic presence in the world of communications"(11). To evangelize through the social media therefore first means to establish vibrant social presence through these same media, and the particular means of evangelization follow from this essential stance. This evolution of the social communications media from a set of tools to a digital frontier to inhabit reflect the evolution in the Church's thought toward a better recognition of the social context of the potential hearers of God's Word.

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<sup>15</sup> For more on the new evangelization, see *Redemptoris Missio* 3, 33. For further treatment of *Redemptoris Missio*, including its consideration of the social media, see "The Evangelization Documents" section below.

### *Church and Internet*

After a series of publications on the ethical aspects of communication, the Pontifical Council for Social Communication turned its attention once again to the social communications media, specifically, the Internet.<sup>16</sup> In 2002, it produced the brief document *The Church and Internet*, in order to address “the Internet’s implications for religion and especially for the Catholic Church”(2). This document, however, is too brief to offer a profound treatment of the Internet’s implication for either religion as a whole or the Catholic Church, despite the stated aim. Instead, the practical purpose of *The Church and Internet* seems to be to offer an acknowledgement of the revolutionary effect of the Internet as a social communications medium, and to reiterate the Church’s position on social communication in this new light. Like *Inter Mirifica*, *The Church and Internet* means to foster further conversation and thought, and therefore it summarizes both the established doctrinal framework and the main social implications of the Internet. Unlike *Inter Mirifica*, however, *The Church and Internet* reliance on further conversation is not for lack of time and energy, but rather it points to the cultural reality of our time. In the rapidly evolving culture of our digital age, continued thought and creativity is part and parcel of keeping up with the world. In fact, any in-depth analysis of the Internet-mediated communication at one point may become obsolete as new technologies and means of communication emerge all the time, while others become outdated very quickly. Therefore the document is wise in its brevity to offer the framework but to assume continued conversation around the specifics.

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<sup>16</sup> Between 1992 and 2002, the Pontifical Council for Social Communication’s special focus on ethics and communication resulted in *Ethics in Advertising* (1997), *Ethics in Communication* (2000), and *Ethics in Internet* (2002), a companion document to *The Church and Internet*.

For the purpose of this overview of the evolution of the Church's thought on social communication, *The Church and Internet* is a great summary, as it recaps the threads that followed from *Inter Mirifica*. In its introduction, it echoes the Church's "fundamentally positive approach to the media," and claims this as the view proper of the Internet as well (1). It reinforces this positive approach by summarizing the theology of communication and human progress, themes inherited from *Communio et Progressio*. It follows *Aetatis Novae* in reasserting that the social media, including the Internet have not only provided new tools, but have reshaped culture and redefined communication. Finally, it re-articulates the Church's interest in social communication both within and outside of the Church, with education and evangelization as particular areas in need of development. A concise and condensed history of the Church and social communication, the beginning of *The Church and Internet* therefore does not add anything new on the doctrinal level, but aims instead to bring the familiar themes in dialogue with the new context of the Internet.

In order to facilitate this dialogue, *The Church and Internet* approaches the Internet systematically, first presenting its gifts, and then warning of its limitations. Avoiding dwelling on specifics, the document focuses on the nature of Internet-mediated communication as a "direct, immediate, interactive and participatory medium"(6), with potential to grant access to great amounts of information and to create interpersonal connections. On the other hand, the amount of information can be overwhelming and at times difficult to evaluate in terms of authenticity (8). There is also real concern in the document about keeping a hierarchical ordering to cyberspace activities and "flesh and blood human community", with face-to-face encounter outranking Internet-mediated interaction, especially in the context of sacraments and worship (9). According to *The Church and Internet*, "pastoral planning should consider how to lead

people from cyberspace to true community”(9). It is clear that the document considers online social interaction as a halfway measure as compared to “real-world interaction” (9), and it thus maintains a distinction between the online and offline worlds.<sup>17</sup> For theological reasons, the Church necessarily stresses the importance of full, human-to-human physical presence, perceiving the potential disembodiment of Internet-mediated presence and communication as a challenge to the incarnational and sacramental reality of the faith.<sup>18</sup>

In many ways, the recent history of ecclesial documents concerned with social communications mirrors the evolution of the socio-cultural relevance and impact of the digital media. After igniting the spark of interest in Vatican II’s *Inter Mirifica*, the Church presented with enthusiasm a theology of communication to pave the way for cultural dialogue in *Communio et Progressio*, a position it tempered twenty years later in *Aetatis Novae* with a sense of more cautious balance to strive to promote the good but weed out the harmful aspects of the social communication media. In a dynamic state of continued maturation regarding its relationship with the social communications media, *Church and the Internet* as one of the most recent ecclesial documents, presents us with a moment in time, acknowledging the impact of the Internet, and offering relevant questions and threads as the Church continues to engage in this cultural dialogue. All in all, these documents exhibit a consistent openness to the social

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<sup>17</sup> In the past eight years since the publication of *The Church and Internet*, scholarship on Internet-mediated communication has found this distinction to be artificial, and has instead proposed a more integrated world view, which considers cyberspace as a legit part of the real world. In describing the world view of people born after 1980 who have only known a digitally connected world, Palfrey and Gasser point out that these “digital natives” do not distinguish between the online and the offline, or a digital and real-world identity. Instead, it is one identity with representations in different spaces. See John Palfrey and Urs Gasser. *Born Digital* (New York: Basic Books, 2008), 4. Sherry Turkle also describes the integration of the online and offline experience in terms of identity formation, where identity is the “sum of one’s distributed presence” as we “build the one self by cycling through many selves.” See Sherry Turkle. *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995)13, 178.

<sup>18</sup> *The Church and Internet* 5 raises the “incarnational reality of the sacraments and liturgy” as the basic doctrinal issue at odds with any sort of interaction that de-emphasizes the fundamental embodied and physical nature of the human person.

communications media, along with the astute assessment that these media are helpful and relevant for the Church's basic evangelizing mission to communicate the Good News of Jesus Christ, both as a means of communication, and increasingly as the cultural context of this same communication.

### **The Evangelization Documents**

While evangelization as communication of the Good News remains a relevant thread throughout the social communication documents outlined above, in order to round out our understanding of evangelization and the digital media, it is useful to turn to other recent ecclesial sources that focus primarily on the evangelizing mission of the Church. Among these, those sources that connect evangelization to social communication are especially helpful for the present survey, and these include *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (1975), *Redemptoris Missio* (1990), and *The Rapid Development* (2005). A brief analysis of how these documents understand evangelization in light of our digital culture further clarifies the potential for the social communications media like the Internet to support and sustain the Church's evangelizing mission.

#### ***Evangelii Nuntiandi***

In the spirit of renewal inaugurated by the Second Vatican Council, and encouraged by the 1974 Synod of Bishops' work on evangelization, Pope Paul VI's 1975 apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (On Evangelization in the Modern World) is one of the most important post-conciliar documents on this topic, and an invaluable resource on evangelization. In essence, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* reinserts the proclamation of the Gospel into the heart of Christian identity

and mission. Basing evangelization in Christ's constant proclamations of the Reign of God through word and deed, as well as in the apostles' mission to do likewise, the document strives to make evangelization an everyday part of Christian existence; not something Christians do, but something Christians fundamentally are. The Church's own identity, "born of the evangelizing activity of Jesus and the Twelve" is also the locus to continue this mission, and each individual member shares in this call (15). From this basic stance, the document then thoroughly lays out all practical aspects of the evangelizing mission, including who carries it out, how they do so, what is the content of its message, to whom is the message directed.

Regarding social communication and media, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* makes special note of these as it considers the methods of evangelization. As the document is deeply concerned with the proclamation of the Gospel, it finds the means of social communication to be especially promising for this, as "they enable the Good News to reach millions of people"(15). Echoing the optimistic tone of the social communication documents, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* states that the "Church would feel guilty before the Lord if she did not utilize these powerful means human skill is daily rendering more perfect" (45). At the same time, this document also indicates that just to reach people with the message of the Gospel is insufficient when it comes to evangelization. In proclaiming the Reign of God, Jesus sought to effect conversion in people, and the Church's evangelizing mission follows suit in seeking to facilitate a profound change of mind and heart toward God (10). Therefore, the document questions whether through the mere fact of reaching people with it, can the message "pierce the conscience of each individual, of implanting itself in his heart as though he were the only person being addressed, with all his most individual and personal qualities, and evoke an entirely personal adherence and commitment"(45). In other words, along with affirming the mass communication potential of the

media, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* also suggests that a personal connection is essential to evangelization, and the social media need to convey personal presence effectively in order to be most useful for the Church's mission.

### ***Redemptoris Missio***

John Paul II's 1990 encyclical *Redemptoris Missio* (On the Permanent Validity of the Church's Missionary Mandate) is best known for reaffirming the Church's basic evangelizing mission, and introducing the Pope's urgent call for "new evangelization." In *Redemptoris Missio*, John Paul II elaborates on Christ's own evangelizing example, but also emphasizes the role of the Holy Spirit in the Church's continuing efforts to proclaim the Gospel in today's world. Among the parameters of the Church's evangelizing mission in our present context, the document lists particular cultural sectors, or "modern equivalents of the Areopagus" (37). Referring to the place of dialogue and exchange of ideas in ancient Athens, these modern equivalents to the Areopagus broadly include communications technologies, scientific research, international relations and politics. More than a place of exchanging ideas, the Areopagus also symbolizes Christianity in the midst of and in conversation with the world, proclaiming its message.<sup>19</sup> Along the same lines, the document encourages the integration of the evangelizing message into the ways of modern culture, including the culture of the media.

*Redemptoris Missio* reiterates the importance of using the social communications media, for evangelization, especially in light of the pervasive effect these have had on current culture and thinking. While this has consistently been stated in all social communications documents, but *Redemptoris Missio* reveals that there has been little accomplished in terms of regular

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<sup>19</sup> In Acts 17:22-31, Paul preaches to the Athenians at the Areopagus, intriguing their intellectual curiosity by using the altar of the unknown God, a shrine familiar to them, to introduce them to the Christian message.

pastoral implementation: “To some degree perhaps this Areopagus has been neglected. Generally, preference has been given to other means of preaching the Gospel and of Christian education, while the mass media are left to the initiative of individuals or small groups and enter into pastoral planning only in a secondary way”(37). Because of the genuine shift these media have generated in communication, thinking and meaning-making, it is essential for evangelization to engage this new culture itself, not just its tools, and integrate the Gospel message into it. This implies engagement in the social patterns, behaviors and mindset generated by media culture, and first and foremost witnessing the Gospel message through one’s participating presence, contributions and interactions in this medium. Therefore, *Redemptoris Missio*’s focus on evangelization and the mass media is primarily about imbuing the culture of the media with the Gospel message through the participation and engagement of these media by Christians. The document’s goal is to drive this point home and encourage authentic Christian presence in the mass media.

### ***The Rapid Development***

While in 1990’s *Redemptoris Missio* John Paul II indicated that the social media are the forgotten means of evangelization, in 2005’s Apostolic Letter *The Rapid Development*, he gladly notes that “the Christian community has taken significant steps in the use of the means of communication for religious information, for evangelization and catechesis, for the formation of pastoral workers in this area, and for the education to a mature responsibility of the users and the recipients of the various communications media”(2). With doctrinal and ethical foundations in place since *Communio et Progressio*, and pastoral implementation apparently on its way, the Pope takes the opportunity in this Letter to continue the conversation around social

communication, and encourage a pastoral and cultural revision within the Church so as to deal adequately with the rapidly changing times in which we live (8). To accomplish this, the Pope notes significant cultural shifts, as well as interweaving new theological themes within the foundational theology of communication inherited from *Communio et Progressio*.<sup>20</sup>

One important cultural shift is the way the Internet not only provides resources for more information, but habituates persons to interactive communication (9). This is an observation previously made by *The Church and Internet*, but takes on increasing significance with the advent of new and more readily accessible ways through which interactive communication is exercised, like social networking, blogging, wikis, and interactive audiovisual media. As the use of these Web 2.0 tools becomes commonplace, *The Church and Internet* rightly notes that the one-way, top-down style of communication is a thing of the past, and “as more and more people become familiar with this characteristic of the Internet in other areas of their lives, they can be expected also to look for it in regard to religion and the Church” (6). In *The Rapid Development*, John Paul II affirms this, and highlights the areas of evangelization and education, along with internal communication, administration and governance as especially relevant to this shift.

While *The Rapid Development* concludes the present survey of ecclesial documents commenting on social communication, the Church continues to observe, comment on and engage with these evolving media, as seen in Pope Benedict XVI’s latest message for World Communications Day, and the example of pope2you.net, described above. All in all, this brief overview demonstrates that social communication is a topic consistently relevant for the Church, especially in light of the Church’s primary and foundational mission to proclaim the Gospel message. As *Evangelii Nuntiandi* highlighted for us, more effective social communications

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<sup>20</sup> In *The Rapid Development*, the theology of communication is complemented by an emphasis on God’s communication of Godself most fully as the Incarnate Word. This connects the theology of communication more clearly to the theology of revelation, foundational to evangelization and catechesis. See Chapter II.

media has meant a better way to reach more people with the Gospel message, and the Church's attitude toward these media has been positive and optimistic. At the same time, the Church continues to grapple with what this means for effective evangelization and education, for just reaching a person with information does not necessarily effect a conversion of mind and heart. *Redemptoris Missio* therefore encourages the evangelization of our digital culture from the inside out, and full immersion in cultural context wrought by digital communication in order to more effectively proclaim the Gospel message. *The Rapid Development* fine-tunes this immersive approach and points to the interactive and participatory medium of Web 2.0 as a defining characteristic of our cultural context, and therefore especially salient for evangelization and catechesis. Following from these ecclesial documents, we now turn to explore the culture wrought by Internet-mediated communication, as the social communications medium most relevant for our investigation.

### **Socio-Cultural Observations of the Internet**

Continued conversation about how to best evangelize in the digital age necessarily includes a clear assessment of the trends and statistics that demonstrate the increasing impact of the social communications media on the evolution of culture. What is the true extent of the impact of the social communications media, especially the Internet, on the everyday life of people? What are the characteristic ways of gaining, sharing and producing information in our present digital culture? Although the answers to these questions are bound to change with time and with the development of technology, it is essential to have a working idea of the present socio-cultural trends and statistics surrounding the Internet. A clear assessment of these offers an added impetus to the investigation of this evolution in communication, and in offering cultural

data and observations, it contextualizes the Church's call to take seriously the social media for evangelization.

### *Statistical Data*

Since 2000, the Pew Internet and American Life Project has investigated, analyzed and provided data on American people's use of the Internet.<sup>21</sup> Through a long series of surveys, this research project has tracked and published invaluable data on Internet use, focusing primarily on making available the numbers and statistical figures backing up social trends. The project's "Trend Data" page details the percentages of five years of Internet use (2004-2009) in terms of frequency and type of activity.<sup>22</sup> According to this, 74% of American adults go online, and of these, 71% do so daily.<sup>23</sup> Most frequently, adults go online to use email (89%), find information through a search engine (88%), research maps and directions (86%), research health or medical information (83%), shop (75%), and check the news (72%).<sup>24</sup> Among the same adults, specifically Web 2.0 online activities rank lower: social networking (47%), uploading digital photos to share (46%), providing feedback in rating a product or service (31%), posting comments (26%), using a status-update service like Twitter (19%), retrieving and creatively remixing digital content (15%) creating a website (14%) and creating a blog (11%).

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<sup>21</sup>Defining itself as a "nonpartisan, nonprofit 'fact tank' that provides information on the issues, attitudes and trends shaping America and the world," the Pew Internet and American Life Project " aims to be an authoritative source on the evolution of the Internet through surveys that examine how Americans use the Internet and how their activities affect their lives. See <http://www.pewinternet.org/About-Us/Our-Mission.aspx>

<sup>22</sup> <http://www.pewinternet.org/Trend-Data.aspx>

<sup>23</sup> Pew Online Activities Trend Data: Online Activities Daily. <http://www.pewinternet.org/Trend-Data/Online-Activities-Daily.aspx>

<sup>24</sup> Pew Online Activities Trend Data. Online Activities Total. <http://www.pewinternet.org/Static-Pages/Trend-Data/Online-Activites-Total.aspx>

Pew's February 2010 report on "Social Media and Young Adults" provides additional insight into the Internet trends characteristic of teens and young adults.<sup>25</sup> According to this report, 93% of teens and 93% of young adults under age 29 go online, and they generally demonstrate a greater affinity toward Web 2.0 activities. Seventy-three percent of teens and 72% of young adults engage in social networking. While teens have not warmed up to Twitter (8%), young adults form the largest group of status-update service users (33%). Fifteen percent of young adults and 14% of teens have a blog, although these percentages are on a decreasing trajectory, while adult bloggers are on the rise.<sup>26</sup> Regarding the uploading and sharing of digital content, 38% of teens engage in various forms of this, while 21% of teens retrieve content to creatively remix it.<sup>27</sup>

These statistics confirm that the majority of the American population regularly uses the Internet, and that although most Internet use is search or email related, Web 2.0 activities such as social networking, blogging, and original or creative contributions to online content are slowly on the rise. The popularity of these more participatory expressions of Internet-mediated communication is fueled by the experience of teens and young adults, whose cultural influence increases as they become adults. These "Digital Natives," for whom interactive and participatory communication through the Internet is the normal culture they were born and raised in will carry this assumption, along with the tools that express it, into adulthood.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Lenhart, Amanda, et. al. "Social Media and Young Adults." <http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2010/Social-Media-and-Young-Adults.aspx>. Pew Internet and American Life Project. February 2010. Accessed March 4, 2010.

<sup>26</sup> Lenhart et al. suggest that as social networking sites develop their communicative tools, teens may be finding it more convenient to comment and update with each other through social networking, instead of a separate blog.

<sup>27</sup> Lenhart, Amanda. Social Media and Young Adults Presentation. <http://www.slideshare.net/PewInternet/social-media-and-young-adults>. Pew Internet and American Life Project. February 4, 2010. Accessed March 4, 2010.

<sup>28</sup> Digital Natives refers to people born after 1980, who are characterized by access to and skills with networked digital technology. See John Palfrey and Urs Gasser. Born Digital: Understanding the First Generation of Digital Natives. (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2008.) 1-2.

### ***Religion and Faith Online***

In addition to generating general statistical data about frequency and type of Internet usage, the Pew project also investigates Internet trends by topic, and one of these has been the use of the Internet for religious and spiritual purposes. The most recent findings under this topic date back to 2004, at which point 64% of the nation's 128 million Internet users, equaling 82 million Americans, have used the Internet for faith-related matters.<sup>29</sup> This report defines online faith activity in broad terms, including email communication with spiritual content, holiday e-cards and research on holiday traditions, reading news stories about religious affairs, downloading religious or spiritual music, or researching meeting or worship information for a specific community of faith. All these activities treat faith as online content, and uses the online medium as a sheer information resource in which to find these. Nevertheless, it seems from the data that millions of people have found a use for the Internet as an informational resource for their spiritual life and religious practices.

A few of the survey's questions go deeper. According to the survey, 7% of the online faithful have made or responded to prayer requests online, and 28% have sought information about their own religious faith, while 26% has researched a tradition other than their own. These numbers demonstrate that some consider the Internet itself as a potential space in which to enrich and experience faith. When the ecclesial documents advocate the use of the social communications media for evangelization and integrating the Gospel message into the culture of the specific medium, they are attuned to this same potential as well.

Whether using the Internet as an information bank or as a more interactive space, the question that emerges is how the online faithful surveyed by Pew relate their online activity to

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<sup>29</sup> Hoover, Stewart, Lynn Schofield Clark and Lee Rainie. "Faith Online." Pew Internet and American Life Project. <http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2004/Faith-Online.aspx>. April 7, 2004. Accessed March 5, 2010.

their overall religious and spiritual life. Pew is surprised to find that most online faithful use the Internet to “augment their already strong commitments to their congregations” and “to supplement to, rather than substitute for offline religious life.”<sup>30</sup> This finding at once points to the importance of community as a reference point when it comes to faith, as well as raising the question of how well does Internet content really reach those who are entirely unfamiliar with a specific religious tradition’s message. The sheer volume of content available on the Internet can actually be a hindrance to finding information, especially without some reference point in the seeker’s everyday life. If the religious and spiritual activity of the online faithful is an extension of their offline life in faith, then to view the Internet as an isolated way of practicing faith is less helpful than to acknowledge it as a part of the overall way of communicating in today’s world. As such, Pew’s findings in this regard echo the ecclesial documents’ call for integrating the Gospel message into the social communications medium of the Internet, not just to use it as a tool. Therefore, to discover the Internet’s impact on the religious life of people, it is most useful to examine what are the overall shifts and developments Internet-mediated communication has wrought in today’s culture. These shifts and developments toward a more interactive, participatory culture influence our entire way of being in today’s world, including our expressions of faith. In addition to the statistical data outlined above, a closer look at the characteristic socio-cultural elements surrounding Internet-mediated communication help round out our understanding of the digital context that we are investigating for evangelization and catechesis.

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<sup>30</sup> Hoover, et, al. “Faith Online” ii.

## **Defining Internet-Mediated Communication**

The socio-cultural developments that characterize Internet-mediated communication emerge in part from observations made from the evolution of the Internet from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0, and part from the assessment of the present social impact of Internet-mediated communication as “participatory culture.” In crafting a comprehensive definition of Internet-mediated communication, we now consider each of these in turn.

### ***Web 1.0 to Web 2.0***

The evolution of the Internet from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0 is a contested subject, because it seemingly separates the World Wide Web into two stages of emergence or two distinct entities. Sir Tim Berners-Lee, the inventor of the World Wide Web, insists that Web 1.0 and 2.0 are not two opposing entities, but rather two points on the same continuum, where Web 2.0 is a fuller realization of the potential of Web 1.0. Berners-Lee rejects the information/participation dichotomy commonly set up to differentiate between Web 1.0 and Web 2.0 when he insists that:

Web 1.0 was all about connecting people. It was an interactive space, and I think Web 2.0 is, of course, a piece of jargon, nobody even knows what it means. If Web 2.0 for you is blogs and wikis, then that is people to people. But that was what the Web was supposed to be all along. And in fact, you know, this Web 2.0, quote, it means using the standards which have been produced by all these people working on Web 1.0.<sup>31</sup>

In other words, the germinal ideas of people participating, connecting and sharing through the online medium were present in the Web from the very beginning, and came to fuller and fuller expression as people used the medium to communicate and connect.

Nevertheless, others maintain that Web 1.0 and 2.0 are markedly different, even if on the same continuum. Tim O’Reilly, credited with coining the term Web 2.0, contextualizes the term

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<sup>31</sup>Scott Laningham. “IBM DeveloperWorks Interviews: Tim Berners Lee.” IBM DeveloperWorks. August 22, 2006. <http://www.ibm.com/developerworks/podcast/dwi/cm-int082206txt.html>. Accessed March 8, 2010.

in the re-emergence of web-based companies after a period of boom and bust in the late 1990s. O'Reilly analyzes why some web-based companies were able to survive this period, and looks for characteristics that helped them do so. For O'Reilly, these characteristics constitute Web 2.0, and they include, among others: the ability to control ever-growing data sets, trusting users as co-developers, customer self-service, and harnessing collective intelligence.<sup>32</sup>

While O'Reilly's focus is on business models, Paul Anderson elaborates on the characteristics O'Reilly names and uses them to offer a more general set of six elements that typify Web 2.0. The six elements are: individual production and user-generated content, harnessing the power of the crowd, data on an epic scale, architecture of participation, network effects, and openness.<sup>33</sup> Anderson further maintains that Web 2.0 implies more than a set of cool new tools, and instead indicates a new way people interact. In other words, the differentiation between Web 1.0 and 2.0 is more a socio-cultural observation than technological commentary; it is a term about interpersonal communication, not about tools. At the same time, the tools of Web 2.0, including blogging, podcasting, multimedia content, tagging and real simple syndication (RSS), content aggregator services, wikis, social networking, status update programs, and collaborative websites all help illustrate the change in user interaction toward a more participatory social communications medium.

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<sup>32</sup> Tim O'Reilly. "What is Web 2.0: Design Patterns and Business Models for the Next Generation of Software." Communications and Strategies. No. 65, First Quarter, 2007. Retrieved online: <http://ssrn.com/abstract=1008839>. Accessed March 8, 2010.

<sup>33</sup> Paul Anderson. "What is Web 2.0? Ideas, Technologies and Implications for Education." JISC Technology and Standards Watch. February 2007. Retrieved online: <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.108.9995&rep=rep1&type=pdf> . Accessed March 8, 2010.

## *Participatory Culture*

Drawing from these characteristics of the Web 1.0 to 2.0 continuum, Henry Jenkins presents the term “participatory culture” as a summative way to define the socio-cultural impact of Internet-mediated communication, as it becomes an increasingly interactive and participatory communication network. As Jenkins explains: “Participatory culture is emerging as the culture absorbs and responds to the explosion of new media technologies that make it possible for average consumers to achieve, annotate, appropriate and re-circulate media content in powerful new ways.”<sup>34</sup> Jenkins is also less concerned with the tools and gadgets of evolving technology, and more with what people are doing to connect, share, contribute and communicate in light of these. Jenkins defines participatory culture as:

A culture with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing one’s creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices. It is also one in which members believe their contributions matter, and feel some degree of social connection with one another.<sup>35</sup>

This definition of participatory culture is through and through relational. At its core, participatory culture and its forms are about belonging and contributing to a community that gets expressed through a broad network of relationships and the creativity of all its members.

Participatory culture is a broad concept that can take form in a variety of ways. Of these, Jenkins highlights four: affiliations, expressions, collaborative problem-solving, and circulations.<sup>36</sup> Each of these four forms expresses the communal, collaborative, knowledge-sharing spirit of participatory culture to a different degree and with a slightly different emphasis. Affiliations focuses on membership or belonging to social networks or online communities,

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<sup>34</sup> Jenkins, Henry et. al. Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2009. 8.

<sup>35</sup> Jenkins 3.

<sup>36</sup> Jenkins et. al. 3. 8.

expressions highlights the creative contributions people make, collaborative problem-solving emphasizes the communal efforts of people working together to produce knowledge, and circulations points out the importance of people's ability to share and broadcast information. When it comes to concrete examples of Internet-mediated communication, social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter encapsulate affiliation, YouTube and fanfiction sites offer a platform for expressions, Wikipedia provides an example for collaborative problem-solving, and Blogger, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube all present avenues for circulation.

In conjunction with analyzing the emergence of participatory culture, Henry Jenkins also advocates digital media literacy, or in other words, practical ways to harness and engage in the opportunities presented by this emerging cultural shift.<sup>37</sup> Besides the various forms participatory culture can take shape through, and Jenkins also outlines a number of skills we can foster so as to best navigate this emerging cultural milieu. The term he often uses for these skills is “cultural competencies”, which is a telling way of pointing to the necessity of fostering these skills if one is to take active part in our networked society. As Jenkins puts it, “these are skills some youth are learning through participatory culture, but they are also skills that all youth need if they are going to be equal participants in the world of tomorrow.”<sup>38</sup> When it comes to imagining catechesis in this context, Jenkins' forms and skills are helpful guideposts that easily lend themselves to adaptation.<sup>39</sup>

The forms and skills of participatory culture as outlined by Jenkins all reinforce for us that the idea at the heart of it is an active sense of belonging to a community. Religious education scholars Pierre Babin and Angela Ann Zukowski argue that this belonging to a community is the

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<sup>37</sup> See Jenkins et. al. 8, 22-55. For a more in-depth look at participatory culture through the analysis of media case-studies, see also Jenkins. Fans, Bloggers and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture (New York: NYU Press, 2006.)

<sup>38</sup> Jenkins et. al. 21..

<sup>39</sup> See Chapter V for reimagining these forms and skills in a catechetical context.

primary and foundational message of the digital age. With the social communications media as the predominant medium, being part of its flow of information outweighs in importance the content, or what the information is actually about. “We understand nothing about the Internet if we do not perceive that for this generation, intellectual content does not matter as much as belonging to the vehicle, the World Wide Web.”<sup>40</sup> While a comprehensive definition of Internet-mediated communication does not dismiss so readily the importance of the information which is the basic carrier of social presence in the online medium, the present emphasis on belonging does help to underscore the profoundly communal and social dynamic at the heart of the Internet.

Along the same lines, this emphasis on belonging does not need to stand in an opposing dichotomy with informational content. As part of belonging and contributing to a community, participatory culture is all about how information gets communicated in a primarily communal context. Participatory culture thus reshapes our relationship to information as it advocates information’s shared access, generation and dissemination. This has significant effect on how we view, create, and pass on knowledge, and therefore also has important educational implications. Recalling *The Church and Internet’s* insight about the evolution of the media toward the two-way interactivity of the Internet, it can indeed be expected of people to embody this multi-vocal, participatory culture in all areas of their lives, instead of the one-way, top-down communication of the past.<sup>41</sup> Who decides what knowledge is, who proclaims it, and who hands it on to whom has become a collection of many voices in this participatory culture. For evangelization and catechesis, this expands our understanding of believers’ relationship with God’s revelatory Word, shifting the focus from believers not only to hearing God’s Word, but also becoming active in sharing it with others as well. Participatory culture not only makes

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<sup>40</sup> Babin, Pierre and Angela Ann Zukowski. *The Gospel in Cyberspace: Nurturing Faith in the Internet Age*. Chicago, IL: Loyola, 2002. 90.

<sup>41</sup> *The Church and Internet* 6.

possible, but encourages all Christians to be evangelizers, and to share, contribute to and disseminate the message of the Gospel in their own creative way. In this way, participatory culture both underscores and re-energizes the original baptismal calling of each Christian to spread the faith to his or her best ability.<sup>42</sup>

The ways participatory culture has impact on religious education contexts, and the emerging possibilities for evangelization and catechesis are both topics of fundamental importance for this dissertation, and will be elaborated on in chapter five. Participatory culture serves as a rich concept by which to characterize Internet-mediated communication, for its emphasis on a collaborative, multi-vocal and creative context for knowledge and meaning-making gets at the heart of what the spectrum of Web 2.0 tools collectively represent.

### **Conclusion: The Evangelizing Church cannot Miss this Evolution in Communication**

This chapter surveyed those ecclesial documents addressing social communication during the past four decades, along with summarizing socio-cultural observations of the increasing influence of Internet-mediated communication on our culture. In the context of this overview, Pope Benedict XVI's "call to blog" is less extraordinary, and more fitting to both the Church's stance on the importance of the social media and the digital culture we live in. Taken together, both of these threads offer a strong impetus for the Church to take Internet-mediated communication seriously, as an element genuinely reshaping our culture, and as the way we go about gaining, accessing, producing and sharing information and forming knowledge. Being thoroughly aware of and engaged in this cultural shift is of primal importance to the way the Church can best carry out its evangelizing mission in the world. When charged with

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<sup>42</sup> *Lumen Gentium* 17, *Ad Gentes* 35

communicating the Gospel message as the Church's primary task, such an evolution in social communication cannot be overlooked.

Communicating the Gospel in this digital age is a dialogue of faith and culture, where a specific theology undergirding a pastoral process seeks to be contextualized in a particular social phenomenon. In order to thoroughly analyze the evangelizing mission of the Church in our digital culture, all three of these elements of faith and culture in dialogue need elaboration. The next chapter begins this by turning to the specific theology both undergirding evangelization and catechesis, and most appropriate for the digital context: the theology of revelation.

## **Chapter II : The Theology of Revelation**

### **Introduction: Why the Theology of Revelation?**

In line with the Church's enduring interest in social communication to benefit evangelization, and taking seriously the recent evolution of social communication through the digital media, it becomes evident that the main point of intersection between the Church's evangelizing mission and the cultural impact of the Internet is that of communication. Therefore, as we begin to explore this encounter between faith and culture by considering its constitutive theological, pastoral and socio-cultural elements, we are first in search of a theology that is foremost concerned with communication. The theology of revelation offers us a most salient starting point, as it delves into the dynamic of communication between God and humankind. Starting with revelation allows us a transcendent model in which to locate communication, along with the interpersonal relationships it helps to bind, sustain and reinforce. Likewise, revelation also locates evangelization and catechesis in a greater theological framework, as these become contextualized as particular ways for communicating the faith in response to and in continuity with God's revelation. Revelation as our starting point therefore helps both locate and illuminate the intersection of the basic Christian mission of communicating the faith and digital communication shaping our culture.

Divine revelation is God's self-communication to humankind. It encompasses all the ways by which God discloses Godself to us, as mediated by our human capacity to sense, perceive and understand it. It also encompasses the content of all God's self-communication throughout history, as revealed truth about who God is in relation to us. The theology of revelation is an area of theology which continues to analyze and interpret the manner and content

of God's self-communication. Avery Dulles sums up the role of a theology of revelation most comprehensively:

It seeks to serve the church by accurately establishing the contents of revelation, by spelling out the theoretical and practical consequences of revelation, by critically examining current doctrine and practice in light of revelation, by exhibiting the coherence and credibility of revelation, by vindicating the beliefs and practices of the church on the basis of revelation, and by refuting views at odds with revelation.<sup>43</sup>

In this way, the theology of revelation belongs to the most fundamental area of theological reflection, providing a basis for Christian doctrine and practices alike. With its primary focus on God's basic relational gesture and on the ways by which this gets expressed in the order of creation and throughout history, the theology of revelation speaks of a communicating God, with a history of relationship to God's people. Communicating and living this history is the task of evangelization, and in a more specific context, catechesis.

The theology of revelation holds that God's self-communication is fullest in the Incarnation of the Word, Jesus Christ.<sup>44</sup> God's full self-communication in the person of Jesus Christ attests to a specific dynamic of revelation, whereby what gets communicated is first and foremost a person.<sup>45</sup> Specific doctrine and content of revelation all arises from this personal encounter with divine revelation, embodied most fully in Jesus Christ. The dynamic of divine revelation therefore is a personal encounter with God which gives rise to particular content about the divine-human relationship.

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<sup>43</sup> Avery Dulles. "Faith and Revelation." Systematic Theology Vol 1 Eds. Francis Schussler-Fiorenza and John P. Galvin.(Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 199) 92.

<sup>44</sup> *Dei Verbum* 4

<sup>45</sup> This emphasis on the fullness of revelation as person leads well into a generally interpersonal-relational approach to the theology of revelation. See Sandra M. Schneiders. "The New Testament as the Word of God." In The Revelatory Text. ( New York: Harper Collins, 1991.) 45 . Although one among other prominent models of revelation (see Models of Revelation section below) this interpersonal-relational emphasis especially relevant for our overall project of investigating the potential of Internet-mediated interpersonal interactions in service of catechesis.

The Second Vatican Council's *Dei Verbum* states that "by divine revelation, God wishes to manifest and communicate *both himself and the eternal decrees of his will* concerning the salvation of humankind."<sup>46</sup> In the same vein, Dulles speaks of revelation in the *active* and *objective* sense, whereby revelation implies both the process of God's self-disclosure, and the fund or deposit of knowledge resulting from this process.<sup>47</sup> The dynamic of revelation as personal encounter generating concrete content also implies that the two elements of this dynamic, person and content, exist in a subsequent interplay of mutual reinforcement. Personal encounter with Jesus Christ generates the Christian story, including Scripture, doctrine, ritual and other elements belonging to the content of the faith. This content of the faith in turn reinforces and makes present the personal encounter with Jesus Christ for generation upon generation. Personal encounter with Christ through the content of the faith also reinforces and contributes to this same content, lengthening the history of God's relationship with God's people, and so on. All in all, this interplay of person and content as found in the dynamic of divine revelation is significant for analyzing *what* gets communicated in God's communication of Godself. As Sandra Schneiders explains it: "Revelation, although one person may initiate it is necessarily a mutual experience of personal disclosure, giving rise to a mutual treasuring of what has been shared, for the 'what' is really a 'who.'"<sup>48</sup> This "*what*" of revelation as the dynamic and inseparable interplay of personal presence and informational content shapes the human communication of the faith as a response to God's revelation, and has important influence on all forms of evangelization, including catechesis.

Focusing on the dynamics of what gets communicated when God communicates Godself to humankind is also useful when considering communications technology in the service of

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<sup>46</sup> *Dei Verbum* 6, emph. mine

<sup>47</sup> Dulles "Faith and Revelation" 94

<sup>48</sup> Schneiders 34

catechesis. As introduced in the previous chapter, the Internet has become an immense communications platform, used by increasing numbers of people all over the world to connect, find information, and contribute their content. However, in order for catechesis to stake a solid claim in digital communication, sheer popularity of this social communications medium is insufficient reason. Because catechesis, at its heart, is expressing a certain theology in carrying out its pastoral task, new educational opportunities such as the use of digital communication also demand an analysis of the new medium in light of the fundamental theology, in order for it to be an authentic expression of catechesis. This chapter thus presents the theology of revelation as the foundation of catechesis, in anticipation of this analysis.

The theology of revelation explores the dynamics and content of God's communication of Godself to humankind. Using this summative statement as a framework, this chapter analyzes in detail the theology of revelation, first focusing on "God Communicates Godself": God's inherent communicative gesture, and the loci and models of God's revelation in terms of human perception and understanding. It follows this with exploring "To Humankind:" the faith response to God's revelation, the deposit of faith, and the transmission of God's revelation, especially through evangelization and catechesis. Having mapped out the theology of revelation this way, this chapter concludes by focusing on two elements of the theology of revelation especially salient for Internet-mediated communication: the dynamic of revelation as person and content, and the participatory knowledge as a way of accessing revelation, especially through symbolic communication.

## Mapping the Theology of Revelation: “God Communicates Godself”

To assert that God communicates Godself to humankind as the basic premise of the theology of revelation presupposes God’s fundamental outward relational gesture, rooted in God’s very being. According to Karl Rahner: “God’s self-communication means that what is communicated is really God in his own being, and in this way it is a communication for the sake of knowing and possessing God in immediate vision and love.”<sup>49</sup> In other words, God’s self-communication is a divine activity inherent to God’s own being; it is God’s essence. Three main theological concepts help undergird this presupposition about God’s communicative nature: Trinity and Incarnation, as tied together by Logos.

### *Trinity*

Christian theology speaks of God as a Trinitarian communion of three divine persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Although the intra-Trinitarian God, or God-within-Godself remains a mystery, Rahner and others have sought to recapture the practical relevance of the Trinity by proposing that who God is within Godself is fully consistent with the God who has revealed Godself to humankind.<sup>50</sup> Divine revelation culminating in Jesus Christ has illuminated who God is, not just in relationship to us, but eternally and consistently. According to this, there is no difference between who God is and who God is for us. Based on this consistency, we as recipients in faith of God’s self-communication who know God to be a communicating God, can

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<sup>49</sup> Rahner Foundations of Christian Faith (New York: Crossroad, 1978) 117.

<sup>50</sup> See Karl Rahner. The Trinity (New York: Herder and Herder, 1997), where Rahner makes the case for the absolute equality of the immanent Trinity and the economic Trinity. Also see Catherine M. LaCugna God for Us (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), who further develops Rahner’s axiom as a relational model for human community.

also assume God to be a communicating God within Godself as well; “God’s actions reveal who and what God is.”<sup>51</sup>

Furthermore, in order to elaborate how the three persons of the Trinity are one God, Rahner has proposed that what unites the three persons into absolute oneness is the divine essence of relationality itself.<sup>52</sup> As such, the divine self-communication of the persons of the Trinity is a defining element of who God is as Father, Son and Spirit. The movement of self-communication among the persons of the Trinity presents Father, Son and Spirit to exist in a perichoretic model of relationship. Catherine LaCugna describes perichoresis as a state of “dynamic and creative energy, the eternal and perpetual movement, the mutual and reciprocal permeation of each person with and in and through and by the other persons.”<sup>53</sup> It is a relational dynamic of giving and receiving of self that exists between the three divine persons of the Trinity. Following Rahner, for LaCugna, this perichoretic dynamic of the Trinity is the very substance of God, and therefore a model for human community and communion.<sup>54</sup> The dynamic of giving and receiving as the substance of God implies that God in God’s own being is relational gesture, a communication of self. When proposing that God communicates Godself as the essential truth of the theology of revelation, the perichoretic dynamic of the Trinity helps clarify that God’s self-communication is essential to God’s own being, beginning with God’s intra-Trinitarian dynamic. God relates to us because God is relationship.

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<sup>51</sup> LaCugna 211

<sup>52</sup> Rahner. The Trinity 71-73

<sup>53</sup> LaCugna 271

<sup>54</sup> LaCugna relies on feminist and liberation theologians when postulating that the perichoretic interrelatedness of the persons of the Trinity is the very substance of God. In these theologies, equating interrelatedness with God’s substance debunks hierarchical power and roots equality in the Trinitarian image of God. See LaCugna 274-278.

## *Incarnation*

In the spectrum of God's self-communication to humankind, Christian theology holds Jesus Christ to be the fullest moment of divine revelation. In the Incarnation of the second person of the Trinity, God's self-communication takes on unique and explicit form in the divine-human nature of the person of Christ. In Christ's own being, in the union of his two natures, God's communication of Godself to humankind is most intimate. As Hans Urs Von Balthasar puts it: "In Christ there is nothing human that is not the utterance and expression of the divine, and likewise there is nothing divine that is not communicated and revealed to us in human terms."<sup>55</sup> The union of Christ's divine and human natures is deeply symbolic of God's self-communicating, relational gesture; Jesus Christ thus literally embodies God's revelation to humankind.

Jesus Christ as the fullness of revelation has implications for the entire divine-human relationship he embodies. Rahner explains that Christ is the absolute climax of revelation, because in the Incarnation, "what is expressed and communicated, namely God himself, and secondly, the mode of expression, that is, the human reality of Christ in his life and in his final state, and, thirdly, the recipient Jesus in grace and in the vision of God, all three have become absolutely one."<sup>56</sup> The Incarnate Christ therefore unites God's self-communication, human reality, and the faith response of human reality to revelation, all in his being. In this, the mystery of the Incarnation is the ground of the divine-human relationship embodied and perfected in Christ. Regarding the theology of revelation, the mystery of the Incarnation illuminates the self-communicating God in dialogue with the human condition. Through the Incarnation, we not only understand, but also fully experience God's self-communication.

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<sup>55</sup> Hans Urs Von Balthasar. Word and Revelation. (New York: Herder and Herder, 1964.) 70

<sup>56</sup> Rahner. Foundations of Christian Faith, 174

## *Logos*

An additional theological aspect significant to revelation that also ties Trinity and Incarnation together is Christ as Logos, the Word of God. From the beginning of creation, when God spoke the words “Let there be light” (Genesis 1:3), God has continued to communicate Godself in an outward procession to the created world. This divine procession of God’s self-expression is referred to as God’s Word, or Logos, and is conceptualized as the second person of the Trinity. Elaborating on the Trinity, Rahner explains:

The Father is by definition the Unoriginate, the one who is in principle “invisible,” who reveals himself and appears precisely by sending his Word into the world. The Word is, by definition, immanent in the divinity and active in the world, and as such, the Father’s revelation.<sup>57</sup>

God speaks God’s Word to the world, revealing Godself in creation, in history, in the economy of salvation, in the prophets, in signs, symbols and miracles, and culminating in the Incarnation of Jesus Christ. Jesus himself is the Incarnate Word, God’s Word spoken to humankind in the most intimate way. In Jesus Christ, God’s eternal Word spoken from the beginning of creation becomes flesh and fully human. In this way, there is continuity between the Word active in the world from the beginning, and the historical, temporal figure of the Incarnate Christ. Christ as Incarnate Word both belongs to and perfects God’s self-communication through the Word from the beginning of time.

It is also significant that the primary symbol encapsulating God’s outward procession is “word”. To utter a word is an event of self-giving, a personal encounter and exchange of

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<sup>57</sup> Rahner. The Trinity. 29

meaning, the source of which is the speaker herself.<sup>58</sup> Walter Ong points to the Hebrew term *dabar* to highlight the primary concept of word as both word and event, or a spoken sound that carries both meaning and presence.<sup>59</sup> Written words, as the ones on this page are derivative from the spoken event of self-communication that is the original context of words. Similarly, Sandra Schneiders emphasizes the metaphorical interpretation of revelation as word of God, and underscores God's gift of self as the ultimate content of God's word.<sup>60</sup> This has high religious significance, in that the Word of God is first and foremost a personal encounter with God's gift of self, which then gets registered as written communication in Scripture and Tradition.

For the theology of revelation, Trinity and Incarnation, as tied together by the Logos all underscore the fundamental idea that God is a self-communicating God. Before the theology of revelation can explore the ways and means of God's self-communication, it rests on the idea that self-communication is essential to God's own being; as noted above, in both God's intra-Trinitarian giving and receiving, and in God's utterance of the Word spoken fullest in Jesus Christ, self-communication is fundamental to what God does. From the essential outward procession of God as Word perfected for us in the Incarnation flow a multitude of concrete ways by which God has communicated Godself to humankind, and continues to do so by the power of God's Spirit. In mapping out the theology of revelation, we now turn to the concrete ways God communicates Godself, as discerned through human experience.

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<sup>58</sup> For further analysis of the word as event, see Walter Ong. [The Presence of the Word](#), (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970). For a discussion of word as self-gift, see also Rene Latourelle [The Theology of Revelation](#) (Staten Island: Alba House, 1966) 315-317, and Schneiders 32-34.

<sup>59</sup> Walter Ong [The Presence of the Word](#) 113

<sup>60</sup> Schneiders 34

### *Ways of God's Self-Communication*

Assessing human experience in light of our self-communicating God, we can frame God's revelation by God's Creation of the world and the Parousia, or final coming of Christ at the end of time.<sup>61</sup> Creation to Parousia encompasses all of our reality, thus giving human experience a divine context and goal. In this light, all of human experience as created by God and oriented toward the Parousia can be revelatory. Nonetheless, this paints the particular expressions of divine revelation with very broad strokes. While God can indeed reveal Godself through any aspect of human experience, the theology of revelation categorizes God's self-communication as starting from the created order and culminating in Jesus Christ. This categorical approach to the ways of God's self-communication encompasses the created order, events of history, prophetic witness, signs and symbols, miracles, and interior illuminations. Through these various categories, salvation history emerges as the revelatory process of God's special relationship with God's people, as chronicled in Scripture and Tradition, and as culminating in the Incarnation of the Word, Jesus Christ. These categories of revelation within the broad context of human experience each receive further elaboration below.

#### *The Created Order*

As all of human experience is framed by God's self-gift from Creation to Parousia, sheer human experience of the created order itself is inherently revelatory. Rene Latourelle defines this as natural revelation or in other words, knowledge of God through the contemplation of the created world, which is a gift of God and a manifestation of God.<sup>62</sup> Avery Dulles describes natural revelation as "the self-communication of God through the regular order of nature," and it

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<sup>61</sup> Latourelle 314

<sup>62</sup> Latourelle 337

is general in the sense that it is directed at all human beings.<sup>63</sup> God as the Author of the established order of creation reveals Godself to us as the source of transcendent meaning and coherence to our experience of life; by contemplating the created order, we can discover the consistencies that testify to God as Creator. However, as Latourelle notes, “natural revelation discovers a present and personal God, but the mystery of this Person escapes it. It arrives at the threshold of mystery but cannot go in.”<sup>64</sup> In other words, natural revelation through the created order communicates a sense of God’s presence to all people, but is not specific enough to disclose God as Godself, who invites humankind to intimate relationship.

### *History and Its Prophetic Interpretation*

The sense of meaning that is more than the sheer experience of the created order and that delves into the mystery of God is often referred to as supernatural revelation.<sup>65</sup> This meaning is often the vehicle of making more specific sense of human life, experience and history in light of a greater transcendent reality. It seeks to evoke faith and has for its object the mysteries of the intimate life of God.<sup>66</sup> It is through supernatural revelation that God communicates Godself specifically, thereby initiating a relationship and inviting the human person into communion. As Rahner explains it, “it is dialogical and in it, God speaks to man and makes known to him something which cannot be known always and everywhere in the world simply through the

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<sup>63</sup> Dulles “Faith and Revelation.” 94-95

<sup>64</sup> Latourelle 338

<sup>65</sup> Supernatural revelation implies an in-breaking of grace, which also invites the recipients of God’s revelation into the mystery of God beyond the realm of the created order. Another way of conceptualizing it by saying that in supernatural revelation, God’s grace expands our notion of reality beyond the created order. Basing his theology on Rahner’s concept of transcendental and categorical revelation, Dulles contests the terms of the distinction natural and supernatural, in that all revelation is supernatural, as communicating a transcendent God. See Rahner, Foundations of Christian Faith. 138-175, and Dulles, “Faith and Revelation” 94. Maintaining a distinction between natural and supernatural is nonetheless helpful in distinguishing the role of grace as an invitation into God’s transcendent mystery, as compared to grace filling and illuminating our created order. In this, the distinction of natural and supernatural is a question of degree, role and response to grace, not of opposition.

<sup>66</sup> Latourelle 339

necessary relation of all reality in the world to God in man's transcendence."<sup>67</sup> As such, supernatural revelation is not only specific but also evokes a faith response, as it reveals God as the One seeking relationship with humankind; it *addresses* the human person. God's specific and dialogical self-communication as supernatural revelation gets expressed in human experience through the course of history, through prophetic words, signs, symbols and miracles, as well as interior illuminations.

History as the temporal course of human experience is the ground for God's in-breaking self-communication as supernatural revelation. God seeking to communicate Godself to humankind approaches us in our own course of events, so that we can be best disposed to receiving God's self-communication in faith. As grounds for God's self-communication, history therefore acquires meaning and direction: it is no longer a sequence of events but a temporal process started by and leading us to God. As Latourelle also notes, history as the ground of revelation additionally "gives revelation an intense character of actualization."<sup>68</sup> God's revelation in history locates God's self-communication in our everyday experience. It removes revelation from abstraction and proposes that God's self-communication take place during the course of our experience, giving it direction. "God is near, God is there, unforeseeable in God's interventions as well as in God's effects."<sup>69</sup>

Events of history, along with their interpretation are one concrete way of historical revelation. Events alone however are insufficient for revelation, unless they are interpreted by the people of faith as the divine activity of God's self-communication. The prophetic tradition plays a significant role in connecting the word and event of revelation. According to Latourelle, the process of revelation comprises of the historical event itself, the interior revelation that

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<sup>67</sup> Rahner, Foundations of Christian Faith, 171

<sup>68</sup> Latourelle 345

<sup>69</sup> *ibid*

prompts the prophet to understand the event in light of God's self-communication, and the prophet's word illuminating the event as revelatory.<sup>70</sup> God's self-communication uses both historical events and the spiritual insight of particular prophets to make Godself known. In this sense, the events of history can also be considered as signs and symbols of God's revelation.

### *Signs and Symbols*

Symbols and symbolic meaning-making as a model of revelation will receive further elaboration below. Here it is important to note that historical events as interpreted by the prophetic word can also be considered as signs and symbols of revelation, where signs point to the mystery of God, and symbols invite the person of faith into the deeper reality of this mystery. As Dulles points out: "The very events of revelation history are symbols fraught with a meaning deeper than clear concepts or propositional language can convey. Each symbol, taken in its historical and literary context contains a whole range of interlocking meanings that cannot be spelled out adequately in objective conceptual discourse."<sup>71</sup> Events of history interpreted as revelatory moments contain a multitude of meaning, disclosing something of God's own mystery, as well as of the human-divine relationship. They also invite the cooperative and collaborative meaning-making effort of the community to be able to access each symbol's multitude of meaning and to glean the most possible from its shared interpretation.

### *Miracles and Interior Illuminations*

In addition to historical events interpreted as symbolic moments of divine revelation, God at times communicates Godself in strikingly direct ways through miracles and interior

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<sup>70</sup> Latourelle 349

<sup>71</sup> Dulles "Faith and Revelation" 97

illuminations. Closely related to signs and symbols, miracles are uniquely direct manifestations of God's power and love, pointing to and revealing moments of a greater reality. Latourelle categorizes miracles as revelatory signs that point to the Reign of God and lend authentic testimony to the presence of God's power.<sup>72</sup> Recalling in Scripture Jesus' frustration with the thrill-seeking crowd wanting him produce signs and wonders,<sup>73</sup> a miracle in and of itself is not revelatory unless interpreted to be announcing the Reign of God and attesting to God's power. It is in this necessary interpretation that miracle can closely align with symbol, inviting witnesses into a greater reality.

In a similar vein, interior illuminations are a category of revelation that maintain the possibility that God can communicate Godself directly to the intelligence of the person in faith. Revelation as interior illumination can be experienced as dream, insight or epiphany, or another direct inner sense of God. Some Scriptural examples that illustrate interior illuminations include Joseph's dream revealing the birth of Jesus (Matthew 1:18-24) or the magis' dream to avoid Herod on their return from Bethlehem (Matthew 2:12). Interior illuminations, since addressed specifically to the person of faith also help highlight the distinction between public and private revelation. While private revelation is divine self-communication to a specific person of faith, public or universal revelation is meant to disclose God's Word to God's people as a whole. God continues to reveal Godself to humankind in our present history, but public revelation is definitive in that it was completed in Jesus Christ, and "no new public revelation is to be expected before the glorious manifestation of our Lord Jesus Christ" in his second coming.<sup>74</sup> Public revelation thus refers to a specific category of revelation within God's self-disclosing

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<sup>72</sup> Latourelle 391-394

<sup>73</sup> See for instance John 6:2, 14,30-31, where his healing miracles and the feeding of the five thousand fascinate the crowd, but they seem to miss the point.

<sup>74</sup> *Dei Verbum* 4

activity in creation and history, a category with regards to the hearers of God's Word as a select people in relationship with God. This process of divine self-communication to a select people through history is also known as salvation history.

### *Salvation History*

When the historical events, signs, symbols, miracles and illuminations are woven together by interpretation, they form a Story, wherein people of faith can coherently see and glean hope and meaning from the consistent way God has communicated Godself with humankind. Salvation history chronicles the series of events in history of God's self-communication that are tied together by God's salvific intention to restore right relationship with God's select people. Salvation history therefore is God's self-communication with a plan, where "humanity and the world are objects of God's powerful mercies and as destined by God for redemption and glory."<sup>75</sup> Throughout salvation history, God communicates Godself to reorient the hearers of God's Word toward the hope of salvation. While beginning with the Israelites, the select hearers of the revelatory Word expand throughout time to include all of humanity. As Latourelle explains:

From Abraham to Jesus Christ, there is one single line, one single plan appearing little by little, the divine plan, the economy of salvation. In each of the interventions of God, only one part of this economy is involved. This plan, restricted to Israel first of all, enlarges to the proportions of all humanity, then, in the Church, tends to incorporate all people of all times.<sup>76</sup>

Through salvation history God initiates a salvific relationship with the Israelites, which expands to all people especially in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Bible as the story of salvation history holds a special place in chronicling the events of God's self-communication to

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<sup>75</sup> Dulles "Faith and Revelation" 98

<sup>76</sup> Latourelle 346

God's people from the beginning of time through Jesus Christ, as witnessed by the last apostolic writers. As Schneiders describes the Bible, it is a "witness in language to the most fully appropriated experience of revelation in Judeo-Christian tradition and it grounds and governs the ongoing revelatory experience of Christians in succeeding ages."<sup>77</sup> Thus the biblical writings not only chronicle salvation history, but also lend a framework for interpreting our present experience as a continuing unfolding of this salvific divine-human relationship. In the continued unfolding of salvation history, the Word of God finds expression in the communal Body of Christ, the Church, animated by the Holy Spirit.<sup>78</sup> As *Dei Verbum* explains, public revelation is completed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, but there is "growth and insight into the realities which are being passed on," as each generation receives and becomes part of the tradition of the faith, especially in context of Christ's communal Body.<sup>79</sup> Scripture, Tradition and the role of the Church as the loci of revelation will receive further elaboration below.

In mapping out the theology of revelation, the order of creation, the events of history, prophetic witness, signs and symbols, the direct in-breaking of God's power in miracles and interior illuminations, and salvation history as the progress of God's salvific relationship with God's people are all helpful categories for describing the variety of ways God communicates Godself to humankind, as according to our experience and understanding. Based on the spectrum of these categories, different theologies have emerged placing emphasis on various focal points within the process of revelation, resulting in different conceptual models of how God communicates Godself to humankind. In continuing to map out the theology of revelation and focusing on how God communicates Godself, we now turn to a survey of these models of revelation. These different models illustrate the spectrum of understandings about how God

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<sup>77</sup> Schneiders 45

<sup>78</sup> *Dei Verbum* 8; see also Schneiders 41

<sup>79</sup> *Dei Verbum* 8

utters God's Word, what basic message this Word carries, and how we should respond to it in faith.

### ***Models of Revelation***

The above summary of the various categories of revelation illustrates the broadness of this concept of fundamental theology. While the fact that God communicates Godself to humankind remains steadily at the core of the theology of revelation, the when, where, why and how's surrounding God's self-communication open the theology of revelation to a multitude of meaning and interpretation. As such, it is the *theological interpretation* of the fundamental idea of God's self-communication, in terms of form, content, process, and response that is mainly responsible for the diversity of approaches to the theology of revelation.<sup>80</sup> Theological interpretation takes into account all that a person brings, including one's prior experience and understanding, into encounter with an aspect of the mystery of God. Naturally, then, God's self-communication will fit differently into various conceptual frameworks: a theologian whose primary image of God is Christ the Teacher will find more connections in revelation as doctrine, while one who understands God as Emmanuel will see revelation as historical events, and so on. All in all, theological interpretation is a significant element of the theology of revelation, and the spectrum of these models below demonstrates how it adds to the diversity of our thought surrounding God's self-communication to us. God speaks God's Word, but theological interpretation shapes and re-shapes its meaning.

Along the same lines, Avery Dulles notes that revelation as "a term of great religious significance in the Jewish and Christian traditions," and such terms, comparable to truth, justice and courage, "evoke an unfathomable fund of subsidiary connotations generally shared by those

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<sup>80</sup>Avery Dulles *Models of Revelation* (MaryKnoll, NY: Orbis, 1983) 118

who use the words.”<sup>81</sup> Revelation is a grand concept attempting to evoke the mystery of God’s self-communication. As God’s self-communication ultimately invites the hearers of God’s Word into this mystery, manifold meanings and emphases naturally emerge in defining revelation, since the dynamics of revelation as communication are comparable to symbolic meaning-making.<sup>82</sup> In accessing the mystery, different approaches and perspectives therefore together yield a richer picture of God. God as Christ the Teacher and God as Emmanuel, although different metaphors, work together to more fully illuminate for us who God is.

Different approaches or models of revelation therefore stem in large part from the diversity of images we have for God. When we assert that God communicates Godself to humankind, we bring different metaphors and understandings of the Divine to this assertion, therefore yielding different theological interpretations of revelation. While there could be many models of revelation based on the diversity of divine images, Dulles points out that for Christian theologians, revelation is already more specific than just God’s self-communication to humankind. As Dulles defines it, Christian revelation is “God’s free action whereby he communicates saving truth to created minds, especially through Jesus Christ as accepted by the apostolic Church and attested by the Bible and by the continuing community of believers.”<sup>83</sup> This definition assumes God’s initiative, the truth of revelation, the relationship of revelation to salvation, revelation’s full reception by the whole human person, the primary role of Jesus Christ, and the continuing role of revelation in constituting Church, Scripture and Tradition.<sup>84</sup>

While sharing these commonalities, Dulles systematizes the surrounding diversity of thought about revelation and presents us with five primary models, all proposing slightly

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<sup>81</sup> Dulles [Models of Revelation](#) 116

<sup>82</sup> See overview of Dulles’ notion of revelation as symbolic communication below, as well as Schneiders 33-40

<sup>83</sup> Dulles [Models of Revelation](#) 117

<sup>84</sup> For a more thorough summary of the doctrinal convergences between the models of revelation, see Dulles, [Models of Revelation](#) 117.

different theological interpretations of God's self-communication to humankind. These include: the propositional model of revelation, the historical model of revelation, the experiential model of revelation, the dialectical model of revelation, and revelation as new awareness. In mapping out the theology of revelation, a brief overview of these models offers a more complex picture of the significance of God's self-communication, and a broader spectrum of its theological implications.

### *Overview of the Models*

The propositional model of revelation places great emphasis on revealed truth as content. The primary locus of God's self-communication according to this model resides in the truth revealed through doctrine and propositional statements about God. Teaching and the formulation of theological statements hold a special place in the process of revelation, as does the body of truth or content expressing God's self-communication, namely Scripture and Tradition. According to Dulles, the propositional model is advantageous in its "practical fruitfulness for the unity and growth of the Church" in that it presents in relative clarity the tenets of faith, and holds adherence to these teachings as a marker of Christian identity.<sup>85</sup> On the other hand, one's identity in faith is primarily localized in assenting to learned statements about God, relegating worship, experience, fellowship, service and other, often more accessible expressions of the Christian life as secondary to this. While greatly emphasizing God's Word, the propositional model is too narrow in its conception of word as written and formulaic, bypassing the importance of word as spoken event of self-gift.

The historical model of revelation locates God's primary self-communication in the events of history. God reveals Godself to us through events, which "seen in their mutual

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<sup>85</sup> Dulles Models of Revelation 47

connection, manifest God as the lord and goal of history.”<sup>86</sup> This model places much value on both human experience of history, and the interpretation of this for greater, transcendent meaning. The historical model seeks and finds meaning in everyday life by subjecting events to the sovereignty of God, and by chronicling the story of God’s continued presence in history, it sets humankind on a trajectory of hope in salvation. On the other hand, revelation as historical event underscores God’s activity at the expense of God’s Word: in history, God primarily acts, not speaks. In terms of God’s self-*communication*, this approach also misses some of the symbolic and theological importance of the word. As noted above, Word as self-gift is presence accompanied by clear meaning.

The experiential model of revelation locates God’s self-communication in the subjective sense of God’s presence, or grace. God communicates Godself as this inner, underlying experience of grace, which then manifests concretely in the particular circumstances of life. As God communicates Godself by inner experience, truths about God or salvation are secondary to the sense of the Divine Presence, or “the blessed experience of union with God.”<sup>87</sup> This undeniable spiritual merit to the experiential model of revelation however is countered by the lack of the objective sense of who God is, which, as pointed out above, is key to communal Christian identity. Likewise, in terms of communicating the Word, the experiential model of revelation is ambiguous about the clear and specific content of God’s self-communication, beyond the sense of God’s presence.

Out of the five models of revelation, the dialectical model addresses the question of God’s Word most specifically. According to this model the proclamation of God’s Word is the primary locus of God’s revelation, and therefore human language and words are highly valuable

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<sup>86</sup> Dulles [Models of Revelation](#) 60

<sup>87</sup> Dulles [Models of Revelation](#) 77

revelatory elements. Nonetheless, this model maintains some distance between words and Word, in that human language is symbolic, but not equal to divine revelation. This leaves some ambiguity around how God can fully reveal Godself, especially in Jesus Christ, if the human expressions of God's revelation are approximations. Nevertheless, the dialectical model rightly emphasizes the *event* of God's self-expressing Word as a live encounter with God's self-communication; revelation thus first and foremost is personal and relational event, giving way to doctrine, Scripture, salvation history, and so on.

The last of the models of revelation conceptualizes God's self-communication as new awareness. This model is somewhat similar to the experiential model of revelation, emphasizing a definite inner sense of God's presence, but the focus here is more on possibility, hope and new horizons. Revelation as new awareness propels one's sense of faith in new directions; it is a forward-looking model which "stimulates the imagination and restructures experience," and invites the person of faith to participate in God's creative-redemptive activity in the world.<sup>88</sup> Overall, this model is highly cognitive and invites the person to engage with God as mystery. Like the experiential model, the new awareness model does not readily generate specific content around the Word of revelation, but rather, it focuses on the creative energy of the revelatory encounter.

While summarizing these five different models is useful for analyzing their various nuances, they prove to be more helpful for mapping out the theology of revelation when seen together. Each of these models provides one important element that an overall model of revelation cannot neglect: clear propositional statements about God, a sense of God in the events of history for meaning, an inner and personal sense of God, the importance of the proclamatory communication of God's Word through human language, and creative energy generated from

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<sup>88</sup> Dulles Models of Revelation 109

God's self-communication. In short, revelation is both subjective and objective truth communicated to us by the Word of God toward new, life-giving possibilities.

### *Symbolic Communication*

For Avery Dulles, what holds these five models together is the idea of revelation as symbolic communication.<sup>89</sup> He proposes a fourfold structure that both revelation and symbolic communication share, and this structure is helpful for illuminating how God's supernatural self-communication is ultimately possible when conveyed to limited human perception and understanding. Dulles seeks to explore how God can communicate Godself to humankind, when our capacity to receive, understand and respond to God's revelation is so finite by comparison. Using the concept of symbol, and starting with the particular elements common to human experience and understanding, Dulles sets divine-human communication on an ever-expanding trajectory toward the More. This way, God both fills our here and now and guides us to deeper understanding and broader meaning-making horizons.

The fourfold structure of symbolic communication is based on the idea of the symbol as a concrete and evocative reality which effects transformation.<sup>90</sup> Symbols first of all invite us into them in the form of participatory knowledge, where we do not just observe a symbol, but bring our whole selves, memories, emotions and thoughts into engagement with it; in this, symbols are gripping. Flags, tombstones and words like "Mother" are some powerful symbols which demand our whole being. In gripping our whole being, symbols have the potential to re-orient us and

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<sup>89</sup> See Dulles, Models of Revelation Chapter 9, 131-154

<sup>90</sup> For his understanding of symbol and symbolic meaning-making, Dulles relies on Rahner's ontology of symbolism, as well as Michael Polanyi's notion of symbolic meaning-making. See Rahner, K. "The Theology of the Symbol." Theological Investigations. Vol. 4: More Recent Writings. (New York, NY: Crossroad, 1983) 224. and Polanyi, M. and Prosch, H.. Meaning. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 1975) 72-73.

“shift our centers of awareness.”<sup>91</sup> This re-orientation is the beginning of the transformative effect of symbolic communication, the second element of the fourfold structure. When we are personally touched by the symbol, we experience its transformative potential toward new meaning and understanding. In the third element of symbolic communication, this transformation becomes manifest in our new attitudes and behaviors, or in the reaffirming of commitments. Flags, crosses, wedding rings and badges for example are symbols that reinforce one’s national, religious, social or professional identity in this way. Finally, the fourth element of symbolic communication is the symbol’s ability to reveal new insight into mystery. Since symbols are concrete realities that grip our whole being, they generate a multitude of meaning, based on all the particularities we bring to them. For example, a flag symbolizes nation differently when it is being carried in the Olympic procession, in war, or being burnt in protest; yet as flag, it holds all of these meanings together. Entering into the symbol thus presents us with its reservoir of meaning, broadening our understanding over time.

According to Dulles, revelation also exhibits this fourfold structure of participatory knowledge, transformation, new behavior, attitude and commitment, and insight into mystery. When contextualized in the ecclesial community, revelation as symbolic communication illuminates how believers (individual persons as well as the community as a whole) may encounter, engage with and become transformed by God’s revelatory Word.<sup>92</sup> For example, taking the water of baptism as our revelatory symbol, it grips us in an elemental way as a paradoxical symbol both of life and death. It also conveys purification, cleansing, refreshment.

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<sup>91</sup> Dulles Models of Revelation 136

<sup>92</sup> In proposing revelation as symbolic communication, Dulles contextualizes the entire revelatory process in the context of the ecclesial community, defining his proposal the ecclesial-transformative approach to religious doctrine. In addition to Rahner and Polanyi as noted above, Dulles also relies on George Lindbeck’s approaches to religious doctrine, especially the cultural-linguistic approach which is the basis of Dulles’ ecclesial-transformative one. See George Lindbeck . The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age. (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1984) 30-32.

Biblical images like the flood, the crossing of the Red Sea, Jesus' own baptism, or the Samaritan woman at the well also come to mind and help imbue the elemental meanings of water with theological significance. Presented to us in context of the Paschal Mystery, water as symbol holds all of these meanings together and invites us into them. In entering into the symbol of baptismal water, we are re-oriented to life, death and renewal as deep truths of salvation in Jesus Christ. Having engaged with the symbol we are reaffirmed in our identity as members of Christ, which transforms us to proclaim the Gospel through word and deed. As members of a community of faith, the revelatory symbol of baptismal water engages and re-engages us each Easter when we witness the initiation of new members and recall our own baptismal vows. Engaging the symbol as a community also introduces us to the reservoir of meaning it holds, inviting us to new awareness and growth in faith.

Dulles' framework for revelation as symbolic communication is helpful for the overall understanding of revelation in that it explores how communication between the infinite and mysterious God and finite human understanding and perception can take place. Elements of our human experience, whether doctrine, history, insight, proclamation or creative energy can become revelatory symbols of God's self-communication, by engaging our whole being, re-orienting our meaning-making frameworks, effecting in us transformation as manifested in our new attitude and behavior, and opening us up to new meaning, all the while keeping us in a dynamic state of growth in faith in context of a community. Akin to describing a process of conversion in faith, the fourfold model of revelation as symbolic communication therefore contextualizes God's self-communication in a believer's personal and communal life experience, as it evokes a response of faith.

In mapping out the theology of revelation, the categories and models of revelation described above all attempt to analyze how God communicates Godself to humankind. At the same time, since revelation is divine *communication*, the utterance of God's self-giving Word seeks to be heard, understood and received by the human person. As such, part of the theology of revelation is analysis of the faith response it evokes in the person, as well as the community of faith. What the community of faith does in response to God's self-communication in the active sense, and what it does with the content of God's self-communication in the objective sense as content of faith are both responses to divine revelation. Having explored the dynamics of how "God Communicates Godself", we now turn to consider the "To Humankind" part of the theology of revelation, as we look at the human faith response expressed in both the reception and the transmission of divine revelation.

## **To Humankind: The Reception and Transmission of Revelation**

### ***The Human Faith Response***

Even though we now shift to analyze the role of the human person and community in the theology of revelation, God's revelatory Word remains essential and active in the reception of revelation and in the human faith response. Faith is the acceptance of God's revelation, where one "freely commits oneself entirely to God, making the full submission of intellect and will to God who reveals, and willingly assenting to the revelation given by God."<sup>93</sup> This faith response is a complex interaction of the human will and God's grace, where the grace of God both tills the ground for and nurtures into maturity the free human response to God's revelation. In this sense faith is a gift of God freely accepted by the human person, who is moved toward perfection by the continuing guidance of God's Spirit. As *Dei Verbum* explains: "For faith to be accorded, we

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<sup>93</sup> *Dei Verbum* 5

need the grace of God, anticipating it and assisting it, as well as the interior helps of the Holy Spirit, who moves the heart and converts it to God, ... and constantly perfects faith by his gifts, so that revelation may be more and more deeply understood.”<sup>94</sup> The faith response points to the complexity of divine revelation, highlighting how God’s communication of Godself is not just delivering divine content about God, but it orders and fills our entire reality. In terms of communication, divine revelation at its core is the expression of the divine-human relationship that permeates our lives. As such, God’s active role in both the utterance and reception of revelation indicates that what is of utmost importance in revelation is for the divine-human connection to take place and to develop. The particular content revealed both about God and about the divine-human relationship, or the truths of our faith, emerges out of the pre-existing and core reality of this divine-human connection.

Elaborating on this definition of faith as presented in *Dei Verbum*, Latourelle presents the dynamics of revelation in similar terms, emphasizing the centrality of the divine-human relationship:

The Council describes faith as establishing a living relationship, *person to person*, between God and man, and a complete and total adherence which involves knowledge and love: man freely commits his whole self to God. Thus, through revelation, God *comes* toward man, *condescends*, and opens to him the secrets of his intimate life with a view toward reciprocal love. Through faith, man *turns* toward God and gives himself to God in friendship.<sup>95</sup>

This living relationship at the heart of the theology of revelation, as highlighted by the human faith response, grounds all categories and models of revelation describe above in the one basic reality of the divine-human relationship. From Creation to Covenant to Jesus Christ to Parousia, the divine-human relationship runs through all of the theology of revelation. When considering the theology of revelation as basis for catechesis through Internet-mediated communication, this

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<sup>94</sup> *ibid*

<sup>95</sup> Latourelle, *Theology of Revelation*, 470

important foundational element will remain a benchmark for practical and pastoral application, as elaborated on in chapter five.

Since the theology of revelation is based on the foundational relationship between God and humankind, it follows that authentic human faith response to revelation also continues to express and reflect this basic relationality. Consequently, the human faith response to the offer of divine-human relationship extended to us in revelation gets most fully expressed in the relational and communal context of the Church, as the People of God called, gathered and commissioned by God's Word. The theology of revelation is therefore constitutive of the Church, in that God's communication of Godself both calls the People of God together and grants them their primary mission of proclaiming the Good News.<sup>96</sup> As in the case of the individual faith response, the Spirit of God is active in the Church, "sanctifying it continually so that believers might have access to the Father through Christ in the one Spirit," all the while rejuvenating the Church, constantly renewing it and leading it to perfect union with its spouse, Jesus Christ.<sup>97</sup> In other words, God's Spirit both prepares the Church for God's revelation, and animates it for continued growth toward maturation in faith. In addition to responding to God's self-communication in the active sense, the Church also engages with God's revelation in the objective sense as content of the faith. For the theology of revelation, this means that the Church is the communal response of faith to God's self-communication as expressed through the reception, interpretation and the transmission of the content of revelation.

Differentiating between the content of God's revelation and revelation as God's active self-gift is somewhat of an artificial distinction, useful mostly for theological analysis. Recalling God's word as self-gift, the content of God's self-communication *is* God, but the unfolding of

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<sup>96</sup> See *Lumen Gentium* 5

<sup>97</sup> *Lumen Gentium* 4

this basic divine-human relationship through time has generated a history, along with a set of propositional truths about God and humankind in relationship. This history and teaching, chronicled primarily in Scripture and Tradition, constitutes the content of revelation in the objective sense, although it remains imbued with God's presence in the active sense.

Nonetheless, the objective content of revelation as Scripture and Tradition is a useful distillation of the theology of revelation, when it comes to practical concerns about receiving, interpreting and transmitting the faith.

### ***The Deposit of Faith***

*Dei Verbum* refers to the objective content of revelation in Scripture and Tradition as “a single sacred deposit of the word of God, which is entrusted to the Church.”<sup>98</sup> As this deposit of the Word of God is entrusted to the Church, the Church has a specific mission beyond existing as a community of faith in response to God's self-communication. In receiving, interpreting and transmitting this deposit of faith, the Church *takes part* in God's communication of Godself to humankind. Since the deposit of the faith as contained in the Word of Scripture is a finite set of information concluded by the last of the apostolic witnesses, the Church is called to facilitate the continued utterance of God's same Word for all generations thereafter. Similarly, Tradition as the inspired ways the community of faith has interpreted the Scriptural Word through the history of the Church also lends significant content to this deposit, giving witness to the Gospel and its interpretation throughout time, and inviting the community of today to continue to engage in this tradition of interpretation. As Latourelle puts it: “As the depository of the word, the Church has received the mission to preach the Gospel and to interpret it authentically; she is endowed with the power of understanding this word with freshness that is always new, in order to answer the

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<sup>98</sup> *Dei Verbum* 10

questions of each generation.”<sup>99</sup> Through its proclamation of the Gospel in worship, teaching, fellowship and service, the Church facilitates the continued transmission and interpretation of the deposit of faith, making possible the utterance of God’s self-giving Word generation after generation.

### ***The Transmission of Revelation and Catechesis***

This dynamic engagement with the deposit of faith, proclaiming God’s Word through its sharing and interpretation is defined as the transmission of revelation. Although presented here last, the transmission of revelation is by no means an afterthought, especially when considering the identity and essential mission of the Church to share the Good News of Jesus Christ with the world. The transmission of revelation is also the particular theological context giving rise to evangelization and catechesis as concrete ways of exercising the dynamic faith response to God’s revelation. Briefly considering catechesis as a moment of evangelization illustrates the way the theology of revelation is the proper foundation for catechesis, as it is revelation that engenders this practical expression of transmitting the faith.

As noted in the previous chapter, the proclamation of the Gospel, or evangelization, is the primary mission of the Church and of all its baptized members. In terms of the theology of revelation, the Church transmits revelation through this universal mission to evangelize.<sup>100</sup> Although evangelization is a diverse process that takes on many forms,<sup>101</sup> catechesis stands out in an explicit way as a direct and systematic engagement with the deposit of faith, facilitating conversion to Jesus Christ through increased understanding and experience of the Word of God.

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<sup>99</sup> Latourelle *The Theology of Revelation* 412

<sup>100</sup> *General Directory for Catechesis* (GDC) 45

<sup>101</sup> For the forms of evangelization, see *Evangelii Nuntiandi* 40-48, and for the steps in the process of evangelization, see GDC 47

Therefore, the relationship between the theology of revelation and catechesis is a close one: revelation forms the theological basis for catechesis, and catechesis offers a direct and systematic engagement with God's revelatory Word.

Catechesis, as a particular moment of the evangelization process is defined as "the period in which conversion to Jesus Christ is formalized, and provides a basis for first adhering to him."<sup>102</sup> Catechesis nurtures the human faith response to the Word of revelation in a religious education context. If the basis of the theology of revelation is the divine-human relationship, then catechesis is the courtship that develops the spark of divine-human love toward a full commitment in faith. During the catechetical process, the believer experiences revelation as the presence of God in worship, community, service and teaching, while especially focusing on exploring the deposit of faith in Scripture and Tradition. The catechetical context is thus one of the primary loci for the utterance of God's Word for each generation, since it often serves as the initiatory process into the ecclesial community, where believers can first come to hear and engage with a thorough and systematic exploration of the deposit of faith.

The process of catechesis as this explicit expression of the theology of revelation in an educational context is the focus of the next chapter of this dissertation. Having mapped out and analyzed God's communication of Godself to humankind, in the next chapter we turn to elaborate on how the theology of revelation informs the catechetical process, especially in terms of the foundational divine-human relational dynamic found at the heart of revelation. How catechesis maintains this personal foundation as it invites persons of faith into a systematic exploration of the deposit of faith is the guiding question of the next chapter.

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<sup>102</sup> GDC 63

## **Conclusion: The Theology of Revelation and Internet-Mediated Communication**

While this chapter presented an overview of the theology of revelation, it served to inform the greater question of whether catechesis can stake a claim in Internet-mediated communication. The theology of revelation analyzes God's communication of Godself to humankind and it contextualizes catechesis in the Church's mission to transmit God's revelatory Word, at the same time granting catechesis a solid theological foundation out of which to carry out its educational and formative task. The above overview of God's essential communicative nature as expressed through Trinity, Incarnation and Logos, along with the categories and models of revelation all underscore in various ways God's foundational relational gesture toward humankind, and the central role of the divine-human relationship in all of revelation.

The analysis of catechesis in light of this relational basis to revelation is the task of the following chapter. Before moving on from the theology of revelation, however, it is useful to highlight some of its key elements especially relevant for Internet-mediated communication. The dynamic of revelation as interplay between personal relationship and specific content, and Avery Dulles' emphasis on engaging with revelatory symbols through participatory knowledge are two important points of the theology of revelation to bookmark for our subsequent analysis of Internet-mediated communication in service of catechesis.

### ***Person and Content in Relationship***

The dynamic of revelation as personal encounter and specific content emerged repeatedly throughout this chapter. God's communication of Godself comes to us most fully in the person of Jesus Christ, and as such, the fullness of revelation is a personal encounter. From another

angle, God's revelation as Word indicates a gift of self, of God's presence spoken to humankind as an event of self-communication. Centered on the divine-human relationship, revelation therefore is the continual unfolding of God's Word addressing humankind, anticipating a response of faith. All of this underscores a revelation as thoroughly personal and relational. At the same time, revelation is also content about God, both in terms of the mystery of God, and the story of God's relationship to humankind. Also called the deposit of faith, the concrete content of revelation is entrusted especially to the Church as the story of the divine-human relationship, chronicled primarily in Scripture and Tradition. As explained above, revelation as personal presence and revelation as content cannot be separated, for God's personal presence imbues the deposit of faith, while the deposit of faith facilitates the continued utterance of God's same Word from generation to generation. All the while, as our overview of the models of revelation demonstrated, personal presence of God and concrete content about God as elements of revelation have at times received different emphasis and stood in relationship in varying degrees to one another. The spectrum of models thus testify that in the history of theological thought around revelation, person and content were not always as integrated as our ideal demands, therefore resulting in different ways of hearing, understanding and transmitting God's Word. While this diversity normally would enrich the overall process, the danger over diminishing the fullness of God's Word by underemphasizing either personal presence or content also presents itself. To avoid this danger, it thus benefits the theology of revelation to maintain a model of integration as its standard, consistently making room for both personal presence and informational content in its conceptual framework. As we will discover in chapters four and five, by virtue of the online medium, Internet-mediated communication presents one such

example of integration, offering wisdom to both the theology of revelation and the practice of catechesis in this regard.

### ***Participatory Knowledge and Participatory Culture***

In line with the integrated model of communication the Internet potentially offers revelation and catechesis, a second important element of the theology of revelation relevant for Internet-mediated communication is the notion of revelatory symbols inviting participatory knowledge. Recalling Avery Dulles' fourfold schema of symbolic communication, he proposes that to engage in symbolic communication means to enter into the symbol with one's whole being, allowing ourselves to be gripped by the symbol. Participatory knowledge then is a path toward understanding that involves the contribution of the whole self; as we enter into the symbol, we allow it to take us to new meaning and understanding. It is a type of knowledge that necessitates this self-giving; it cannot be accomplished by mere observation or analysis. To understand through participation implies engagement, risk and giving over control to the symbol to disclose ultimate meaning.

As we will find in chapter five, participatory knowledge in symbolic communication finds a practical parallel in the participatory culture generated by the evolution of the World Wide Web toward Web 2.0 and its more interactive user platforms. To communicate fruitfully and to gain understanding of and through Web 2.0, Internet users are entering into the digital medium with full intent to reinforce their online presence through interacting, sharing and collaborating with others to produce content. Presenting us with a uniquely integrated model of communication, information in Web 2.0 is also entirely personal because of this sense of participatory culture, where online content always bears the digital fingerprints of many users

actively involved in sharing, remixing, producing and augmenting it. In fact, part of thorough digital media literacy is the ability to engage in participatory culture, “where everyone has a more active stake in the culture that is produced.”<sup>103</sup> Participatory engagement in the online medium has become part and parcel of gaining information, understanding and making meaning through Internet-mediated communication. Regarding the theology of revelation and Dulles’ notion of participatory knowledge, both catechesis and Internet-mediated communication seem to promote an epistemology that involves full engagement of self toward greater understanding, gaining of information, and conversion. The practical implications of this parallel will be taken up in the following chapter on catechesis.

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<sup>103</sup> Jenkins “Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture:Media Education for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century” 10

## Chapter III : Catechesis

### **Introduction: Catechesis as Expression of Revelation**

The analysis of revelation in the preceding chapter has immersed us in the theology of God's self-communication to humankind, informing our overall investigation of Internet-mediated communication in the service of catechesis. Since revelation forms the theological basis of catechesis, catechesis then is an expression of the theology of revelation, in terms of direct and systematic engagement with God's revelatory Word for forming people in the faith. Catechesis follows the theology of revelation as it engages in faith formation according to revelation's most foundational elements: personal encounter with God culminating in Jesus Christ, and the resulting message and story of the divine-human relationship as the content of faith.

Having considered the socio-cultural relevance of Internet-mediated communication in chapter one and the theology of revelation in chapter two, this chapter turns to catechesis as the concrete process of religious education we are investigating in light of the digital medium. Following from the theology of revelation, this chapter first defines catechesis and then analyzes it in terms of the core dynamic of revelation between personal encounter and content of faith. While catechesis as an overall process incorporates both relational/communal and instructional elements, this chapter risks an artificial separation of these for the sake of analysis, and in order to demonstrate how the core dynamic of revelation also finds particular expression in the catechetical process. By way of method, this chapter therefore first defines catechesis as a concrete expression of the theology of revelation as well as a moment in the Church's evangelizing mission. Following from revelation, it then also considers how catechesis facilitates

both personal encounter with Jesus Christ through the Church's teaching, liturgy, communal life and service, as well as engagement with the necessary content of catechetical instruction. It concludes by pulling relationship and content back together to underscore the absolute necessity of the integration of these two elements in the catechetical process.

### **What is Catechesis?**

As introduced in the previous chapter, catechesis is a process of education in the faith, where the believer is invited to grow in commitment to Christ through participation in the life of the Church and deeper immersion in the content of Christian faith. Set in its greater context, catechesis is a process in service to the Church's basic evangelizing mission to proclaim the Good News of salvation in Jesus Christ. From a theological perspective, catechesis is both expression and transmission of God's revelatory Word, or in other words, the human communication of God's self-communication. In actualizing God's revelatory Word and in carrying out the Church's evangelizing mandate, catechesis serves to bring believers to maturity of faith, thereby forming Christian identity both on an individual and on a communal level. Catechesis accomplishes this by enculturating the person of faith in the whole Christian life, including its teaching, worship, fellowship and service.<sup>104</sup> Because catechesis differs in goal from religious instruction, this enculturation into the Christian life seeks to facilitate conversion, compelling the believer to live in Christ, not just understand him. At the same time, the catechetical process also incorporates specific engagement with the content of the faith by means of instruction. Catechesis inherits from the theology of revelation this dynamic of enculturation

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<sup>104</sup> For enculturation as the primary paradigm of catechesis see John H. Westerhoff. Will Our Children Have Faith? (New York: Seabury, 1976). For the particularly formative elements within the life of the community, including teaching, worship, proclamation, fellowship and service, see Maria Harris. Fashion Me a People. (Louisville, KY: Westminster, 1989.)

and instruction, relationship and content, or Person and story, which has impact on the potential of Internet-mediated communication for catechesis. In order to enter more deeply into the dynamics of catechesis, it is helpful to first briefly explore the elements that constitute the context and goal of catechesis: its relationship to revelation, evangelization, and the ecclesial Body of Christ as both its cradle and context.

### *A Moment of Evangelization*

Catechesis is often contextualized as an essential moment of evangelization.<sup>105</sup> Set in the broader spectrum of the Church's basic mission to proclaim the Gospel, catechesis is a specific expression of evangelization, where the Gospel is proclaimed through participation in the life of the Church, which facilitates the conversion of the believer toward greater commitment to Jesus Christ and maturity in faith. This implies an explicit evangelizing effort, where the Word of God is expressed in an "organic and systematic way with a view to initiating hearers into the fullness of Christian life."<sup>106</sup> "Organic and systematic" refers to the purposefulness of catechesis to guide and structure the believer's immersion into the life of the Christian community, as will be explored further below. Regarding the broader spectrum of evangelization, catechesis as the "initiation of hearers into the fullness of Christian life" points to how catechesis both builds on and prepares for other expressions of evangelization.<sup>107</sup>

To begin with, catechesis assumes the already-existing faith response of the believer to the Word of God. As such, catechesis depends on some previous evangelizing efforts to proclaim the Word of God and to evoke the spark of faith within a person. The General Directory for Catechesis (GDC) refers to this as "primary proclamation," part and parcel of the

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<sup>105</sup> *Catechesi Tradendae* 18

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>107</sup> See CT 18, as well as GDC 63

Church's missionary activity addressing especially those new to or unformed in the Christian faith.<sup>108</sup> While primary proclamation seeks to initiate conversion, it is the explicit role of catechesis to formalize this conversion, and to provide a basis for the believer to adhere to Jesus Christ.<sup>109</sup>

One expression of catechesis focuses on preparing the believer for entering into the Christian community. Called "initiator catechesis,"<sup>110</sup> this seeks to deepen and facilitate the process of conversion to Jesus Christ taking place within the believer. While Christian initiation is a remarkable faith-event in the life of the believer, conversion to Jesus Christ is a life-long process for all members of the Body of Christ. Therefore, initiator catechesis centered on the sacraments of initiation also lays the foundations for further evangelizing, catechetical and pastoral efforts toward greater maturity in faith. All in all, located on the wide field of the Church's primary mission to evangelize, catechesis is that specific moment which takes the seed of faith to plant it and nurture it in the rich soil of Christian life. Other evangelizing efforts may bring the seed there, and yet other pastoral activities may tend to it to bear fruit, but catechesis enjoys the foundational task of ensuring that the seed of faith both grows solid roots and comes to life in the Christian community. For this reason, catechesis has a certain priority in the Church's evangelizing mission, although it should remain fully integrated with both the missionary and pastoral activities that come before and after it.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> See GDC 61. The GDC and *Redemptoris Missio* both highlight three intended settings for this primary proclamation of the Word through evangelization: *missio* "Ad gentes" to communities of non-Christians, pastoral action toward communities well-established in the faith, and new evangelization toward communities who are baptized but non-practicing. See GDC 58, RM 33.

<sup>109</sup> GDC 63

<sup>110</sup> GDC 64-5

<sup>111</sup> GDC 64, CT 15

### *Catechesis as Ministry of the Word*

As God communicates Godself to humankind, humankind responds in faith to both accept and hand on the Word of God's self-communication. Catechesis captures the moment of the human faith response to revelation and, in cooperation with God's Spirit, nurtures it toward fuller maturity. As the GDC explains: "Catechesis for its part transmits the words and deeds of Revelation; it is obliged to proclaim and narrate them and, at the same time, to make clear the profound mysteries they contain."<sup>112</sup> In this way, catechesis is essential to the transmission of revelation, as it constitutes a concrete and systematic process to accept, engage in, interpret and hand on the Word of God. This holds true for the broad spectrum of catechetical contexts, including worship, proclamation, service, fellowship, as well as specifically catechetical teaching and instruction. In each of these contexts, God communicates Godself and the community is intentional about receiving, interpreting and sharing this revelatory Word, albeit in different ways.

Another way to refer to the Church's evangelizing mission with regards to revelation is "the ministry of the word." The expression is rooted in Acts 6:4, where the ministry of the word is differentiated from ministries of service and prayer in describing the emerging responsibilities of the early Christian community.<sup>113</sup> Concerned especially with proclaiming the Word of God, the ministry of the word encompasses all evangelizing efforts to transmit revelation through human expression.<sup>114</sup> As Ann Marie Mongoven defines the ministry of the word: "It is the proclaiming of the story of our freedom through Christ, the One who fully revealed God's unconditional love for us, through evangelization, or preaching, or theologizing, or

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<sup>112</sup> GDC 39

<sup>113</sup> "Therefore friends select from among yourselves seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom whom we may appoint to [serving the widows in need of food] while we for our part will devote ourselves to prayer and to serving the word." Acts 6:3-4

<sup>114</sup> GDC 50

catechesis.”<sup>115</sup> While as broad ranging in concrete expression as human communication itself, the ministry of the word serves the Church in several major ways: in proclaiming the faith as the primary proclamation of evangelization, in exploring the faith in preparation for initiation through catechesis, and in continuing to present the faith to believers as they mature in Christian identity through various ways, including theology, preaching, liturgy and further catechesis. Presented in this way, the ministry of the word contextualizes catechesis in the same way as the broad spectrum of evangelization that both prepares for and derives from catechesis. While in practical terms overlapping with evangelization as the greater context of catechesis, the ministry of the word is a helpful term because it highlights catechesis’ essential connection to revelation, as the theology which undergirds all practical undertakings of catechesis. This is especially useful when exploring new contexts and media for catechesis such as the Internet, because as ministry of the word, it continually roots catechesis in the transmission of God’s self-communication as both person and content.

### *Catechesis and the Communal Body of Christ*

One expression of catechesis serves the process of initiation, and as such, it is profoundly integral to Christian identity formation, incorporating new believers into the communal Body of Christ. By becoming Christian, catechumens become part of the Body of Christ, entering into Christ’s Paschal Mystery through the sacraments of initiation, and emerging to new life as sons and daughters of God in Christ. To become a Christian is to change in relationship to God through Christ, and to live out the Gospel mission of Christ’s communal Body, as empowered by the Holy Spirit. Relationship with God through Christ and a sharing in identity and mission of Christ’s communal Body the Church are the hallmarks of the newfound Christian identity

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<sup>115</sup> Ann Marie Mongoven. *The Prophetic Spirit of Catechesis*. (New York: Paulist Press, 2000) 22

formed and facilitated by catechesis. Within its general aim to facilitate conversion to Jesus Christ, the process of catechesis therefore develops and fosters in the believer a sense of belonging to Christ's communal Body the Church, as the greater context for turning one's mind and heart to Christ.

One of the clearest expressions of catechesis fostering the sense of belonging to the Body of Christ is found in the process of initiatory catechesis, following the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA). Indeed, in structure and in expression, the RCIA seeks to facilitate the conversion process moving it along from primary evangelization to post-baptismal mystagogy, all in the context of the community of faith. It has explicit stages methodically structured to deepen the conversion and the commitment of the believer: the pre-catechumenate or inquiry stage focused on the evangelizing primary proclamation, the catechumenate proper for formation in the faith, the purification and enlightenment stage to focus on spiritual preparation, and post-baptismal catechesis or mystagogy initiating the ongoing formation of the believer as part of the community. Each of these stages is marked by communal ritual celebrations symbolizing the transition and increasing commitment of the believer. The RCIA as catechetical process demonstrates a structured and multifaceted approach to facilitating conversion, where the community of faith as Body of Christ is both the cradle and the context of the believer's conversion process.

The catechumenate stage of the RCIA is "the extended period during which candidates are given suitable pastoral formation and guidance, aimed at training them for the Christian life," and it includes four main elements to scaffold Christian identity: suitable catechesis, familiarity with the Christian way of life, liturgical rites and encouragement of active witness of life.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> RCIA 75. For a fuller treatment of these four elements, see section on the "Relational Dimensions of Catechetical Process" below.

Because the catechumenate stage, along with the entire RCIA process is concerned with enculturating the believer in the communal Body of Christ, it follows that the aforementioned suitable pastoral formation addresses the believer as a whole, communally oriented person. Therefore, while the focus of catechetical instruction, as in the catechumenate stage of RCIA, is to present Catholic teaching in its entirety, it underscores all of the other catechetical elements in the life of the faith community, and thus serves to enlighten faith, direct the heart toward God, foster participation in the liturgy, inspire apostolic activity, and nurture life completely in accord with the spirit of Christ.<sup>117</sup> Catechetical instruction therefore is never disconnected from the whole conversion process of the believer or the life of the Christian community.

Christian identity formation is deeply intertwined with a personal commitment to Jesus Christ, resulting in a transformed way of life with a sense of distinct purpose and mission in the context of Christ's communal Body. It is more than an increased understanding of Christianity, and observation of or even participation in the communal and ritual life of the Christian community. It is a total transformation by which the believer comes to call the Christian community, including its teachings, traditions, rituals and mission his own.

### ***The Challenge of Catechesis: Balancing the Relational and the Instructional***

The enduring challenge for catechesis is to maintain a balance between its overall goal to facilitate a personal commitment to Jesus Christ by deepening conversion and the sense of belonging to his communal Body, and its instructional aim to convey dogmas and teachings as the content of faith. Without this balance, the faith-identity of the new believer would gravitate toward either a doctrinal or experiential extreme, leaving the believer impoverished by the lack

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<sup>117</sup> RCIA 78

of one or the other.<sup>118</sup> This question of balancing the goals of the Church's catechetical ministry has inspired much scholarly thought, especially in the decades after the Second Vatican Council. As Avery Dulles points out, the primarily doctrinal approach to catechesis between the Council of Trent and the Second Vatican Council resulted in generations of Catholics who memorized the basic contents of the faith from question-and-answer catechisms, and were assumed to come to an eventual understanding of these memorized truths later in life.<sup>119</sup> The kerygmatic and catechetical movements of the twentieth century coupled with the reforms of the Second Vatican Council paved the way for a renewed approach to catechesis, one that focused on the Good News of Jesus Christ taking root in and transforming the person of faith in the context of the community.<sup>120</sup> After this shift to a more communal, experiential model of religious education, some more recent scholarly voices have returned once again to advocate the importance of the classroom and of the concrete instructional elements of religious education.<sup>121</sup> Parallel to these voices is the shift in ecclesial attitude away from the vision of the 1971 *General Catechetical Directory* and other post-conciliar catechetical documents that take seriously the communal and cultural context of catechesis, toward a renewed interest in a standardized, doctrine and catechism oriented model of teaching the faith.<sup>122</sup> Faced with the challenge of secularization<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> For the necessity to integrate the various models of catechesis, including doctrinal and experiential, as well as kerygmatic, liturgical and praxis-oriented, see Avery Dulles. *Evangelization for the Third Millennium*. (New York: Paulist, 2009.)112-113. See also Graham M. Rossiter. "Perspectives on change in Catholic religious education since the Second Vatican Council." *Religious Education* 83, no. 2 (March 1, 1988): 264-276.

<sup>119</sup> Dulles. *Evangelization for the Third Millennium*. 103

<sup>120</sup> For an overview of the kerygmatic and the catechetical developments of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, see Mongoven *Prophetic Spirit of Catechesis*, 36-63.

<sup>121</sup> See Graham M. Rossiter. "Perspectives on change in Catholic religious education since the Second Vatican Council." *Religious Education* 83, no. 2 (March 1, 1988): 264-276, and Thomas P. Walters, "Instructional objectives, catechesis, and the future." *Religious Education* 85, no. 1 (December 1, 1990): 84-91.

<sup>122</sup> See for instance the 2006 *Compendium to the Catechism of the Catholic Church*, which reintroduces the question and answer format and points to the benefit of memorizing these distilled and brief statements of the faith. See Introduction to the *Compendium* 4.

and confronted by socio-cultural observations that correlate a generation of young Catholics unclear on basic tenets of the faith to the shift away from the doctrinal toward a more relational, communal model of catechesis,<sup>124</sup> catechesis continues to “constantly seek the proper means and language for presenting, or representing, to them God’s revelation and faith in Jesus Christ.”<sup>125</sup> With both the communal and instructional models in recent memory, the debate and discussion thus continues around how to pull them together into an integrated balance in order to find this proper language.

This enduring challenge of catechesis to integrate its relational/communal and instructional elements is significant for our present focus on the use of Internet-mediated communication. While one approach to the dialogue between catechesis and Internet-mediated communication would be to survey the practical use of the Internet for catechetical purposes, this dissertation casts a wider net. Keeping catechesis’ enduring challenge in mind, this dissertation turns to the Internet as a model for integrating the personal and informational into one communication process. Rather than focusing on its potential as a tool, the Internet instead becomes for us a platform of communication to study, especially noting how Internet-mediated communication weaves interpersonal interaction and conveyance of self together with the sharing of information. These dynamics of Internet-mediated communication will be addressed in the following chapter. In anticipation of this dialogue, our current focus on catechesis further explores and clarifies the parallel dynamic of the relational/communal and instructional elements

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<sup>123</sup> See John Paul II’s call for the new evangelization in *Redemptoris Missio* 33 and Benedict XVI’s *Ubi cumque et Semper*, in which he echoes John Paul II’s concern about secularization and announces the establishment of the Pontifical Council for Promoting the New Evangelization

<sup>124</sup> Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton correlate the overall religious laxity of US Catholic teenagers with the shift in Catholic religious education away from the structured, systematic and doctrinal approach of the instructional model of Catholic schools and CCD programs before Vatican II. See *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005) 211-214.

<sup>125</sup> *Evangelii Nuntiandi* 56

at play in the catechetical process. By outlining these elements in terms of their role and importance in the overall conversion process of the believer we can be better prepared when trying to integrate them in light of our impending analysis of Internet-mediated communication. This chapter now turns to consider in detail first the relational and then the instructional dimension of catechesis.

## **The Relational Dimension of the Catechetical Process**

### *A Caveat for Integrated Balance*

Before turning to explore the relational dimension of the catechetical process, an important caveat must be stated. While for the sake of analysis we focus on the relational/communal and instructional dimensions of the catechetical process separately, the ideal and the standard of catechesis remains their balanced integration. Instruction in the faith joins with the prayer, service and fellowship experiences of the believer, which together shape her in her emerging identity as a member of the Body of Christ. These relational/communal and instructional elements are all held together by catechesis' roots in the theology of revelation. Most fundamentally, all of the elements of the life of the Church convey God's self-communication, and therefore are revelatory channels inviting the faith response of the believer to conform more fully to Jesus Christ. At the same time, these elements all convey something about who God is and who we are in light of the divine-human relationship at the heart of our faith. For this reason, *Catechesi Tradendae* explains:

Authentic catechesis is always an orderly and systematic initiation into the revelation that God has given of himself to humanity in Christ Jesus, a revelation stored in the depths of the Church's memory and in Sacred Scripture, and constantly communicated from one generation to the next by a living, active *traditio*. This revelation is not however isolated from life or artificially juxtaposed to it. It is concerned with the ultimate meaning of life

and it illuminates the whole of life with the light of the Gospel, to inspire it or to question it.<sup>126</sup>

By this it is evident that the different dimensions of catechesis and all its particular elements in the life of the Church are meant to work together, not to compete with one another. Finding a harmonious balance and a successful integration of these is one of the present challenges facing catechesis. We begin by considering all that the relational/communal dimension of catechesis adds to the overall conversion process of the believer.

### *Relational/Communal Elements of Catechesis*

The primary agent of catechesis is the community of the Church, as animated by the Holy Spirit: it is an “essentially ecclesial act.”<sup>127</sup> This means that catechesis is not only the responsibility of the entire community of faith, but also affects the entire community of faith.<sup>128</sup> The community of faith is the origin, locus and the goal of catechesis, as it strives to continue to transmit the Word of revelation as its fundamental aim.<sup>129</sup> Accordingly, when believers participate in catechesis, their personal conversion to Jesus Christ is in fact a communal process that engages the life of the community both as a cradle and context for catechesis, as well as belonging to the communal Body of Christ being catechesis’ immediate goal. It is erroneous then to equate the catechetical ministry to a handful of catechists leading a discussion group in the church basement. Thanks to persistent scholarly voices, it has become clear that the entire life of the community of faith educates to some degree, and has a definite curriculum that it conveys.<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> CT 22

<sup>127</sup> GDC 77

<sup>128</sup> GDC 78

<sup>129</sup> GDC 254

<sup>130</sup> Community-based theories of catechesis, which rely on the concept of socialization as a model for religious education have received the support and interpretation of many religious education theorists, including, Iris Cully, C. Ellis Nelson, Berard L. Marthaler, Gabriel Moran, John H. Westerhoff, Maria Harris, and Thomas H. Groome. See

Therefore, when exploring the concrete elements of the catechetical process, it is wise to think broadly. Starting with the worship space, the liturgical art and furnishings, and moving on to the sense of hospitality, the language of the liturgy, the choice of hymns, the openness and approachability of the pastoral staff, the selection of faith formation, devotional and service activities available, the age, gender and lay or ordained status of persons involved in all activities, the content and message of the preaching, the intercessions and the goal of the collection, the bulletin, the announcements, the use of media and the web-presence of the community: all of these elements of the life of the church convey something about the community's identity as Body of Christ. Before the new believer even joins the RCIA or attends a specific catechetical event, his process of enculturation into the community of faith has already begun as he encounters these basic elements of community life listed above. These basic elements of the life of the church become the initial reference-point that will hold together for the believer the more detailed insights gained through RCIA or other catechetical formation. Without this initial experience providing a reference-point, it would be difficult to understand the doctrines, beliefs and practices presented in the context of catechetical instruction.

Along these lines, the *General Directory for Catechesis* asserts that catechesis that is comprehensive has to be “an apprenticeship of the entire Christian life, a complete Christian initiation which promotes an authentic following of Christ focused on his Person, and it implies an education in knowledge of the faith and in the life of the faith.”<sup>131</sup> An apprenticeship of the entire Christian life is an appropriate metaphor as it conveys a sense of learning and participation coupled in one dynamic process. It is hands-on and total involvement toward the aim of gaining

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especially Berard L. Marthaler “Socialization as Model for Catechetics” Foundations of Religious Education Ed. Padraic O’Hare.( New York: Paulist, 1978); John H. Westerhoff. Will Our Children Have Faith? (New York: Seabury, 1976); Maria Harris. Fashion Me a People (Louisville KY: Westminster, 1989)

<sup>131</sup> GDC 67

mastery, becoming one who will then teach and show others the way. Recalling the primary evangelizing mission of the Church and all its baptized members, catechesis as apprenticeship of the entire Christian life underscores in a helpful way the call of each believer to immerse oneself in the Body of Christ *so as to* share the Good News with others.

An authentic following of the person of Christ underscores the relational/communal dimension foundational to the catechetical process. As we recall from chapter two, the complete and perfect revelation of God is the person of Jesus Christ, his incarnate presence, not ideas and beliefs about him, which all derive from this personal encounter.<sup>132</sup> This results in the relational roots of the theology of revelation that yields the differentiation between revelation as first the encounter with the Word, and revelation as the content of the faith handed on by transmission. Inseparable from each other as two sides of the one divine self-communication of God to humankind, the relational roots of revelation nonetheless set a standard for a dynamic openness to the Word of God in the communal life around us. Rooted in the theology of revelation, catechesis inherits this relational standard: “At the heart of catechesis we find, in essence, a person, the Person of Jesus of Nazareth, the only Son of the Father, full of grace and truth.”<sup>133</sup> The GDC echoes the same dynamic of revelation in which the content of faith derives from the personal encounter with Jesus Christ, in asserting that the fundamental task of catechesis is to “present Christ and everything in relation to him” and that “every element of the message [of catechesis] tends to this.”<sup>134</sup>

Although affirming the formative potential of all that the community of faith is and does together, catechesis as apprenticeship of the entire Christian life is more of a theoretical qualification than a pastoral directive. If the entire Christian life educates, where does the

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<sup>132</sup> *Dei Verbum* 4

<sup>133</sup> *Catechesi Tradendae* 5

<sup>134</sup> GDC 98

catechist begin? How can a catechist structure the catechetical process in order to draw on the educational potential of the entire life of the community of faith? In order to provide some practical specificity, the GDC outlines several forms of catechesis especially relevant for the ongoing formation of the people of faith: study of Sacred Scripture, liturgy and sacramental preparation, spiritual formation, theological instruction, and an ongoing awareness of the Church's social teaching in dialogue with our world.<sup>135</sup> Systematizing these various forms into four main categories, the RCIA lists suitable catechesis, familiarity with the Christian way of life, liturgical rites and active witness of life as the essential ways by which to foster maturity of faith.<sup>136</sup> Organizing the entire life of the Church around these four loci, though still all-encompassing, helps generate creative thought around the process of catechesis, and how to intentionally engage each of these loci in the conversion process of the believer. In order to further clarify the relational/communal dimension of catechesis, each of these four loci merits a brief analysis.

### *Suitable Catechesis*

In context of the four general catechetical elements in the life of the community, "suitable catechesis" zeros in on the instruction the believer receives about its teachings, beliefs and practices. The specific role and content of the instructional dimension of the catechetical process will receive further elaboration in the section below. Here we briefly consider how catechetical instruction fits into the overall life of the community, and contributes to its communal identity in faith.

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<sup>135</sup> GDC 71

<sup>136</sup> RCIA 75

In contextualizing catechetical instruction in the overall life of the community of faith, the theme of conversion colors the language of the RCIA. For catechetical instruction, the document stresses “not only an appropriate acquaintance with the dogmas and precepts but also a profound sense of the mystery of salvation in which [the catechumens] desire to participate.”<sup>137</sup> While it may concentrate on clarifying dogmas and teachings, a catechetical instruction does this in the clear and direct light of Christ’s invitation addressing the catechumen to enter into the Paschal Mystery for salvation and right relationship with God, as a member of Christ’s Body. Catechetical instruction done in the spirit of facilitating conversion therefore strives to both illuminate the teachings of the faith and contextualize them in a relevant way in the life and communal faith-context of the believer.

Suitable catechetical instruction also reinforces the communal sense of belonging to the Body of Christ by turning to Scripture and Tradition as its primary sources for God’s revelatory Word, which it transmits as the content of faith. These two primary sources of the Word of revelation inherently point to the communal context in which they are written, proclaimed, preached and taught, as both Scripture and Tradition chronicle the story of God’s self-communication to a people over time. Through catechesis, Scripture and Tradition as primary sources of the Word invite new believers to become part of this story and to gain a new identity as part of the People of God. In this, catechetical instruction roots all of its teaching, dogmas, practices in the foundational communal identity gained from the relationship God extends to God’s people.

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<sup>137</sup> RCIA 75

### *Liturgical Rites*

From the perspective of the people of faith, liturgy may be the most common activity we participate in as Catholic Christians; to “go to church” is synonymous with “attending mass.” For this reason, the liturgy is extremely influential in how we understand God’s revelatory Word, and ourselves in relationship with God. The liturgy as a ritual activity replete with visual, verbal gestural and temporal symbolism speaks to the people of faith on many different levels, and conveys meaning in ways entirely unique and apart from everyday communication. Its catechetical potential is equally rich, as it engages, and draws in and transforms its participants to convey meaning, by virtue of its symbolic nature.<sup>138</sup> This potential for transformation inherent to liturgical symbolism is especially promising for catechesis concerned with facilitating the conversion process of believers.

The connection between liturgy and catechesis has been intentionally cultivated since the early days of the Church. Catechesis in its origins was entirely connected to the process of initiation in the early Church, where the liturgy was often used as an experiential reference point to be elaborated upon by the bishop in the catechetical context, especially during post-baptismal mystagogy.<sup>139</sup> The present RCIA draws on this tradition of the early Church, especially in structure and the intentional incorporation of ritual and liturgical elements into the process: “the Church, like a mother, helps the catechumens on their journey by means of suitable liturgical rites, which purify the catechumens little by little and strengthen them with God’s blessing.”<sup>140</sup> Ritual elements of the RCIA, such as the Rite of Acceptance, Rite of Election, the scrutinies, the

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<sup>138</sup> Recall Chapter II and Dulles’ definition of symbolic communication, as he describes it in Models of Revelation, 136-139.

<sup>139</sup> For many examples of 4<sup>th</sup> century mystagogical catechesis by Cyril of Jerusalem, Ambrose, John Chrysostom, and Theodore of Mopsuestia, see Chapter 3 in Edward Yarnold SJ. The Awe-Inspiring Rites of Initiation: The Origins of the RCIA. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1994)

<sup>140</sup> RCIA 75.3

presentation of the Creed and the Lord's Prayer, anointings, blessings, exorcisms, and especially the final rites of initiation together serve to reinforce the communal context of conversion and locate the teachings of catechetical instruction in an experiential and symbolic framework.

Apart from the particular liturgical rites associated with the RCIA process, the general liturgical life of the community of faith also enriches the catechetical process. As Dulles observes: "The liturgy provides a very suitable context for catechesis. Liturgical vestments, church architecture, the structure of the Mass, the various rites of the Church, and the seasons and feasts of the liturgical year can serve as reference points."<sup>141</sup> With a more critical tone, Aidan Kavanagh asserts that: "what is envisaged [for the catechetical process] is not merely a classroom effort in watered-down theology, but a well rounded formation program that is suffused with a strong liturgical methodology."<sup>142</sup> His liturgical perspective sheds a helpful light on the overall purpose of catechesis, which he defines as "to make Christians who have something to repent of and celebrate, and who know how to do both in common."<sup>143</sup> Catechesis enjoys a natural connection to the liturgy, because the liturgy symbolically expresses the repentance and celebration which are benchmarks of the conversion process. Furthermore, participation in the liturgy teaches the believer about belonging to the communal Body of Christ as the context of conversion, celebration, identity and mission.

### *Life in Community*

Whether we focus on the teaching, the beliefs, the ritual practices or the worship, these and other expressions of the life of the community of faith have one thing in common: they are rooted in the faith community being "a people", or persons called together in identity, purpose

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<sup>141</sup> Dulles. Evangelization for the Third Millennium. 107

<sup>142</sup> Aidan Kavanagh. The Shape of Baptism: The Rite of Christian Initiation. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1991) 131.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

and mission. Being a people is a fundamental reality of the community of faith, as well as of our human condition.<sup>144</sup> Maria Harris points to our basic human need to affiliate with one another, to “move toward wholeness, unity and union” as the inherent driving force in us to seek community.<sup>145</sup> Before we have a set of teachings, beliefs, practices and mission to define and shape who we are together, we are intrinsically seeking the company of one another. Conversely, when we are denied the opportunity to connect with one another, we suffer loss, isolation, and despair. We have an inborn “passion for completeness and at-one-ment.”<sup>146</sup>

Our inherent desire for community is also present in our theology. We conceptualize God as Trinity, a communion of Divine Being, and the idea of a personal, relational and communal God underlies our concepts of Incarnation, salvation, and eschatology and revelation.<sup>147</sup> The communion of saints is just one example that illustrates the ultimate hope of our salvation: to gather as one around the throne of God for all eternity. Shaping our intrinsic desire for community toward true communion in the image of our Trinitarian God is another way of describing our journey of faith toward holiness and perfection.

Because the community of faith captures and expresses both the intrinsic human desire for community and the transformative potential of the Gospel to shape us toward true communion, the communal life of the church is deeply educational. Being a people teaches us who we are, and being a People of God teaches who we are becoming in response to God’s revealing Word. As such, the community of faith as a People of God is a sign and a “seed of unity, hope and salvation for the whole human race.”<sup>148</sup> Our communal identity as the People of

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<sup>144</sup> See Maria Harris. Fashion Me a People. 75-76.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid 79

<sup>146</sup> Ibid

<sup>147</sup> Catherine M. LaCugna. God For Us. (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1991). 320-321.

<sup>148</sup> *Lumen Gentium* 9

God thus grants a greater purpose and mission to who we are, which then gets expressed in our teaching, beliefs, worship, practices, and service.

We become part of the People of God as we enter through the sacraments of initiation into the Paschal Mystery of Christ, to rise anew in Him as a member of his Body. When it comes to the catechetical potential of the communal life of the church, our identity as People of God saturates all that we are and do together. Simple expressions of the communal life of the church, such as the bulletin, the coffee-hour following liturgy, pot-lucks, socials, trips and prayer groups all subtly reinforce the primary reason we come together: our shared identity in Christ, who calls us to turn our communities into communion and be a sign of hope and transformation for our world. This worthy goal would not materialize without the Spirit of God forging bonds of friendships among us in these communal contexts. Catechesis itself wisely adopts and fosters these simple communal elements, where the catechists, catechumens and sponsors form solid relationships during the months of preparation and study. These relationships support the aim of catechesis to welcome new members into the community of faith, putting them in touch, communion and intimacy with Jesus Christ through his Body, the Church.<sup>149</sup>

### *Active Witness of Life*

Service projects, outreach ministries, collecting and sharing resources, advocating for the marginalized: these are all examples in the life of the community of faith of taking care of those around us in light of our Gospel mandate to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ to all. The message of the Gospel which we proclaim presents to us Jesus Christ, who not only came, died and rose, but also spent his time among us reaching out with compassion to the sick, the poor and the marginalized. The compassion of Jesus Christ was one of the deepest practical expressions

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<sup>149</sup> GDC 80

of his Incarnation as Emmanuel, God-with-Us; Christ became human not out of curiosity for the human condition, but out of a loving and intimate desire to be with us so that we could be renewed in our relationship with God.<sup>150</sup> His compassionate stance also initiated the Reign of God, the proclamation of which culminated in his death and resurrection. His acts of service are therefore integral to the message of the Gospel, as his compassion is a starting point for our efforts of serving and ministering to those around us in his name.<sup>151</sup> Called to be evangelizing presence and to proclaim the Good News, an active witness of life that imitates Christ's service and compassion helps communicate the message of salvation through both word and deed in the life of the community.

As Maria Harris points out: "the ministry of service begins with the choice to become engaged."<sup>152</sup> This choice is the realization that we cannot proclaim the Good News with integrity if we do not enact the compassion of Christ toward those around us. In his shared praxis approach to religious education Thomas Groome underscores the importance of the dynamic of action and reflection animating the Christian life, as his overall aim for religious education is "not simply to inform people about the freedom made possible in the paschal event of Jesus but to form people as well to participate in the transforming struggle to realize the passover to freedom for all."<sup>153</sup> Therefore, after presenting the Christian Story and Vision, the shared praxis approach intentionally orients the believer toward making a decision to live and

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<sup>150</sup> Athanasius *De Incarnatione* See for instance Chapter 2, paragraph 13 : "The Word of God came in His own Person, because it was He alone , the Image of the Father, who could recreate man after the Image." St Athanasius On the Incarnation (Crestwood NY: St. Vladimir Press, 1998) 41.

<sup>151</sup> Harris 147

<sup>152</sup> Harris 155

<sup>153</sup> Thomas H. Groome. Sharing Faith. (Eugene OR: Wipf and Stock, 1998) 25.

witness the faith.<sup>154</sup> Without evoking this active response to the Word of God, the formation of the believer would be incomplete.

The *National Directory for Catechesis* also supports this connection between catechesis and witness of Christian life, as it asserts that “learning by Christian living is an essential component of catechetical methodology.”<sup>155</sup> Along with prayer and worship, the NDC lists fostering works of charity, engaging in works of justice and promoting virtues from the natural law as those key elements of living the Christian life which are especially rich for teaching believers about the faith through active participation.<sup>156</sup> Learning by doing, the believer “brings faith to life and life to faith” through living the Christian life and engaging in acts of service and social justice.<sup>157</sup> Regarding the catechetical process, witness of Christian life is essential for testing the beliefs, practices and teachings in the often-harsh reality of our immediate context, an experience that can be both jarring and transformative. Only after integrating the message of the Gospel with the suffering in our world through the resolve to imitate the compassion of Christ can the believer mature in faith.

Catechetical instruction, liturgical rites, life in community and witness of Christian life offer us four loci around which to organize the entirety of Christian life, and as evident from the preceding survey, they are interrelated with each other. Apprenticeship in the entire Christian life therefore is an immersion into a context which speaks the Word of God through many different languages: doctrinal, symbolic, communal, participatory, and so on. These different languages indicate different ways the community of faith relates and affiliates, and the four loci can be considered four ways of chronicling God’s revelatory Word to and among God’s People. God,

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<sup>154</sup> See especially Chapter 10: “Movement 5: Decision/Response for Lived Christian Faith” in Groome, 265-293.

<sup>155</sup> NCD 29 G

<sup>156</sup> Ibid

<sup>157</sup> Groome’s own summative way of describing his shared praxis model of religious education.

whose essence is relationship, communicates God's revelatory Word to us, compelling us to forge relational bonds in response to and around God's self-communication. Out of our relationship as Church emerge the languages by which we communicate the revelatory Word. Instruction, worship, community and witness of life as rooted in our fundamental relationship to God and one another communicate the Word of God most fully and authentically when speaking together. Therefore, the process of catechesis benefits from listening to the Word of God spoken in these different languages of the life of the Church, so as to be able to transmit this Word to new believers in the fullest. Listening to the Word of God in these diverse but connected ways enriches and supports catechesis' most concrete responsibility of offering instruction in the faith.

## **The Instructional Dimension of the Catechetical Process**

### ***The Role and Importance of Catechetical Instruction***

While it is undeniable that in some way the entire spectrum of Christian life is educational, the Christian life also makes room for intentional instruction of the content of the faith. When it comes to instruction in the content of the faith for the greater purpose of conversion and commitment to Christian life, this ministry is the particular responsibility of catechesis. As part of the immersion into the life of the faith community, the believer has to gain a definite sense of its teachings and beliefs, because in the greater process of conversion, she will be invited not only to adhere to these but also to witness and proclaim them as part of her baptismal vocation in Christ. A clear sense of the content of the faith also contributes to one's continuing development of Christian identity, spiritual discernment, and potential for ecumenical dialogue.

As we explored in chapter two, revelation implies both God’s active self-communication, and the story and message of this communication as the content of the faith. While never separated from God’s active self-communication, catechesis as instruction in the content of the faith serves revelation in transmitting the Word of God in this story and message of God’s self-communication.<sup>158</sup> For this reason, ecclesial documents repeatedly promote the importance of such catechetical instruction within the greater and overall formative context of the life of the faith community.<sup>159</sup>

A specified period of catechetical instruction has been essential to Christian initiation since the early Church. Max Johnson points to second century evidence in the *Stomata* of Clement of Alexandria, which refers to three years of pre-baptismal catechesis, while the third century *Apostolic Tradition* of Hippolytus mentions a similar, three year period of “listening to” or “hearing of the Word” in preparation for initiation.<sup>160</sup> The *Apostolic Tradition* also clarifies that after hearing this instruction in the faith, the catechumens are to depart from the worshipping assembly each time with a blessing from the company of the rest of the faithful.<sup>161</sup> This detail reveals that the period of catechetical instruction was an important condition for the catechumen’s full initiation into the faith community,<sup>162</sup> so important that catechumens were physically dismissed until sufficient instruction and initiation has passed.

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<sup>158</sup> God’s active self-communication is also present in catechesis, especially in the communal and teaching-learning-sponsoring relationships which serve as the actual context of the transmission of revelation as content of faith. In addition, as we have explored above, the relational dimensions of teaching, liturgy, communal life and service are all interconnected in the life of the Church as primary context of catechesis.

<sup>159</sup> See for example EN 44, CT 21, GDC 67, NCD 66

<sup>160</sup> See Maxwell E. Johnson. *The Rites of Christian Initiation*. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999.) 52, as well as *Apostolic Tradition* 17.1-2 in Paul Bradshaw, Maxwell Johnson and Brad Philips. *The Apostolic Tradition: A Commentary*. (Minneapolis MN: Fortress Press, 2002) 96-97.

<sup>161</sup> AT 18.1 in Bradshaw, Johnson and Philips, 100.

<sup>162</sup> Along with sufficient instruction, AT 20 lists the necessity of a sponsor’s testimony of the catechumen’s virtuous life in which they “honored the widows, visited the sick and fulfilled every good work” as another condition for full initiation into the community. This detail reinforces the point that preparation in faith was for and by the entire Christian life, a theme central to contemporary ecclesial documents.

Regarding the content of pre-baptismal instruction, Egeria, a fourth century pilgrim offers a glimpse into the catechetical practices of the Church in Jerusalem at the time. She describes the prominent role of the bishop as teacher of the faith, who after an examination of the virtuous character of each catechumen, begins to offer catechetical instruction on the first day of Lent, “from six to nine every morning.”<sup>163</sup> The catechetical instruction is an exposition of the sacred Scriptures from Genesis forward, and after five weeks of this, the catechesis turns to the exposition of the Creed.<sup>164</sup> In addition, Egeria reveals that the fullest of catechetical instruction is imparted only after the rites of initiation, for, as she quotes the bishop of Jerusalem: “the teaching about baptism itself is a deeper mystery and you do not have the right to hear it while you remain catechumens.”<sup>165</sup> We have numerous examples of such post-baptismal catechesis, or mystagogia, which prompt the neophyte to recall his baptism, and uses Scripture, theology and rich metaphors to invite him deeper into his experience of initiation.<sup>166</sup>

This brief note on the historical origins of catechesis serves to illustrate the integral role and importance of catechetical instruction within the overall process of facilitating conversion toward commitment to Christ. As we see in the early Church, liturgy, service and community also played a role in the catechetical process, but these collaborated with both pre- and post-baptismal instruction in the faith, carried out systematically by the bishop. In addition, the evidence of the use of Scripture, the Creed and theology elaborating on the sacramental experience of the neophyte offers helpful precedent for analyzing the essential content of the faith to be imparted in catechesis. We now turn these to examine the necessary content as particular elements of our faith.

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<sup>163</sup> Egeria 45.1-4 as quoted in Thomas Talley. The Origins of the Liturgical Year. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1986) 174-175.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid 175

<sup>165</sup> Egeria 46.6 *ibid.* 175

<sup>166</sup> See Yarnold, 67-250

### *The Content of Catechetical Instruction*

When considering the 72 books of the Bible, the breadth of theological debates, controversies and early ecumenical councils behind just the Creed, as well as the greater Tradition of the Church and the teachings of the Magisterium, the content of the faith as chronicled through these primary sources for catechesis remains vast. God's self-communication to humankind has generated two millennia of content in human terms. When it comes to transmitting this revelatory Word of God through catechesis, it is necessary to approach the content of the faith systematically and to create some hierarchy of teachings and beliefs. Catechesis is both a moment in evangelization and an expression of the greater ministry of the Word, and it is therefore contextualized among other ways of proclaiming the Word of God. This alleviates the pressure from catechesis to impart the entire content of the faith, an impossible task. Assuming the continued faith-formation of believers through various pastoral ministries, catechesis focuses on conveying the essential content of the faith necessary for facilitating the conversion of the believer to Jesus Christ, and commitment to his communal Body. As *Catechesi Tradendae* prescribes it, catechesis must deal with essentials without any claim to tackle all disputed questions or to transform itself into theological research or scientific exegesis, but it must nevertheless be sufficiently complete, not stopping short at the initial proclamation of the Christian mystery, such as we have in the kerygma.<sup>167</sup>

What is essential to the content of the faith? While all Scripture and Tradition communicate the Word of God, some teachings and beliefs within these are basic building blocks of the content of the faith. As the GDC explains, Scripture and Tradition are not only the principal sources of catechesis, but also offer basic structural criteria for the particular content of

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<sup>167</sup> CT 21

catechesis that derives from these.<sup>168</sup> In other words, these primary sources for catechesis are inherently helpful for determining what is essential to our teachings and beliefs; by virtue of what each of these sources are, they point to key elements at the heart of the content of faith. Scripture as Word of God contains the account of the Good News or Gospel, describing God's relationship with God's people as culminating in the life, death and resurrection of the Incarnate Word, Jesus Christ. Tradition testifies of the continued relationship of God and God's people, now in light of the Gospel message, and highlights the role and importance of the ecclesial community in relationship to God's revealed Word. In light of the primary sources of Scripture and Tradition then, the essential content of the faith for catechesis necessarily incorporates the Gospel message, including: the life and person of Jesus Christ and his salvific death and resurrection, the promise of salvation and eternal life the Gospel implies for all of us generation after generation, and the Church as the community gathered around the Word of God that has the responsibility to proclaim the Gospel.<sup>169</sup>

Exploring the Gospel message, Jesus Christ, and the life and mission of the Church for what meaning they inherently hold and how they come into relationship with one another is therefore essential to catechesis. Since catechesis seeks to facilitate conversion toward full commitment to Jesus Christ through belonging to his Body the Church, it is fundamental to teach the believer who Jesus Christ is, what he has accomplished, what invitation and promise he holds for each of us, and how the ecclesial community lives out and offers the basic context for Christ's invitation and promise today. Without thoroughly understanding Christ, Gospel and Church, the believer's conversion toward full commitment would remain uninformed and unanchored in these essential elements of faith that form the content of the dynamic process of

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<sup>168</sup> GDC 96

<sup>169</sup> See GDC 97

catechesis. His faith would exist in response to the kerygmatic proclamation of the Gospel, but could become directionless without a deeper immersion into the message of the Gospel, the identity of Christ, and the life and mission of the Church.

The Gospel message, Jesus Christ, and the Church as essential elements of the content of our faith still remain grand topics in and of themselves, and even more so in combination with each other. In order to further systematize the transmission of the Word of God through catechesis, the GDC points to the Catechism as “an organic synthesis of the essential and fundamental contents of Catholic doctrine.”<sup>170</sup> While also a vast resource, the Catechism is helpful in organizing the content of the faith around key topics, including the Creed, the Sacraments, the Decalogue and the Lord’s Prayer, which respectively explore the faith, worship, moral code and prayer of the Church. Beyond the essential Gospel message of Jesus Christ and the Church, these topics help to elaborate further the content of the faith, while also immersing the new believer in the common language of the Church as she learns these primary prayers and teachings. Since the Creed and Lord’s Prayer also have ritual importance for the catechumens of the RCIA, to consider these among the essential content of the faith is especially appropriate.

In the context of the entire life of the Church community, catechetical instruction distills these essential truths of the content of the faith and presents them to foster the conversion of the believer to Jesus Christ, and a sense of belonging to his communal Body, the Church. While the content of the faith as revelatory Word gets proclaimed, celebrated, ritualized, expressed and taught in various ways in the life of the Church, catechetical instruction exists as a straightforward venue to ensure that the believer gains particular meaning and understanding from the overall life of the Church, and she successfully synthesizes this with her faith journey. Always connected to the conversion process of the believer, teaching the essential content of the

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<sup>170</sup> GDC 121

faith through catechesis thus clarifies the particular demands of the commitment to Jesus Christ entails, as well as the mission to which this commitment will call the believer. At the heart of catechesis is personal encounter with of Jesus Christ,<sup>171</sup> but engagement with the Word of God through catechetical instruction in the content of the faith is indispensable for fully entering into who Jesus Christ is, the Good News he brings, and what he invites us to be as members of his Body.

### **Conclusion: Toward a More Integrated Catechetical Ministry**

We began this chapter by acknowledging catechesis' roots in the theology of revelation, highlighting catechesis as the religious education context that both makes present and transmits the revelatory Word of God within the life of the Church. As a ministerial expression of the theology of revelation, catechesis also inherits from revelation a dynamic understanding of the Word of God, where God communicates Godself to humankind both through personal encounter and through the story and message of God's enduring relationship with God's people as chronicled through time. Personal encounter with the Word of God culminates in Jesus Christ the Incarnate Word, and as such, revelation becomes fullest in him. For this reason, catechesis at its foundation seeks to facilitate conversion and commitment by guiding the believer toward personal encounter with Christ through all the relational/communal avenues within the life of the Church: catechetical instruction, liturgy, communal life and service. At the same time, God communicates Godself through the story and message of the divine-human relationship culminating in Jesus Christ, which is the concrete content of the faith. Turning to Scripture, and Tradition as its primary sources, catechesis also transmits the Word of revelation as concrete

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<sup>171</sup> GDC 98

content, as a way to reinforce and deepen the believer's personal encounter with Jesus Christ in the life of the community.

Outlined this way, personal encounter with Jesus Christ and gaining understanding of the content of the faith are two aspects of God's one divine self-communication to humankind, just as the relational/communal elements of the life of the Church and specific catechetical instruction together seek to facilitate the conversion process of the believer toward full commitment to Jesus Christ. The problem arises when these two aspects of both revelation and catechesis lose their essential connection. While the theology of revelation has discernibly embraced the fundamental importance of the personal encounter with God through Jesus Christ,<sup>172</sup> catechesis has been on a pendulum, swinging between the heavily doctrinal and the all-around communal extremes from the later part of the twentieth century to our present day. Although in the long run, this pendulum may be a healthy process toward contributing an integrated understanding, in the meantime, the swings impact the practice of catechesis, and the faith identity of those believers seeking to make a commitment to Christ today. As we noted above, too much adherence to either extreme leaves the person of faith impoverished by the lack of the other.

How do we center the pendulum? The key is to engage in such practice of catechesis that is indeed organic and systematic, and one that is able to naturally integrate the relational/communal and instructional dimensions of the ministry. Truly rooted in the theology of revelation, this natural integration of the present extremes would form one catechetical ministry that seamlessly conveys the Risen Christ in the content of the faith, and the content of the faith in the life of the Church, his communal Body. This envisions a model of communicating

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<sup>172</sup> Comparing Vatican I's *Dei Filius* and Vatican II's *Dei Verbum*, there is a move to expand the notion of revelation from the decrees of God's will to communication of Godself. See DV 6 and DF 2.2

the faith that integrates the personal/communal and instructional-informational elements around conveying the one core reality of the Jesus Christ, the Word Incarnate.

Seeking this model of communication, we now turn to the Internet, which as it evolves toward an increasingly participatory medium of communication, expands our notions of what it means to communicate ourselves through communicating information. In the following chapter, we explore this dynamics of Internet-mediated communication, so as to enrich our understanding of catechesis and the possibilities that exist for its practical integration.

## **Chapter IV: The Internet as Social Web**

### **Introduction: White Bean Dip and the Emergence of the Social Web**

“You are one of the people formerly known as the audience. Now we'd like you to become part of the conversation!”<sup>173</sup> This invitation is offered on the Open University's website, and it both heralds and signals the effects of the present evolution in social communication. No longer just recipients of information through the one-to-many communication scheme of the websites of old, Internet users today regularly weave something of themselves into the digital fabric of the Internet, whether through uploading images on Flickr, organizing a playlist on iTunes, rating a movie on Netflix, leaving feedback about a recent trip on Travelocity, reviewing a book on Amazon, creating a profile and connecting with others on Facebook, or musing about a favorite topic on Blogger, to name a few ordinary examples. The Internet, long valued as a vast information resource is now taking shape as a true social network, where in addition to retrieving content, people are more and more likely to express themselves in, through and in response to information.

The crux of this transformation is the increasing way Internet users are animating the information available in cyberspace with a sense of human and social presence. The comparison of the same website between now and eight years ago offers us a striking example. In 2002, any home cook inspired by TV chef Rachael Ray's “White Bean Dip” recipe could find it on foodnetwork.com, and it would look identical to what one would see in a cookbook: a simple and straightforward list of ingredients, brief directions, and a quick evaluation of the overall

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<sup>173</sup> As stated on the Open University website under “OU Community,” <http://www.open.ac.uk/use/>

process.<sup>174</sup> In 2010, the recipe still exists on [foodnetwork.com](http://foodnetwork.com), now embellished with an image of both Rachael and the bean dip, hyperlinks to similar recipes, as well as to the episode of her show in which she demonstrates making it.<sup>175</sup> More importantly, “White Bean Dip” is no longer a mirror image out of a cookbook; it has acquired interactive features, including rating stars measuring its popularity among users, along with a tab that reveals several user reviews. Rachael Ray’s recipe for “White Bean Dip” is no longer a set of directions; it has become a discussion.

Information on any given topic presented in the context of a discussion has become a regular and important feature of researching online. For example, the user reviews of “White Bean Dip” can provide essential “peer-to-peer” information about the recipe; because these are presumably other home cooks “like me” who have given it a go, their impressions are more relevant to me than Rachael Ray’s one-for-all recipe. Their tips, tricks and cautions about the recipe season my impression of the potential of “White Bean Dip” as much, if not more than Rachael’s friendly smile over the perfect bowl of dip featured in the image. At the same time, “White Bean Dip” would not be “White Bean Dip” without crucial details in the recipe about what goes in it; sheer information about cannellini beans, garlic, herbs and spices remain central to successful bean dip making.

While both eight years ago and today I could have followed Rachael Ray’s “White Bean Dip” recipe relying solely on the list of ingredients and brief directions, the added dimension of the social context of other users takes the potential of the dip to another level. User reviews reveal that the recipe yields a large quantity, that it gets better the following day, and that it can easily be turned into a soup. User reviews also reveal that people serve this dish at parties, and that women seem overwhelmingly more interested in preparing and reviewing “White Bean Dip”

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<sup>174</sup> The Food Network website from January 21, 2002, as archived online through the Wayback Machine: <http://web.archive.org/web/20020206040852/foodnetwork.com/recipes/re-c1/0,6255,19608,00.html>

<sup>175</sup> <http://www.foodnetwork.com/recipes/rachael-ray/white-bean-dip-recipe/index.html>

than men. In a few paragraphs, the user reviews create an actual, practical social context for “White Bean Dip” open to me and any other home cook intrigued by the recipe. In a simple way, “White Bean Dip” is a gathering point for people online with a shared interest in cooking, bearing a germinal potential for creating community. By contrast, finding the recipe in a cookbook or on the 2002 version of foodnetwork.com does not yield this same potential.

The evolution of the World Wide Web toward a more interactive and socially oriented network of information has been a natural development, resulting in large part from more and more people using it to communicate, who recognized its potential to not only inform but to connect with each other. As we continue to inhabit and make our own the digital world, the Internet continues to offer an increasingly integrated example of people connecting and sharing through various forms of digitized information. On the Internet, there is no split between sharing information and conveying social presence, since information is the necessary carrier of communicating ourselves online. Information as text, image, and audio files are the essential medium for sharing and conveying my presence. In the most basic way, all that I share and communicate about myself online in hopes of forming relationships is made up of code, the informational building blocks of all text, image and audio files. My social presence online cannot be divorced from these.

At the same time, as the “White Bean Dip” recipe example demonstrates, behind these codes and various file formats are people, unique beings of spirit, intellect and will who seek one another’s company. These fundamental elements of the human person do not become subject to the elements of communication by which we seek to express ourselves; rather we imbue these elements with our characteristic humanity, to potentially form community even around something as simple as a bean dip recipe. Just as much as information is essential to online

communication, so is the human person who animates, wills and facilitates communication in order to relate to others. By virtue of the digital medium, Internet-mediated communication integrates information with the relational drive of the human person, holding these together in a necessary symbiosis.

Because of its inherent structure, Internet-mediated communication holds together the informational and the relational in one integrated communications process, and it offers an intriguing perspective to consider for both the theology of revelation and the practice of catechesis. In the preceding chapters, we have explored how both the theology of revelation and the practice of catechesis incorporate a particular dynamic of communication that consists of two interrelated elements, the content and the interpersonal act of communication. In the theology of revelation, the relative emphasis of each element has resulted in the dominance of various models of revelation over time, ranging from revelation as a set of doctrine to revelation as God's active self-communication manifest in history, inner insight, experience, etc. In the practice of catechesis, the shifting emphasis between content and relationship has equally generated a spectrum of approaches to teaching the faith, ranging from the memorization of short catechisms in a classroom setting to immersing oneself in the life of the community of faith. In revelation as in catechesis, overemphasis on one impoverishes the communication of God's self-communication by the lack of the other. While the theological and practical pendulum may continue to swing, it is not only helpful but necessary to maintain an overall vision of God's self-communication that integrates person and content, and preserves the fullest range of possibilities for both the theology of revelation and the practice of catechesis. Analyzing the dynamics of Internet-mediated communication in this regard, especially its inherent way of holding

information and personal presence together, can contribute to a richer and more integrated understanding of God's self-communication, both in theory and in practice.

In this chapter we therefore turn to study the dynamics of Internet-mediated communication, and how it can serve our overall goal of communicating the faith in catechesis. We first focus on how this digital communications medium may be able to give rise to authentic interpersonal connections, genuine sharing, and the formation of communities in the catechetical context. Concentrating on the interpersonal dynamics of Internet-mediated communication, we consider how communities online become possible, and what makes these unique and distinct from other forms of community. Keeping in mind the complex communication dynamic of both revelation and catechesis, we then turn to investigate the way Internet-mediated communication integrates the informational and the relational in the digital medium. Along these lines, we focus on the some of the ways people integrate self-communication with the communication of information online, as we look for this dynamic in three of the most salient types of online social interactions that exhibit information integrated with personal presence: online dating and romance, support groups, and online education. In exploring how Internet-mediated communication integrates information with relationship, these specific examples offer us a spectrum, ranging from the highly relational focus of online dating and romance, to the relational and informational focus of support groups, to the informational emphasis of online education. In presenting a spectrum of ways by which information and relationship can be integrated, these three examples help piece together the wisdom which can enrich the theology of revelation and benefit the practice of catechesis.

With a nod to the scholarship surrounding the study of electronic communication, we conclude this chapter by retrieving Marshall McLuhan's now classic adage, "the medium is the

message.” Using “the medium is the message” as the pithy way to summarize the wisdom revelation and catechesis can glean from Internet-mediated communication, we define the medium of the Internet as *a social network that expresses itself by gathering around shared nodes of information*, and propose that this interpretation of the classic axiom may shed new light on our present understanding of revelation and our current practices of catechesis, leading into the fifth and final chapter of this dissertation.

### **The Interpersonal Dynamics of Internet-Mediated Communication**

Since its inception, communication with and through computer technology has fueled the human imagination, resulting in positions ranging anywhere between extreme caution and limitless possibility. For some, the age of the computer ushers disembodied interactions, increasing isolation and a sense of meaninglessness unto total despair.<sup>176</sup> For others, the computer is the gateway to our posthuman immortality, where the thoughts and characteristics that constitute our essence can be digitized into data and continue backed up into eternity.<sup>177</sup> Having gained the experience of using computer technology for ordinary tasks and everyday communication, most people however seem to fall in a reasonable middle position between these two extremes. A regular part of life for at least the past decade, computer technology has so far

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<sup>176</sup> For more on the disembodiment critique of computer-mediated communication, see Chris Schilling. [The Body in Culture, Technology and Society](#) (London: Sage, 2005); Robert Mitchell and Philip Thurtle, eds. [Data Made Flesh: Embodying Information](#) (New York: Routledge, 2004); Neil Postman. [Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology](#). (New York:Knopf, 1992); Klaus Wiengerling “The Superfluous Body: Utopias of Information and Communication Technology” in [The Body and Religion](#). Concilium 2002:2. Ammicht-Quinn et al. eds. (London:SMC Press, 2002)

<sup>177</sup> For an overview of posthumanist philosophy, see The World Transhumanist Association website authored by Nick Bostrom: [www.transhumanism.org](http://www.transhumanism.org); Ray Kurzweil. [The Age of Spiritual Machines](#) (New York: Viking, 1999); Francis Fukuyama. [Our Posthuman Future](#) (New York: Picador, 2002); Matthew Eppinette “Human 2.0: Transhumanism as a Cultural Trend” in [Everyday Theology: How to Read Cultural Texts and Interpret Trends](#). Vanhoozer et al. eds. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007) 191-208.

left us firmly situated in our bodies and in the realm of God's created order, subject as ever to finitude both as living beings and as authors of unsaved data in case of computer malfunction.

While avoiding either extreme of disembodiment or posthumanist immortality, the regular use of computer technology has ushered in other significant developments in human communication. Whether emailing, chatting or Skyping, time and physical distance in communication seems to be a hurdle we have conquered. In addition, thanks to the increased sophistication of web browsers and the cataloguing of the immense amount of information online, we are able to find and connect with others over information most relevant to us with increased speed and precision. Both the sheer ability to connect with others and to do it in a relevant way in terms of our needs and interests has made it possible to speak of the *interpersonal* dynamics of the Internet and the development of genuine online communities. As noted above, this animation of the data online with authentic human presence is a natural evolution of people using the Internet to communicate and connect with each other.

A brief look at the development of the Internet from its historical roots affirms this simple proposition.<sup>178</sup> The term "Internet" refers to the system of interconnected networks to support the sharing of information, lending structure to electronic communication. The origins of the Internet lie in the communication network established by the US Department of Defense during the Cold War as a safety measure by allowing for the transfer of data and for backing up other avenues of communication. Named the Advanced Research Projects Agency Network or ARPANET, this computer network connected four points across the US when it went online in 1969. Intended as a system that transfers necessary data but not for interpersonal communication, ARPANET soon became a platform to host communication exchange among

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<sup>178</sup> For an overview of the early history of the Internet, see Heidi Campbell. [Exploring Religious Community Online: We are One in the Network.](#) (New York: Peter Lang, 2005)2-6, and Howard Rheingold. [The Virtual Community: Homesteading the Electronic Frontier.](#) ( New York: Addison-Wesley, 1993) 65-109.

the growing number of research communities connected to it, as these researchers discovered the ease and convenience of email. As Heidi Campbell describes:

The communication exchange on the network through email was revolutionary. A hundred pages could be as easily transmitted as one line. The ARPANET mail system was intended to facilitate research activities, yet users quickly saw that email was a fast and easy way to communicate with co-workers. Correspondence quickly became group conversations as mail and news became primary motivations for network use.<sup>179</sup>

Soon to come were newsgroups, forums and discussion boards to offer more efficient alternatives to group emails, and these were coupled with technological developments in connecting communities on a specific network. ARPANET went out of existence in 1990, but the emergence of the World Wide Web around this time carried on the social communications potential discovered through ARPANET, as through the use of hypertext markup language, the World Wide Web offered a more accessible multimedia user-interface to browse the Internet. While information may have been central to the initial military purpose of ARPANET, the communicating person became more and more relevant as the expanding system of networks became more accessible through the “user-friendly” World Wide Web we navigate today. In summary, the Internet outgrew its intended use as just an information dissemination tool, and quickly became a social sphere from early on, setting the course for the way this social communications context is taking form ever since.<sup>180</sup>

Always able to transmit information, the evolution of the Internet then is better characterized as an evolution of its capacity as a medium for *social* communication. While encouraged by the invention and refinement of software, tools and gadgets, this evolution is also undoubtedly driven by people’s use of the network and discovery of its potential to communicate, connect and share, as we see in the example of ARPANET above. Howard

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<sup>179</sup> Campbell 3.

<sup>180</sup> Campbell 6

Rheingold has also observed that people's tendency to humanize the web has been a consistent thread in the evolution of computer mediated communication technology. As he points out: "A continuing theme throughout the history of computer-mediated communication is the way people adapt technologies designed for one purpose to suit their own, very different communication needs."<sup>181</sup> These communication needs generally express the desire to connect with others around shared or mutually relevant interests in the most practical and convenient way possible. This desire to connect and communicate with others is the driving force behind the inevitable emergence of online communities.

### *The Emergence of Online Communities*

Online communities as a concrete reality is a much-debated issue, celebrated by some for its possibilities to connect people and form relationships, while critiqued by others who approach with suspicion the authenticity of any community formed in an environment of limited social and physical cues, such as the Internet.<sup>182</sup> While it is undeniable that people do connect and communicate with each other online, are the social entities formed online genuine communities? The answer to this depends largely on how one defines community, and what characteristics one assigns to it as essential.<sup>183</sup> To construct a definition affirming the possibility of genuine online communities, we explore the common threads gathered from the observation and analysis of people connecting with each other online in a meaningful way. This body of research highlights

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<sup>181</sup> Rheingold 7

<sup>182</sup> Barry Wellman and Milena Gulia "Virtual Communities as Communities: Net Surfers Don't Ride Alone" in Communities in Cyberspace Eds. Marc Smith and Peter Kollock, (New York: Taylor and Francis, 1998) 167-168.

<sup>183</sup> To consider this question from a theological or ecclesial perspective of community as People of God or Body of Christ is a salient topic, but beyond the scope of our current chapter. As our focus in this chapter is to glean wisdom from the social dynamics of Internet-mediated communication for the enrichment of the theology of revelation and catechesis, we approach the Internet and its social elements such as online communities on their own terms here. See chapter five for analysis of the social network as community vis-a-vis the communal Body of Christ.

the characteristic way online communities experience time, engage in self-presentation, and encounter risks online. After broadly defining online communities, we turn to explore each of these defining characteristics.

Howard Rheingold was one of the first scholars of Internet-mediated communication to focus on this digital medium from the perspective of social communication toward human interaction and relationships. His work on the social origins of Internet-mediated communication remains helpful in understanding the emergence and nature of online communities, even as technology changes to shape the particular expression of these digitally mediated interactions. As he put it, “whenever computer-mediated communication technology becomes available to people anywhere, they inevitably build virtual communities with it, just as microorganisms inevitably create colonies.”<sup>184</sup> A virtual or online community, according to Rheingold’s definition is “a social aggregation that emerges from the Net when enough people carry on public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace.”<sup>185</sup> Similarly, when arguing for the validity of online groups as communities, Haythornthwaite et al.’s definition of community emphasizes particular basic social norms and dynamics, including the recognition of members and nonmembers, a shared history, a common meeting place, commitment to a common purpose, adoption of normative standards of behavior and emergence of hierarchy and roles.<sup>186</sup> Wellman and Guila likewise characterize online communities as those social networks held together by shared interests, rather than kinship or a

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<sup>184</sup> Rheingold 7. Although Rheingold’s observations and terminology are dated, he remains helpful in pointing us to the social origins of the Internet, a trend still essential to understanding Internet-mediated communication today, especially as it continues to take form as Web 2.0.

<sup>185</sup> Rheingold 5

<sup>186</sup> Haythornthwaite et al. “Community Development Among Distance Learners: Temporal and Technological Dimensions.” in Learning, Culture & Community in Online Education. (New York: Peter Lang, 2004) 41.

common physical location.<sup>187</sup> Campbell also proposes a networked understanding of online community, as people “gathered around a specific topic or purpose with some level or commitment to that topic or purpose and each other.”<sup>188</sup> From these definitions, we can surmise that what makes a gathering of people online a community is the presence of sustained and structured communication expressed through mutual dialogue, a shared center or interest which generates this dialogue, along with the presence of feelings, emotional attachments and genuine relationships imbuing the information exchange surrounding this generative center of interest. In other words, people form communities online when they care about a topic of interest as well as about others sharing in that same interest, and they express and sustain this by participating in Internet-mediated communication with others around that topic. Online communities, most simply put, are social networks around a shared center of interest.

If we honor these definitions above, then it is undeniable that people do form communities online. However, by virtue of the digital medium, Internet-mediated communication, whether in context of an online community or through an independent interpersonal exchange, presents us with a different set of communicative elements and interpersonal cues than face-to-face interaction. For example, the element of touch is still lacking in Internet-mediated communication, and although we can enrich our verbal communication with whimsical emoticons to insert expression and gesture, the more subtle parts of face- to-face communication (glances, body language, and the general energy and mood of the person in front of us) still escapes text-based online media, though now better mediated by audiovisual communications platforms like Skype.<sup>189</sup> For this reason, theorists of computer-

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<sup>187</sup> Wellman and Gulia 171.

<sup>188</sup> Campbell 44

<sup>189</sup> While the subtleties of face-to-face communication cannot quite be captured in textual Internet-mediated communication, in addition to Skype, teleconferencing technology through avatars has evolved to replicate these

mediated communication characterize the online medium as overall having a lower degree of social presence, a more limited set of social context cues and leaner media richness than face-to-face interaction.<sup>190</sup> At the same time, as people continue to colonize the digital medium, new aspects of interpersonal communication have emerged to compensate for these limits.

### *Control: Experiencing Time Online*

While embodiment may seem to be the most significant issue of difference between-face to-face and Internet mediated communication, Joseph Walther has proposed that it is not the hindrances of disembodied communication but rather the element of time that truly differentiates between face-to-face and Internet-mediated communication, and consequently between ordinary and online communities. According to Walther's social information processing theory, online communication can eventually arrive at the same level of trust and intimacy as offline relationships, but this just takes a longer time because of the limited number of cues and communicative elements available through Internet-mediated communication. As he explains:

Due to the differential capacity of computer-mediated communication to convey a great deal of information within a typical message exchange, computer-mediated exchanges require more frequent interactions and more time in order for users to reach the level of relational development that offline group partners accomplish more quickly. Given enough time, however, virtual groups achieve liking, trust and sociable states often as well as offline groups.<sup>191</sup>

Walther's social information processing theory is significant, not only because he offers solid theoretical ground for taking online communities and relationships seriously, but because he

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subtleties in the most appropriate way to enhance social presence online. See for instance Bailenson et al. "Transformed social interaction in mediated interpersonal communication" in Mediated Interpersonal Communication Eds Konijn et al. (New York: Routledge, 2008). 77-99.

<sup>190</sup> Joseph B. Walther. "Relational Aspects of Computer-Mediated Communication: Experimental Observations over Time." *Organization Science*, March-April 1995:186-203.

<sup>191</sup> Joseph B. Walther. "Problems and Interventions in computer-mediated virtual groups" in Mediated Interpersonal Communication. Elly A Konijn, Sonja Utz, Martin Tanis and Susan B Barnes, Eds. ( New York: Routledge, 2008.) 278.

names the crucial element of time as uniquely paradoxical in its function to Internet-mediated communication. Time as an aspect of Internet-mediated communication, both speeds up and slows down the rate of communication through the digital medium.

Time disappears online when I am able to exchange emails instantaneously with others great distances away, as it does when I chat or Skype. Internet-mediated communication shares this potential for instantaneous communication with other electronic communication media, including the telephone. My anticipation of the other's response is no longer dependent on the message delivery system, but rather waits on the decision of the other person to respond. For this same reason, time also becomes exaggerated in online communication, since the medium grants people more time and mental space to respond to others, even in synchronous or "live" online exchanges. This paradoxical combination of instantaneity coupled with the potential to insert extra time in communication exchanges makes Internet-mediated communication, and the online communities that it sustains unique.

While Walther's social information processing theory seems to suggest that the reality of time forces the rate of relationships through computer-mediated communication to lag behind face-to-face interactions, the unique function of time in Internet-mediated communication can in fact significantly benefit online communities. We have already mentioned Internet-mediated communication's ability to overcome time as it is imposed by physical distances and separation. The exaggeration of time in Internet-mediated communication on the other hand can greatly benefit online communities by granting greater access and voice to all participants. Online interactions provide participants with more control over how and when they will respond, how they present themselves, and the degree to which they can have their say.<sup>192</sup> For example, having

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<sup>192</sup> Katelyn McKenna and Gwendolyn Seidman. "You, me, and we: Interpersonal processes in electronic groups." In The Social Net. Ed. Yair Amichai-Hamburger. (New York: Oxford, 2005) 201.

additional time and space to craft one's comment or response invites the introverted thinker into the circle of conversation more readily than does face-to-face communication.<sup>193</sup> Along the same lines, McKenna and Seidman note that "those who are socially anxious and those who are lonely are more likely than those who are gregarious to feel that they are better able to express important aspects of true self over the Internet than they can in face-to-face situations."<sup>194</sup> Regardless of personality type, this exaggeration of time allows all users to "better control their communication and presentation of self", encouraging reflection and intentionality about one's sharing of self online.<sup>195</sup> This introduces the second characteristic of Internet-mediated communication and online communities: presentation of the self.

#### *Connecting: Anonymity and Identifiability in Self-Presentation*

Because of the exaggeration of time, limited cues, and the resulting opportunity to exert greater control over our self-presentation, the sharing of ourselves through the online medium highlights another unique feature of Internet-mediated communication and online communities. Internet-mediated communication generally allows us to communicate, share and connect with others, while exerting intentional control over how we identify ourselves, to a greater degree than face-to-face communication.<sup>196</sup> In the past, self-presentation online was concealed by greater anonymity, but Internet-mediated communication today experiments with authentic and identifiable self-presentation that preserves some boundaries but also conveys a sense of trust necessary for truly social and interpersonal encounters. As Deanna Zandt writes:

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<sup>193</sup> Rena M. Palloff and Keith Pratt. Building Online Learning Communities: Effective Strategies for the Virtual Classroom. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007.)8, 29.

<sup>194</sup> McKenna and Seidman 209.

<sup>195</sup> Wellman and Gulia 181

<sup>196</sup> With the advent of synchronous audiovisual communication platforms like Skype, our authentic physical signifiers are more likely to be revealed, moving Internet-mediated communication closer in this regard to face-to-face.

Developments in online security and privacy, as well as the normalization of a variety of Internet activities – such as online shopping, chat and social network participation – have reached a point where folks are becoming comfortable with revealing parts of themselves. Everything we chose to share doesn't just represent those individual events, but also contributes to the larger picture of what our values and experiences are. Those contributions create trust between the members of any given network, and the combination of high trust and valid identities enhances the depth, breadth and overall health of the social media ecosystem.<sup>197</sup>

Whereas anonymity may have been the hallmark of Internet-mediated communication more than a decade ago, using a pseudonym and lacking a profile picture today actually raises suspicion instead of fostering trust that enables for social connections.<sup>198</sup> Because of exaggerated time and limited cues online, presentation of the self is an intentional activity of Internet-mediated communication, but identifiability has emerged over anonymity as a more important component for being part of today's online social medium. For this reason, instead of concealing our social markers, we are more intentional about presenting them through the various online communication platforms, as we experiment with preserving our boundaries while at the same time sharing our identities to evoke trust and invite communication partners to enable us to belong to the social web.

To illustrate this, Peter Steiner's 1993 cartoon in the *New Yorker* offers us an iconic image commenting on presentation of the self online. The cartoon shows two dogs in conversation in front of a computer, as one tells the other: "On the Internet, nobody knows you are a dog."<sup>199</sup> A true artifact of the social web, this iconic cartoon has generated a series of interpretations commenting on the evolving social web, and along with it, notions of self-presentation online moving from anonymity toward greater identifiability. One such recent

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<sup>197</sup> Deanna Zandt. Share This! How You Will Change the World with Social Networking. (San Francisco: Berrett Koehler, 2010) 38.

<sup>198</sup> See Zandt 35.

<sup>199</sup> See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Internet\\_dog.jpg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Internet_dog.jpg)

homage to the original cartoon changes the caption to “On Facebook, 273 people know that I’m a dog and the rest can see my limited profile.”<sup>200</sup>

The comparison of the two cartoons thus points to a shift in Internet-mediated communication from the protective cloak of anonymity to the sense of navigating the network by the intentional presentation of the self that is at once identifiable, but also maintains appropriate boundaries to protect privacy. Yet, it may be more helpful to view this shift in terms of degrees of anonymity in Internet-mediated communication, instead of the complete eradication of the concealed self with the advent of the social web and its transparent platforms like social networking.

One reason to hold on to the element of anonymity in exploring the presentation of the self in the context of Internet-mediated communication despite the increasing transparency of the social web is the way anonymity points to the boundaries raised around our identifiable online self. Instead of considering anonymity as an absolute, if we refer to the various degrees of boundaries present in Internet-mediated communication either by virtue of the medium or as a result of our own intentional choice, then anonymity can be viewed as a significant element influencing online sharing, relationships and communities. Like the dog on Facebook, we are identifiable online but vary our degree of this by the boundaries raised around our presentation of the self. These boundaries bear impact on the social potential of the web and the kinds of communities that emerge online; our degree of desired anonymity can generate our degree and sense of belonging to the social web and specific communities within it.

While we erect certain boundaries, like grouping people to see only our limited profile, as a way to negotiate privacy versus identifiability on today’s social web, other boundaries emerge by virtue of the online medium itself, and these can influence online sharing often in a positive

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<sup>200</sup> See <http://www.socialsignal.com/blog/rob-cottingham/a-little-history-and-some-cartoons-greatest-hits>

way. As noted above, exaggerated time and limited cues online allow for greater control and intentionality about the presentation of the self, and consequently, this can also make it easier to connect with other people and share parts of oneself in a way perceived as more free of shame or judgment. While seemingly dismissible as a hindrance to genuine relationships, some degree of anonymity online can actually encourage more authentic self-sharing because it acts as a “protective cloak,” while allowing users to explore and express intimate aspects of themselves without the risk or embarrassment possible in face-to-face interaction.<sup>201</sup> Even if identifiability remains a factor, at times it is easier to allow the exaggerated time and limited cues of the online medium to mitigate the pressure of sharing certain aspects of the self. Traditional confessional booths evoke the same idea, although by no means does degrees of anonymous self-expression online have to be associated with sin and shame.<sup>202</sup> As noted above, the protective cloak which the relative anonymity of the online medium creates may be especially appealing to those who are socially private, introverted or shy, but anonymity also may just create a safe context for self-expression for anyone who is simply hindered to do so face-to-face, whether for practical, psychological, physical or emotional reasons. The relative anonymity of Internet-mediated communication as a facilitator of more judgment-free sharing takes us to the third characteristic of Internet-mediated communication: negotiating risk and commitment online.

### *Commitment: Risk and Responsibility in Online Relationships*

As stated above, the relative anonymity of Internet-mediated communication can help facilitate the development of online relationships because it alleviates the risk and

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<sup>201</sup> McKenna and Seidman 204

<sup>202</sup> At the same time, the protective cloak of anonymity can also encourage those with malevolent intentions to deceive, harass, stalk or bully others online, as they can seemingly escaping the consequences if their online malfeasance cannot be traced to their flesh and blood identity.

embarrassment possible in face-to-face communication. Internet-mediated communication and the dynamic of online communities characteristically present a different set of risks than does face-to-face communication. Hubert Dreyfus depicts the Internet critically as a medium where the anonymous spectator takes no risks.<sup>203</sup> As he explains: “The person in the aesthetic sphere keeps open all possibilities and has no fixed identity that could be threatened by disappointment, humiliation or loss, and commitments on the Internet are at best virtual commitments.”<sup>204</sup> While Internet-mediated communication does indeed produce risks particular to the online medium (deception, identity theft and manipulation, bullying, online predators), Dreyfus’ critique highlights the interpersonal effects of the playful way people tend to represent themselves online, along with how easily they move in and out of connections and relationships.

Facebook provides an excellent example for illustrating this characteristic behavior. When an old college acquaintance “friends” me on Facebook, the website sends me a message, presenting me with a choice to either “confirm” or “ignore” his friend request. It takes just a click to either dismiss this person or to reconnect with him. I browse my mental files and decide that since he bothered me back then, I have no desire to have him become privy to my profile now. I dismiss the request by clicking on “ignore,” and move on with my day. If, instead of Facebook, my old college acquaintance showed up at my door unexpectedly to reestablish our connection, social convention, good manners and Christian discipleship would not allow me to shut the door in his face as swiftly as I had clicked “ignore.” To click “ignore” and to shut the door are essentially the same act of dismissal, but they carry entirely different weight because of their on- or offline context.<sup>205</sup>

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<sup>203</sup> Hubert L. Dreyfus. On the Internet. 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. (New York: Routledge, 2009) 81.

<sup>204</sup> Dreyfus 81

<sup>205</sup> In general, the number of friends on Facebook signifies one’s social capital and therefore the more friends one has, the greater one’s social capital is. In this case, however, our example above illustrates that the online medium

On the Internet, connections are easily made and easily broken as a standard part of online social conventions for several reasons. First, as Ho and McLeod point out, users' relative anonymity as a result of limited cues dissociates them from responsibility of face-to-face social situations and the risk of shame due to disappointing others, thereby encouraging more forthright self-expressions.<sup>206</sup> Furthermore, one's social presence online, as established through an intentional and well-crafted self-presentation is assumed by others to carry a certain degree of play, fluidity and multiplicity.<sup>207</sup> In addition, the physical distance Internet-mediated communication seems to generally eradicate re-emerges here, as ultimately, users do maintain a sense that when we connect with others online, we let others into our space differently than in a face-to-face context. Our participation in online relationships and communities through Internet-mediated communication carries with it more "safe" distance than do our face-to-face relationships.<sup>208</sup> If we make an explosive comment or abandon a relationship online, less risk is involved because they are not concretely here face-to-face to demand our commitment, hold us accountable, or to make trouble for us in some other way.

Similar issues of risk and commitment emerge when considering online community participation. In an offline context, my physical presence at a group meeting communicates some degree of my commitment, even if I remain a silent observer. In addition, my physical presence disposes me to acknowledge and respond to the others if they choose to address me. I

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lowers the degree of self-censorship as compared to face-to-face interactions, prompting users to express what they really think, and making it more likely to reject a friendship than in face-to-face contexts. See Jason B. Reinecke and Heather D. Burchfield. "Defending Against De-Friending: Understanding Self-Censorship of Online Social Networking Profiles" *Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, Denver, CO, Aug 04, 2010*. Retrieved Online 2010-11-10 [http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p434707\\_index.html](http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p434707_index.html). See also Shirley S. Ho and Douglas M. McLeod. "Social-Psychological Influences On Opinion Expression in Face-to-Face and Computer-Mediated Communication." *Communication Research* 35 no. 2 (2008) 190-207.

<sup>206</sup> Ho and McLeod 192

<sup>207</sup> See Sherry Turkle, *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995.)177-209.

<sup>208</sup> Ho and McLeod 194

an undeniable there, and to simply walk out if I choose to would be a strong signal of discontent and would upset social convention. However, as online groups and Internet-mediated communication operate in a limited-cues environment, my presence can be minimal or even undetectable to all but the group administrator.<sup>209</sup> Furthermore, as the Facebook example above indicates, abandoning a relationship or a group is as easy as a click in the online environment.<sup>210</sup> On the Internet, the communication of my presence is well-crafted and controlled, and nothing automatically commits me to stand in relationship, in the same way as my physical presence would more likely do so in an offline social situation. In cyberspace, I can more easily shrug off the consequences of my strongly worded or offensive comment, or my abruptly terminated relationship without a risk of immediately perceivable social consequences.

While not everyone seeks to plant such landmines in online communities, the characteristic of risk and commitment does make the facilitation of purposeful online communities, such as distance learning or work groups, more demanding. In the online environment, the existing gap between presence and active participation collapses: in order to convey my presence, I have to make it known through active participation. At the same time, because of the seeming lack of immediate social consequences, the online environment itself does not necessarily compel me to do so in the same way my physical presence would. Online group members need additional motivation, effort and disciplined intentionality about communicating their presence through participation in the virtual environment, and students whose learning styles exhibit a greater degree of self-efficacy may generally do better in online

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<sup>209</sup> Such silent participants online are referred to as “lurkers”, a term which in and of itself carries a negative tone, regardless of the intentions of the particular user.

<sup>210</sup> See also Wellman and Gulia, 175-6.

learning contexts than less self-motivated classmates.<sup>211</sup> Yet, as in an ordinary classroom, online learning spaces welcome a variety of students, and this importance of self-motivation vis-à-vis participation online has led educators to connect this risk characteristic of Internet-mediated communication to “fading back,” which refers to the general tendency to withdraw or disengage from the learning community by decreased participation.<sup>212</sup>

While some learners do intentionally withdraw both on or offline, online fading back may also be fueled by the unique time and limited cue characteristics of Internet-mediated communication described above. We recall that these grant the particular learner more time and freedom to communicate on her own terms, therefore potentially decreasing one’s frequency of participation, especially if she is less compelled or self-motivated to participate in the online learning community.<sup>213</sup> However, even if online fading back is an effect of the dynamics of Internet-mediated communication as opposed to an intentional gesture of withdrawal, generally it has a negative effect on both the community and the individual participant. As Haythornthwaite et. al. explain, participants’ fading back can have “a negative impact on the learning community when students let themselves fade back and then fail to contribute to the public good, as it can also have a negative impact on the individual as he or she misses out on the socializing and support given by others and finding that others share his or her trials and tribulations.”<sup>214</sup>

Because of the different sense of risk and commitment online, online communities therefore rely

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<sup>211</sup> Recent studies explore the relationships between student satisfaction and successful online learning with a greater degree of self-efficacy and motivation in the student to participate. Some studies remain overall inconclusive, as surveyed in Charles B. Hodges. “Self-Efficacy in the Context of Online Learning Environments” *Performance Improvement Quarterly*. 20 (3-4). 7-25. Others note a positive correlation between motivation, self-efficacy and success. See Karen Clayton, Fran Blumberg and Daniel P. Auld. “The Relationship Between Motivation, Learning Strategies and Choice of Environment Whether Traditional or Including an Online Component.” *British Journal of Educational Technology*. 41 no. 3 (2010). 349-364.

<sup>212</sup> Haythornthwaite et al. 47

<sup>213</sup> See Mary K Tallent-Runnels et al. “Teaching Courses Online: A Review of the Research.” *Review of Educational Research* 76 no. 1 (2006) 116.

<sup>214</sup> Haythornthwaite et al., 47

on the motivation of individual participants to sustain a sense of community, a motivation that is expressed through disciplined and regular participation. In some intentional online communities, facilitating this sense of motivation through structure, defines roles and collaborative exercises is the key to the group's success and member's sustained participation, regardless of individual learning style.<sup>215</sup>

Control and time, connection and anonymity, and commitment and risk are three elements which characterize the uniqueness of Internet-mediated communication and online communities. To summarize, online communities are social networks existing on the Internet around a shared center of interest, which continue to exhibit people's innate social desire to communicate, share and connect with others. This innate social desire has also fueled the evolution of social communications technology and media, along with the tools and gadgets which make Internet-mediated communication possible. Given the Internet's increasing ability to host such social connections, genuine online communities have continued to emerge from the days of group email listserves, discussion groups and bulletin boards to today's multimedia participatory culture marked by the tools and trends of Web 2.0. These online communities express the human desire to connect and share with each other in the digital environment, and as such, they are marked by the distinct three characteristics. First, online communities experience time paradoxically, as Internet-mediated communication at once allows for the conquering of time due to physical distances, and it exaggerates time in that users have greater time, and consequent control over their communication. Second, because the Internet creates a limited-cues social environment, connecting with others online involves more intentional self-presentation. Conversely, the Internet offers users a desired degree of anonymity in their self-

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<sup>215</sup> See for instance Douglas J. Lynch, "Application of Online Discussion and Cooperative Learning Strategies to Online and Blended College Courses." *College Student Journal* 44, no. 3 (September 2010): 777-784; see also Tallent-Runnels et al. 101.

presentation, increasing one's control over communication, as well as offering a "protective cloak" for facilitating increased intimacy in sharing. Third, online communities exist with a different sense of risk and commitment. The online medium does not compel commitment or demand our availability in the same way our physical presence does, and as such, online users have an easier out both of relationships and communities. As a result, online community participation demands genuine personal motivation and a disciplined approach to regularly making one's presence known through active communication. With this overview of online communities in place, we now turn to explore three particular kinds of online communities, in order to examine a broader spectrum of how the informational and the relational get conveyed through Internet-mediated communication in three different online social contexts: dating, support and learning. As opposed to focusing on particular communication platforms, these three broad social contexts (that may find expression through a variety of platforms) offer us a spectrum of examples in terms of how information and relationship are integrated online, ranging from the highly relational focus of online dating to the both relational and informational goal of online support groups, to finally the informational emphasis of online education. In showing the interplay of information and relationship in a variety of ways, these three examples are helpful for deepening our understanding of the potential of Internet-mediated communication for the catechetical ministry.

## **Integrating Information with Relationship: Particular Examples of Internet-Mediated Communication**

### *Online Dating and Romances*

Online dating and romance are an intriguing area of Internet-mediated communication for our present study. Although concerned less with community formation, online dating and romance are interesting because they exhibit people's ability not only to connect and share online, but also to express a high degree of relationality in developing romantic interest, deep feelings and in some cases, falling in love while communicating through the Internet. This is especially relevant for catechesis, since the goal of catechesis is to facilitate conversion, a true turning of the mind and heart to Jesus Christ. These profound and life-changing feelings of conversion are akin to those of interpersonal relationships, and they are a unique kind of falling in love in and of themselves. Consequently, how people share themselves with others online to the point of reaching such deep feelings and commitments, such in the case of online dating and romance is a salient topic.

Online dating and romance cover a broad range of interpersonal behaviors. Customers of online dating sites, such as eHarmony or Match.com for example post detailed profiles in hopes of attracting their ideal mate, with the goal of moving the encounter offline as soon as possible.<sup>216</sup> In other words, these online dating sites offer a practical tool for more efficiently facilitating relationships offline through pooling, sorting and matching people by interest and presumed compatibility. In the case of online dating sites then, most of the more meaningful Internet-mediated communication actually takes place asynchronously through the profile the

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<sup>216</sup> Monica T. Whitty, "E-Dating: The Five Phases on Online Dating." In Social Networking, Communities and E-Dating Services: Concepts and Implications. Eds. Celia Romm-Livermore and Kristina Setzekorn. (Hershey PA: IGI Global, 2009) 284.

men and women create to present themselves. It is through crafting one's profile that one actually discloses the most meaningful information about oneself; subsequent exchanges with potential mates are usually brief and serve get a sense each other and possibly to set up a face-to-face meeting. As Monica Whitty points out, a successful profile in the online dating context not only stands out in the sea of other men and women, but also achieves a balance of genuineness and desirability.<sup>217</sup> Anything over the top, clichéd or too good to be true is received with skepticism in this context, and as such, online daters are drawn to profiles conveying a self-presentation that could be perceived as both attractive and real.<sup>218</sup> Echoing the shift away from concealed identity toward greater identifiability in the presentation of the self as described above, this measure of "attractive authenticity" is a valuable lesson for both communal of individual presentation of the self online, in terms of how to avoid skepticism and evoke trust from communication partners, in order to facilitate the emergence of online communities.

In addition to online dating services, a fewer number of people engage in online romantic relationships, where instead of swiftly moving the encounter offline, the partners continue for some time to grow in intimacy through Internet-mediated communication.<sup>219</sup> Some of these relationships are evolutions of encounters in online communities of shared interest. Others are long distance relationships sustained through the online medium, among other means of

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<sup>217</sup> Whitty. "E-Dating" 283

<sup>218</sup> Whitty, "E-Dating" 282

<sup>219</sup> In general, online romances are a minor form of online relationships, as most online relationships have a face-to-face referent or are weak tie connections serving to maintain a channel of communication to one another. For more on this comparison, as well as on the pervasiveness of online romances, see Nicola Doring. "Studying Online Love and Cyber Romance" *Online Social Sciences*. B. Batinić, U.-D. Reips & M. Bosnjak, Eds. (Seattle: Hogrefe and Huber, 2002) 333-356. For another example, one survey of such online relationships conducted among adolescents also reveals online romances as a minor alternative (7% of those surveyed) to the more popular close online friendships (75%). See Janis Wolak, Kimberly J. Mitchell and David Finkelhor. "Close Online Relationships in a National Sample of Adolescents." *Adolescence* 37 (Fall 2002) 441.

communication.<sup>220</sup> Even though these romantic partners meet face-to-face infrequently or only later in the relationship, their computer-mediated interaction can generate deep feelings of intimacy and intense emotions, fueling the online romance to endure and grow more intense despite physical separation.

Aaron Ben Ze'ev characterizes such online romances as fueled by intense emotion, along with a dynamic sense of incompleteness and the convenience of detached attachment online.<sup>221</sup> The uniqueness of the online environment contributes to the development of each of these characteristics: physical distance and limited cues lead people to focus intensely on ideas and personality traits over physical attributes, the same also fuels the shared sense of incompleteness, a dynamic sense of moving forward toward greater and eventually face-to-face intimacy. Both of these factors help generate the strong emotional attachments that online partners form.<sup>222</sup> On the other hand, “detachment” or detached attachment is Ben Ze'ev's term for naming how online risk and commitment effects these relationships: online romantic relationships generally try to enjoy the benefits of romance while avoiding the responsibilities and the demands it makes on us, and “detachment” refers to the tendency in online romances to be able to get away from people if one wants to, but then be intensely close to them again if one desires to do so.<sup>223</sup> Although similar in this respect to traditional forms of romantic correspondence, online romances are able to intensify this emotional context by mediating the presence of the partners in increasingly rich ways, especially through synchronous interaction and/or audiovisual media.

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<sup>220</sup> According to the Pew Internet and American Life Project, 18% of American Internet users engaged in online dating have used the Internet to maintain a long-distance relationship, while 37% of American Internet users engaged in online dating have used an online dating website. See “Dating Related Activities Online” Pew Internet and American Life Project Survey, September –December 2005.  
<http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2006/Online-Dating/07-Beyond-Dating-Websites/02-Flirting-online-ranks-highly.aspx>

<sup>221</sup> Aaron Ben Ze'ev. “‘Detachment’: the unique nature of online romantic relationships” in The Social Net: Human Behavior in Cyberspace. Ed. Yair Amichai-Hamburger. (New York: Oxford, 2005)115-138.

<sup>222</sup> Ben Ze'ev 126

<sup>223</sup> Ben Ze'ev 124

One's partner is virtually, but not actually there, and the juxtaposition of these two elements in the online environment, where virtual presence is becoming increasingly rich but still remains elusive, heightens the emotions of online romances. Thus, what ultimately continues to sustain partners in this environment is the emotional intensity generated by the increasingly rich but still elusive presence of partners, coupled with the somewhat imagined and idealized promise the other partner represents, as inherited from traditional romantic correspondence. As Ben Ze'ev explains: "Online [romantic] relationships gain their emotional intensity by referring to a partial, imaginary environment that is better than the actual one."<sup>224</sup> One puts up with physical separation from their partner along with the risk of abrupt endings because of the emotional intensity of hope, fulfillment and mutual sharing the online romance provides. The powerful role of emotions in sustaining one's commitment to a person or community is therefore another valuable lesson online romances can teach other forms of community.

### *Online Support Groups*

While online dating and romances illustrate the emergence and the dynamics of strong interpersonal connections through Internet-mediated communication, online support groups offer a look into how people connect and form community around a shared center of interest in a particularly personal way. As Martin Tanis defines the activity of online support groups in terms of offering social support:

Social support, consisting of a range of assistances that people can provide to one another in order to improve the quality of life, is found to be important because they can reduce feelings of stress, loneliness or isolation, can provide people with useful knowledge and information, and may teach people strategies that help them to cope with the situation they are facing.<sup>225</sup>

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<sup>224</sup> Ben Ze'ev 132

<sup>225</sup> Martin Tanis. "What Makes the Internet a Place to Seek Social Support?" In Mediated Interpersonal Communication, Ed. Elly A. Konijn et al. (New York: Routledge, 2008) 291.

As such, online support groups are different from other online communities because their generative and shared center of interest usually entails a problem, instead of a hobby or another form of personal or professional interest. Even within this definition, there exist a broad range of forms of online support, including everything from practical problems (troubleshooting for computer problems, video game cheats and codes, improving your hitting in baseball) to lifestyle issues (marriage, divorce, families, relationships, sexual orientation) to a variety of health and wellness related topics (weight loss management, eating disorders, depression, addictions, cancer and other illnesses, death, grief and bereavement). Often, these groups take form as message boards where people leave postings describing a particular problem that starts a thread of discussion and invites the input of other users, although support groups have also emerged in 3D virtual environments like Second Life, adding audiovisual components to the interaction. By and large, whether text based or audiovisual, these groups also generally maintain some degree of anonymity, allowing the problem to emerge as the focus of interaction.

Through addressing a great variety of challenging topics, online support groups offer both informational and emotional assistance. Sharing how to recover from a computer crash and assuring a depressed person that they are not alone are different expressions of support, yet they both strive to improve the situation of the person in need. Albeit different in content, online support offered to the owner of the crashed computer and the depressed person both convey a sense of emotional and informational support. The owner of the computer may learn the best practical way to salvage some of his data, and at the same time he is assured that there is hope for his situation, as others have also survived a computer crash. The depressed person may most appreciate that someone “out there” responded to them with encouragement, but the caring stranger’s response may also contain practical information like a phone number or link to helpful

resources. In other words, because they focus on addressing a personal problem, online support groups seem to successfully integrate the communication of information with the sharing of personal presence through the online medium.

Because most online support groups are to some degree anonymous, and generally convenient and comfortably accessible for people with even the most stigmatized or alienating problems, they have skyrocketed in popularity, as supplementing or replacing to some degree other more traditional forms of social support, including family, friends, and church or community groups.<sup>226</sup> While elements of online communities and Internet-mediated communication such as anonymity, controlled self-presentation, time, limited cues and access all contribute to the popularity of online support groups, they also exhibit their own unique factors. For example, the primarily text-based communication of message board-type online support groups takes advantage of writing both as a therapeutic tool and a vehicle for one's greater and more cohesive understanding of a problem.<sup>227</sup> In order to leave a posting, one has to be able to clearly articulate one's problem, and this in and of itself has the positive benefit of potentially clarifying one's understanding. The aforementioned exaggeration of time in online communication also contributes to this as it grants the person ample time and control to craft a description of one's problem most clearly in a support context. Often writing under the protective cloak of anonymity in a safe space of support facilitates understanding, self-expression and healing even before another user may respond with advice. One valuable lesson of online support groups therefore is the space they provide for self-expression and dialogue, contributing to both increased understanding but also an increased sense of hope through social

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<sup>226</sup> Tanis 291

<sup>227</sup> Tanis 296

cohesion.<sup>228</sup> Both the act of posting and receiving the input of others are highly beneficial for fostering these.

At the same time, online support groups also exhibit Internet-mediated communication's characteristic low risk and low commitment. Because pockets of community form in rallying around particular problems as posted on the message board or shared in a virtual social platform, once that discussion fizzles out, the impromptu community dissipates. Online support groups are thus issue-specific and as a whole, exhibit weak ties.<sup>229</sup> For this reason, as convenient as they are, online support groups are often too finite to replace other forms of community or social support, and are generally better integrated into one's overall social support system as a supplement to other resources. In seeking to glean the wisdom online support groups may offer other forms of community, it is important to note that problems as a gathering point for community may have strong initial appeal, but they offer only a temporary rallying point and the community will face inevitable transition once the problem is resolved. For this reason, problem-based communities may better be conceptualized as a niche within one's greater social network.<sup>230</sup> In this way, online support groups point to the importance of envisioning "social context" or "community" broadly, and contextualizing Internet-mediated communication as one viable way of engaging in this greater whole.

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<sup>228</sup> For example, in the context of one study of online social support for caregivers of older adults, "finding and expanding the network of status similar others" or in other words, finding that one is not alone, is listed as one of the benefits of engaging in this form of interaction, through which one can find hope and decrease isolation. See Jan Colvin, Lillian Chenoweth, Mary Bold and Cheryl Harding. "Caregivers of Older Adults: Advantages and Disadvantages of Internet-Based Social Support." *Family Relations* 53 no. 1 (2004). 53. Yet another early study of computer-mediated support groups for breast cancer survivors also revealed hope, social cohesion and a sense of universality as helpful factors for the participants. See Weinberg, Nancy, et al. "Therapeutic factors: their presence in a computer-mediated support group." *Social Work with Groups* 18.4 (1995): 57-69.

<sup>229</sup> Tanis 301-303

<sup>230</sup> Tanis 303

### ***Online Education***

Online education is a complex topic, well beyond the scope of this present section. Nevertheless, the interplay of information and relationship in online education is especially salient for catechesis as an educational ministry, and exploring this dynamic with catechesis in mind is our particular approach to this otherwise large topic. In continuing to survey the communication dynamic of information and relationship, our focus here is to therefore trace this dynamic in the context of online education, for the overall purpose of examining what this dynamic offers catechesis, both in theory and practice.

One particular benefit of Internet-mediated communication has been the broadening of educational opportunities for people physically beyond campus. Online education, like online dating and online support also encompasses a broad range of actual contexts, including entirely online educational institutions like Open University quoted in the introduction above, to physical colleges and universities offering online classes, to these same universities and colleges offering hybrid classes, where students meet face-to-face but also communicate and connect through an online platform. In each of these cases, the ease and convenience by which the Internet allows people to overcome the hurdles of time and distance has coalesced into a virtual space for learning. Much like in a physical classroom, students participating in online education are invited to appropriate and engage with content, and contribute to discussions by commenting on other people's insights as well as sharing one's own. Online education settings often take form through a course management software program, which allows easy access to files of content, including documents and multimedia presentations. Students engage in dialogue through asynchronous threaded discussions, or through synchronous live chat, at times in a 3D virtual environment. Some course management software programs also allow for video conferencing,

facilitating class meetings online with the help of web cameras. Other features may include collaborative learning spaces such as wikis and idea-boards, as well as a messaging system to communicate easily with members of the class.

While the convenience of online learning has made it a popular option to consider both for students and educational institutions, scholars continue to debate its efficacy and the broad implications of moving teaching-learning into a virtual space. We have already noted the possible influence of learning style on a satisfying online learning experience, as students with a higher degree of self-motivation may succeed better in this context.<sup>231</sup> Also important is the need for roles and structure to enhance participation,<sup>232</sup> and a generally collaborative approach to engage with content, especially in light of the emergence of the social web.<sup>233</sup> Additional relevant questions center around the learning environment, sense of community in a mediated environment, learner expectations, role of the teacher, and institutional and administrative factors.<sup>234</sup>

In some contrast to online dating and support groups, online education as a form of Internet-mediated communication exhibits a practical, information oriented structure. Online classes gather purposefully and temporarily around a specific topic so as to gain greater knowledge, understanding or practical skill. For this reason, online classes seem to focus more on exchanging topic-relevant information than on building personal relationships or on sharing emotional issues. However, it is important to maintain that although less inherent than in dating or support, online education still cultivates relationships and engages the emotional sensibilities

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<sup>231</sup> See again Clayton, Blumberg and Auld 361.

<sup>232</sup> Lynch 777f, Tallent-Runnels et al.101.

<sup>233</sup> See Paul Anderson. "What is Web 2.0? Ideas, Technologies and Implications of Education" *JISC Technology and Standards Watch*. February 2007. 32-34.

<sup>234</sup> For an overview of these issues animating the discussion around online education, see Mary K Tallent-Runnels et al. "Teaching Courses Online: A Review of the Research." *Review of Educational Research* 76 no. 1 (2006) 93-135.

of students. In fact, Palloff and Pratt maintain that when the virtual classroom becomes the educational setting, the intentional development of a sense of community and social presence are imperative for a successful class, learning and overall student satisfaction.<sup>235</sup> If no face-to-face group meeting is possible, Palloff and Pratt recommend a “week zero” to open the course and focus solely on posting personal introductions and course guidelines, or suggesting even the creation and inclusion of participants’ personal profiles or webpages if the course management software allows for this.<sup>236</sup> Without the sense of community and personal presence, participants of online education may feel isolated, lost or left unanimated by the content of the course, and get less out of their online course.

Haythornthwaite et al.’s case study of the University of Illinois’ hybrid Library Educational Experimental Program (LEEP) also demonstrates the strong role emotions play in online classes, particularly if a student feels left out or becomes overwhelmed by the digital medium itself, as in the case of “Nancy” whose transition into the virtual classroom was so bumpy, that she became frustrated, overwhelmed and eventually took time off of her job to be able to get back on track in the online class.<sup>237</sup> Related to the importance of self-motivated participation noted above, Haythornthwaite et al. show that what made LEEP students more satisfied with their online learning experience was their perceived ability to actively participate and convey a steady online presence in the class: “dynamic and interactive communication has also been associated with increased satisfaction, performance quality, learning, sociability and cooperation.”<sup>238</sup> In order for this sense of presence to develop, participants of online education have to be both motivated and able to engage in the structure of online communities, where they

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<sup>235</sup> Palloff and Pratt 31

<sup>236</sup> Palloff and Pratt 14, 21

<sup>237</sup> Haythornthwaite et al. 46

<sup>238</sup> Haythornthwaite et al. 46

create a true social network around a shared topic of interest. In other words, engagement with the informational content, although the true purpose of an online class, needs a communal, social, interactive, and participatory method to be successful and satisfying.

An intentionally communal approach to online learning not only satisfies participants, but it also takes better advantage of the online medium itself. Internet-mediated communication not only conquers the constraints of distance and time, but it also offers a genuinely unique medium for communication, characterized by a networked presentation of information, as authored, augmented and commented on by many people.<sup>239</sup> In the context of online education, it therefore becomes somewhat unnatural to present information in the one-to-many style of traditional lectures, without any sort of vehicle for student-to-teacher and student-to-student feedback, sharing, and collaboration; the medium of the Internet itself demands this. As Lynch puts it, Internet-mediated communication reshapes the role of the instructor to “being a guide on the side rather than a sage on the stage.”<sup>240</sup> While an instructor remains necessary, she is not as much the source of knowledge, but rather, she is an architect of the learning environment and facilitator of group dialogue and collaboration around the relevant topic, in order for the participants to best generate knowledge and meaning together, in the context of “truly an empowering, mutual learning experience.”<sup>241</sup> With such recent emphasis on the importance of learning communities, online education offers a valuable lesson in pointing to the value of the social, relational context of information sharing and exchange. In order to generate knowledge and meaning, the relational aspect of communication cannot be neglected.

Online dating and romances, support groups and online education offered us three examples of communities as generated by Internet-mediated communication, all with different

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<sup>239</sup> See Anderson 14-25

<sup>240</sup> Lynch 778

<sup>241</sup> Palloff and Pratt 20

ways of integrating informational and relational elements. The wisdom gleaned from these generally highlights the powerful human element saturating all of these informational contexts, whether it being the role of emotions driving online relationships, impromptu communities of support that form around a stranger's crisis, or the necessary sense of presence and communal participation that makes online educational contexts satisfying and successful. These examples all underscore the truly social nature of the Internet: from its roots as ARPANET to its evolution toward Web 2.0, the Internet is indeed a social network of people seeking to connect and share through the digital medium in increasingly effective and relevant ways. Information, from the zeros and ones of binary code to data files to meaningful texts, videos and audio clips all serve as useful and necessary carriers of human social presence and communal interaction. As the Web evolves to be more participatory and more interactive, the integration between information and relationship becomes more and more thorough, making information meaningful, and relational communication inherently part of informational elements. Internet-mediated communication cannot be credited for inventing this dynamic, but the digital medium does present this dynamic to us in such a way so as to shed new light on other forms of interpersonal communication. In the case of communicating the faith, the example of Internet-mediated communication is a beacon for reorienting both the theology of revelation and catechesis toward a more integrated dynamic of information and relationship.

## **Conclusion: “The Medium is the Message”: The Internet as Social Network Gathered around Nodes of Information**

Packaged in a playful book that said more through its format than its actual content, Marshall McLuhan declared in 1967 that the medium was the message.<sup>242</sup> His philosophy draws attention to the fact that no message exists in a void, and that the medium conveying the message contributes greatly to the overall meaning of the communication taking place. While not necessarily exclusive to electronically-mediated communication, McLuhan’s now-famous declaration has been embraced as a classic truth of scholarship surrounding the study of computer-mediated communication and the Internet. Along these lines, the online medium itself contributes uniquely to the message of the information shared and communicated through the Internet.

Keeping in mind our larger context of catechesis and the interplay of information and relationship in communicating the faith, in this chapter I sought to demonstrate that the characteristic contribution of the online medium to the overall message of Internet-mediated communication is the unique way that genuine human spirit and social, relational presence imbues and animates information in this medium. This leads to a distinctive integration of the informational and the relational in one act of communication, as these two aspects of join inseparably as two sides of the same act of communication. Internet-mediated communication as this symbiotic medium of information and relationship enriches and shapes the particular message by facilitating it to take form as an increasingly social, communal, interactive and participatory way of sharing information. If the medium is the message, then the message that the Internet really communicates through its increasingly social communication medium is a vast *social network that expresses itself by people gathering around nodes of information. As in the*

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<sup>242</sup> Marshall McLuhan. *The Medium is the Message*. (New York: Random House, 1967.)

case of the theology of revelation and of catechesis, to focus exclusively just on relationship or just on information diminishes the overall message and meaning the Internet conveys to us, and presents only a partial picture of Internet-mediated communication.

*A social network that expresses itself by people gathering around nodes of information* as the way to conceptualize Internet-mediated communication can also offer us an intriguing new way by which to return once again to the theology of revelation and to catechesis in our next and final chapter. What happens to our understanding of the theology of revelation and of catechesis if we apply this definition to those ecclesial contexts in which revelation is transmitted through the practice of catechesis? How will this contribute toward the greater and more balanced integration of information and relationship in our theological and practical context? What are the practical implications for catechesis if we conceptualize the ecclesial community as a social network, and the content of the tradition as gathering points of information? These questions lead us into chapter five, where we will test out, evaluate and apply the wisdom and of Internet-mediated communication in a theological and catechetical context, with the overall aim of drawing constructive and practical conclusions to benefit the future practice of catechesis.

## **Chapter V: What the Internet as Social Web Offers Revelation and Catechesis**

### **Introduction: Revisiting Pope2You.Net**

Eight months after Pope Benedict XVI encouraged the use of Web 2.0 digital media for better evangelization, the web-traffic to [www.Pope2you.net](http://www.Pope2you.net) has slowed to a trickle.<sup>243</sup> In spite of the time and effort invested in the site's variety of multimedia applications, web statistics reveal that the site traffic of [Pope2you.net](http://Pope2you.net) presently ranks as 1,202,883rd, the average time users spend on the website is 85 seconds, and this is number has been steadily declining during the past three months. In these past months, traffic to the website has also generated enough statistics to piece together the profile of its average visitor; 55-64 year old, single, college-educated males who access the site from work dominate this category. To hazard a guess, it seems that when Pope Benedict XVI encouraged priests to blog in his January 2010 44<sup>th</sup> World Communications Day address, they responded by checking out this website. At the same time, [Pope2you.net](http://Pope2you.net) was intended to address young people both directly and indirectly through the array of applications perceived to be popular to them, such as Facebook. It somehow missed this mark, and instead became a showcase of sorts to demonstrate for priests what is possible with Web 2.0.

[Pope2you.net](http://Pope2you.net) is bright, attractive, presents a networked approach to information, and showcases relevant multimedia applications. Why did it miss the mark? It seems that despite its packaging, [Pope2you.net](http://Pope2you.net) failed to create a truly participatory space, where Catholics can connect and share with each other online in an authentic and creative way. Instead, [Pope2you.net](http://Pope2you.net) created a space where individual users can engage with the Church through more colorful media. In terms of its acknowledgement of our cultural milieu, this is a step in the right direction, but the

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<sup>243</sup> For a detailed analysis of internet statistics relevant to [Pope2you.net](http://Pope2you.net), see [www.alexa.com/siteinfo/pope2you.net](http://www.alexa.com/siteinfo/pope2you.net). Site accessed for our present analysis on September 17, 2010.

problem that remains is that Pope2you.net did not conceptualize “Church” broadly enough to create an online opportunity for fellowship for the People of God.<sup>244</sup> Initially, even Pope2you.net’s Facebook feature was only a postcard-sharing application, falling short of engaging in the true social networking potential of Facebook, which exhibits ongoing commitment and sustained online presence among users. Of recent, two Facebook users also involved with coordinating Pope2you.net created a page to help support and popularize Pope2You on this platform, which links users to the original postcard-application, but now also takes advantage of the discussion board for prayer requests and theological exchanges. To date, 9,354 Facebook users have acknowledged this page with a “like”, another step in the right direction, but a modest number as compared to the largest and grassroots Catholic group on Facebook, “Catholic Church”, which is followed by 157,162 users.<sup>245</sup>

Pope2you.net fizzling out offers a valuable lesson for our current investigation, seeking to glean the wisdom this medium can offer the theology of revelation and the practice of catechesis. What really matters it is not whether we use the latest software apps, but whether we can tap into the true ethos surrounding Internet-mediated communication. Apps and ethos certainly go hand in hand, but we risk not seeing the forest for the trees, if our focus remains on the tools and does not explore their motivating force. As we found in chapter four, this true ethos is rooted in the profound social and interactive potential of the Internet, which is both the driving force and a goal behind the evolution of communication technologies. In the case of

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<sup>244</sup> It is important to note the ecclesiology assumed by Pope2you.net. By connecting users to St. Peter’s Square via webcam or following the recent activity of Benedict XVI through podcasts, the definition of Church leans more toward “the Vatican” and less toward “People of God” or “Body of Christ” models as promulgated by *Lumen Gentium*.

<sup>245</sup> The “Catholic Church” is the Facebook extension of uCatholic.com, an interactive resource portal for Catholics, run by Ryan Scheel. A layperson working in publishing and Internet marketing, Scheel singlehandedly runs both the Facebook group and uCatholic.com, which generates 30,000 monthly hits on his website, and which he maintains independently, but respectful of his local bishop and the official diocesan Catholic Church. (Personal Interview, September 20, 2010)

Pope2you.net, showcasing the latest generation of Web 2.0 resources proved insufficient for the overall purpose of getting people connected to the Church online. On the other hand, if the website had a message board, chat room, discussion forum or “wall” where users could directly convey and share in a sense of communal online presence, this would have planted the seeds of a new kind of communal space. It would have moved Pope2you.net from being a showcase to becoming a bold embodiment of the Pope’s message. As Benedict XVI stated in his January World Communication Day address: “Priests are thus challenged to proclaim the Gospel by employing the latest generation of audiovisual resources (images, videos, animated features, blogs, web sites) which, alongside traditional means, can open up broad new vistas for dialogue, evangelization and catechesis.”<sup>246</sup> With such worthy goals in mind, Pope2you.net led us to the technology, but stopped short of actually using it, at least in the way that would have captured the social ethos of Internet-mediated communication.<sup>247</sup>

Capturing the social ethos of the Internet is the key to understanding its significance and to using its tools for our benefit, whether for business, commerce, politics, education, or in our case, catechesis. In this final chapter of the dissertation, we bring our investigation of the Internet to its conclusion by applying its wisdom to the theology of revelation and the practice of catechesis. Rooted in the Church’s consistent effort to take social communications media seriously for the purpose of evangelization and catechesis, along with its more recent emphasis

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<sup>246</sup> Benedict XVI, “44<sup>th</sup> World Day of Communications Message” [http://www.pope2you.net/index.php?id\\_testi=25](http://www.pope2you.net/index.php?id_testi=25)

<sup>247</sup> Seen together with the Pope’s World Day of Communications Message, along with the current theme of the Church as the “Year of Priests”, Pope2you.net does fulfill the useful and educational purpose of showing priests and pastoral associates what can be possible with the help of Web 2.0 technology. To Pope2you.net’s credit, it likely sidestepped inviting the participatory engagement of users because it intends for this to flourish instead on a local level, through priests and bishops. At the same time, imagining the overall value of facilitating a participatory space for connecting Catholics on a global level through a Vatican-created portal is quite powerful, and comparable to attending large events such as Papal visits, World Youth Days or visiting St. Peter’s Basilica on a feast day. Practical hurdles aside (what language to use, who would administer it, would it be open or closed, how do you evoke trust and ensure authenticity) the space itself would be a powerful witness of a global sense of presence and communion.

on digital communication, this dissertation has explored both the exponentially growing phenomenon of Internet-mediated communication, and the Church's understanding of catechesis as the process of facilitating believers' conversion to Jesus Christ, and as one direct and educational form of transmitting God's revealing self-communication to humankind. We found that both in the theology of revelation and in the practice of catechesis, there exists a compound answer to the question of *what* gets communicated both when God communicates Godself through revelation, and when we transmit this revelation in the process of catechesis. In both cases, what gets communicated is informational content infused with and animated by personal presence. While being two inseparable components of the one act of communication, how these two elements get emphasized and interpreted in relation to each other has significant impact on what models of revelation have dominated our theological understanding, and what consequent practices of catechesis we have engaged in to form faith. Through our exploration of Internet-mediated communication, we discovered that while its newest and latest tools offer intriguing possibilities for catechesis and evangelization, its more profound bit of wisdom addresses this compound dynamic of communication as made up of personal presence and informational content. Thanks to Internet-mediated communication, we have a unique model offering an integrated dynamic of personal presence and content, where informational content is the necessary vehicle which not only carries personal presence but is entirely imbued and animated by it. Another way of conceptualizing this is the now-classic adage: the medium is the message.

Chapter four has shown us that on the Internet, the medium is the *social network gathered around particular nodes of information*, and as such, what message the Internet really communicates to us through its vast files of data is the people connected, sharing, collaborating and communicating through all this information. This chapter begins by exploring more fully

“the medium as the message” re-defined as this social network, as we apply this definition to our theological and catechetical context, taking note of what emerges of this aspect of faith and culture in dialogue. We conclude our overall investigation by highlighting foundational concepts and new skills for the practice of catechesis in light of its dialogue with the ethos and culture of Internet-mediated communication.

### **The Medium is the Message**

If we apply “the medium is the message” to the Internet defined as the *social network gathered around particular nodes of information*, then the Internet as “medium” communicates to us the primary importance of people relating and communicating as its “message.” The social network as the Internet’s medium/message also encompasses for us the fundamental social ethos of Internet-mediated communication, and encapsulates the essence of Internet-mediated communication so valuably for dialoguing with our theologically and catechetically oriented context. Having arrived at this definition through chapter four, here we therefore test it out in this context and investigate how this definition impacts our understanding of the theology of revelation and our practice of catechesis. To ground our theological investigation of the medium/message of the Internet as social network, we first explore how “the medium is the message” may apply to the Person of Jesus Christ, who is both the foundation and perfection of our theology of revelation and the ultimate goal of catechesis. We next return to the theology of revelation, and continue our investigation by exploring the dynamics of communication in the medium/message of the Internet as social network. We present the medium/message of the Internet as a new model of revelation, suggesting that the social network of the Internet offers a new analogy for understanding the existing dynamics of God’s self-communication to

humankind. To test out this proposition, we follow the method of Avery Dulles as we note the locus of revelation, the faith response of the human person, and the merits and criticisms of this new model. Finally, we draw practical conclusions for a catechetical context, considering how to transmit the Word of revelation in a context where God's Word gets uttered most clearly in the communicative bonds of this social network.

### *Jesus Christ as Medium and Message*

To begin our analysis, Pierre Babin offers us a valuable glimpse of the encounter of Marshall McLuhan's own understanding of the "the medium is the message" with a theological context. Similarly intrigued by McLuhan's philosophy of communication and its implications for religious education, Babin recounts McLuhan's own insight on Jesus Christ. As according to Babin:

When I asked [McLuhan] whether the formula "the medium is the message" could be applied to Christ, he replied at once, "Of course. That is the only case in which the medium and the message are perfectly identical." And, in explaining the term *message*, he insisted that it was not the words spoken by Christ but *Christ himself* and all the ministries that extend him that produce an effect on us. "The message is conversion."<sup>248</sup>

McLuhan's brief quote is replete with significant connections to the theology of revelation and to catechesis, and offers a rich starting point for beginning our analysis.

McLuhan identifies the medium/message with the whole person of Jesus Christ, and thus proposes a broad understanding of communication. If Christ is the perfect example of the unity of medium and message then he models the ideal for the fullest communication possible. The identity between who Christ is and what he wishes to concretely communicate to us shows not only the integrity of his self-communication, but also raises our awareness that words are but one important vehicle of conveying a total communicating presence, which manifests also through

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<sup>248</sup> Pierre Babin. The New Era in Religious Communication. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1991) 6.

gesture, action, choices, habits, social sphere, interests, etc. As perfectly aligned expression of medium and message, Jesus Christ *is* the Word, whose whole being embodies God's self-communication.

Christ's perfectly aligned embodiment of medium and message takes us back to the theology of revelation. Christ as the Incarnate Word of God is the perfection of God's self-communication, precisely because it is not an abstract Word, but is Word that gets uttered to us entirely contextualized in our human condition. Since revelation is communication between God and humankind, its fullest expression integrates both God's will and effort to communicate Godself and our openness and capacity to receive this.<sup>249</sup> As such, the Word of revelation actually becomes flesh in Jesus Christ to come to us in the most familiar and fullest way we can perceive. Through this, the Incarnation of the Word in and of itself carries the profound message of God's limitless desire for intimacy with humankind. The actual presence of his whole being with us as the Incarnate Word is Christ's primary message of revelation, which then gets reinforced and specified through his particular communicative acts, that then get registered as the content of the Gospel message, transmitted through Scripture and Tradition in the context of the Church. Yet, Church, Tradition, Scripture and Gospel all depend on and serve to express God's invitation to relationship as embodied most fully in the Incarnation of the Word.

Along these same lines, McLuhan notes that when it comes to the message of Christ, he is the perfect embodiment of an invitation to conversion. The concrete message of Christ's whole being as the Incarnate Word carries within it the invitation to the relationship he extends to humankind toward greater intimacy with God. In more specific terms, Christ's invitation to relationship is an invitation to turn our minds and hearts to God by following the Son to lead us

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<sup>249</sup> See again Sandra Schneiders, "The New Testament as the Word of God." In The Revelatory Text, ( New York: Harper Collins, 1991.)37

toward greater intimacy with the Father. This invitation to relationship resonates profoundly with catechesis, which has the facilitation of conversion as its main goal.

If Christ as the Incarnate Word both embodies God's desire for greater intimacy and communicates this relational desire through the invitation to conversion, then in the context of catechesis the effort to engage new believers in the social and relational bonds of the ecclesial community serves as an avenue for the continued expression of God's relational desire. As Babin points out: "To understand the message of Christ is not simply to share in the content of the word-message, but to partake also in the body-message."<sup>250</sup> While a rich statement for its sacramental overtones, Babin here is more concretely emphasizing the communal Body of Christ, and the importance of the broad social medium that communicates the message of God's invitation to relationship through many particular languages of the life of the ecclesial community. In the case of catechesis, which seeks to facilitate conversion by transmitting God's self-communication through a formative process, the goal is to imitate Christ in embodying the message of invitation to relationship in and through this communal Body.

"The medium is the message" therefore is not only a classic maxim of the philosophy of communication, but, according to McLuhan's own view, also allows for rich theological interpretation if applied to Jesus Christ. This intersection between theology and the philosophy of communication paves the way for our more specific analysis. The idea of medium/message as perfectly exemplified in Jesus Christ presents us the possibility of applying this axiom to more specific theological concepts like revelation and catechesis.

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<sup>250</sup> Babin 7

### ***Medium/Message as Model of Revelation***

In our previous chapter, we contextualized McLuhan's "the medium is the message" in Internet-mediated communication, and arrived at the *social network gathered around nodes of information* as the medium/message of the Internet. Here, we turn to test out this Internet-specific interpretation of the classic adage in dialogue with the theology of revelation. One way of engaging Internet-mediated communication in dialogue with the theology of revelation is by proposing the medium/message of the Internet as social network as a new model of revelation. Recalling chapter two and Avery Dulles' approach to systematizing the theology of revelation according to a spectrum of models, the model of revelation as found in the Internet's social network generates new possibilities within Dulles' framework. Similar to the other models of revelation presented in chapter two, the medium/message model of revelation explored here offers a new analogy for investigating the dynamics of God's self-communication, one that draws from the emerging dynamics of social communication in our present cultural context. Following Dulles' example, we break down the specific theological elements of the medium/message model of revelation, followed by evaluating the possibilities of this new model as according to its merits and criticisms.

If we propose as a model of revelation the medium/message of the Internet as social network, then we are suggesting that the primary locus of God's Word, whether on or offline, is the social network of people connected through communicative bonds. When considered from a theological perspective, the medium/message model underscores the importance of the ecclesial community vis-à-vis God's revealing Word; the social network that is called together by God's Word, and that is commissioned to proclaim this same Word in and through community is the Church. As such, with medium/message of the Internet as model of revelation, we are proposing

that God communicates Godself to humankind most prominently through the communicative bonds forming the ecclesial community. These communicative bonds within the life of the Church are formed and sustained by encountering particular expressions of God's Word, as we explored in chapter three: teaching, liturgy, service, fellowship. However, as important as these seem, in the medium/message model of revelation they are nonetheless secondary to the overall sense of social network, or the sense of connection to one another as evoked and sustained by these particular expressions of God's Word, whether didactic, proclamatory, liturgical, sacramental, service or fellowship oriented. If the social network is a model of revelation, then the people gathered around the various expressions of the revelatory Word of God are the necessary supporting pillars of the sense of belonging to the social network through which God reveals Godself to us most clearly. This social network is beyond an abstract or momentary sense of community, and instead points to an active sense of belonging through being connected to, sharing and participating in the Body of Christ. Consequently, this model would locate the Word of God communicated to humankind most prominently through this active sense of belonging to the Body of Christ. The ecclesiological, sacramental, Christological and pneumatological implications of this are significant, and invite future research.

Next, if the locus of revelation is the active sense of belonging to the Body of Christ, then the significant moments of revelation are those conveying a mutual sense of presence and reinforcing one's sense of belonging to the community. Seemingly subjective, these moments are nonetheless more concrete than Dulles' mystical inner experience model of revelation, because these moments of medium/message revelation are highly interactive and participatory. These moments surface when one's participation in the community of faith becomes transcendent, compelling the individual person of faith to engage more because of a greater and

shared sense of purpose and mission. Coupled with this is a strong impression that one's presence in the community matters, that one takes an active part in contributing to community and to the realization of the community's shared purpose and mission, proclaiming the Gospel. To pinpoint exactly when one encounters the clarity and grace of such a revelatory moment is difficult and indeed remains on the subjective side. However, the most objective circumstance that can foster such moments of revelation is one's active engagement with God's revelatory Word, and full participation in the ecclesial community, whether through worship, service, teaching or fellowship. While ecclesial documents have sounded the invitation to full and active participation with renewed fervour since the Second Vatican Council, the model of revelation as medium/message of the Internet adds a new dimension to this, in terms of inviting the individual believers not only to partake in but also to contribute to the life of the ecclesial community.<sup>251</sup>

Along these same lines, the medium/message model of revelation also evokes a particular type of faith response. Akin to Dulles' new awareness model of revelation that calls forth deeper personal engagement in being co-creators cooperating with God's grace,<sup>252</sup> the medium/message model animates the person of faith more fully by participating in the life of the ecclesial community and contributing to its purpose and mission. Most simply put, if one hears the revelatory Word of God through belonging to the Body of Christ as social network, then one is compelled to continue to engage and interact in this social medium to hear more. Furthermore, in order to hear more, the network structure of this model of revelation also animates individual persons of faith to engage in the evangelizing purpose and mission of the ecclesial community, share the Good News, gain more members and widen the network. The wider the network, the

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<sup>251</sup> For invitation to full and active participation in the life of the ecclesial community, see for instance *Sacrosanctum Concilium* 14

<sup>252</sup> See Ross A. Schechterle. *The Theology of Revelation of Avery Dulles 1980-1994: Symbolic Mediation*. (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1996.)38-39.

richer the possibilities of encountering and sharing in God's revelatory Word. This socially-oriented faith response to the medium/message model of revelation can be a great asset toward re-animating all members of the Body of Christ with an enthusiastic and active desire to carry out the basic baptismal mission to evangelize.

The strongest merit of medium/message model of revelation is therefore the way it underscores the importance of believers' active and contributing participation in the life and mission of the ecclesial community. This emphasis on belonging to the social network of the Body of Christ also can energize the evangelizing mission of each baptized believer in a new way. The medium/message model thus results in a fuller sense of belonging and a greater motivation to evangelize, and the fundamental theological relevance of this merit is that it resonates with the revelation of God-in-Godself, and God's perichoretic, intra-Trinitarian life. Through its focus on social network, sharing and participation, the medium/message model of revelation communicates who God is in Godself, as this model both finds its grounding in and affirms God's relational nature as a communion of three Persons existing in a perpetual state of giving and receiving. With its emphasis on belonging to the Body of Christ as social network, and special focus on the active, contributing part each person of faith brings to the Body in order to gain a sense of being part of its identity, mission and purpose, this model of revelation points to the dynamics of the Trinity. Like the Persons of the Trinity, each member of the Body of Christ gives of oneself and receives from others a sense of fellowship while engaging in this social network, and this movement of giving and receiving animates the social Body of Christ, especially in its evangelizing mission in the world. Consequently, relationship, communion, sharing, active participation and contribution are hallmarks of this model of revelation, bearing much potential for evoking a vibrant and active faith response to God's Word.

At the same time, an important critique of the medium/message model of revelation is that it may grant believers' active participation such importance that it overlooks the radical in-breaking of grace that accompanies God's revealing Word. By no means should the full and active participation of believers suggest that the communication of God's revealing Word depends on the participation of believers, forgetting altogether that the transmission of revelation is a faith-response to God's Word, not a human initiative. God's self-communication as a moment of grace does not depend on the degree of participation of the members of the ecclesial community. Rather, God's revealing Word comes as an outpouring of grace from God's intra-Trinitarian movement of giving and receiving between the Divine Persons. Spoken fullest in the Incarnation of Christ, it is God's revealing Word that calls the faith community into being, and that articulates the Good News of salvation, which is the community's mission and purpose. Therefore it is imperative to root our belonging and participation in the Body of Christ in a fundamental moment of grace received at baptism, so as to avoid the over-emphasis on believer's participatory works at the expense of the movement of God's grace. In the medium/message model of revelation, God's grace needs intentional emphasis as the cause and the animating force of the vibrant social network communicating God's revelatory Word.

As with all other models of revelation in Dulles' systematic approach, the medium/message model of revelation is best presented in the company of the other models, so as to grant due importance to all possible avenues of God's revealing Word, which cannot be contained in or limited to just one theological construct. To this spectrum of revelatory channels, the medium/message model adds another way of thinking about God's communication of Godself to humankind, a way that stresses the importance of truly and actively belonging to the social and communal Body of Christ as a locus for hearing God's Word.

### *Medium/Message Shaping Catechesis*

In light of the generative relationship between the theology of revelation and the practice of catechesis, if we accept the theological implications suggested by the medium/message model of revelation, then these also engender a particular approach to catechesis. Whereas the theology of revelation was concerned with the locus and response to God's revelatory word, catechesis focuses on how to facilitate the faith response to God's revelation toward conversion to Jesus Christ. While the medium/message model of revelation leaves this fundamental concern of catechesis in place, the importance of belonging to the communal Body of Christ through engagement with the particular expressions of God's revelatory Word does suggest new directions for the practice and process of catechesis.

To begin with, catechesis after the medium/message model of revelation would seek to facilitate conversion through fostering a sense of belonging to the communal Body of Christ. Toward this aim, the particular expressions of God's revelatory Word in the life of the ecclesial community noted in chapter three would receive renewed emphasis as gathering points for forming communal bonds of the Body of Christ. Special focus on the didactic, liturgical, service or fellowship oriented expressions of God's Word as gathering points for the communal Body would invite new believers to appropriate the content of faith in an inherently relational-communal way.

For example, catechesis intentionally incorporates symbolic elements, such as the liturgical rites accompanying initiatory catechesis, and these present us with potential gathering points within the structure of catechesis itself. With these symbolic elements already in place, the medium/message model would heighten their significance as gathering points for Christ's

communal Body. Symbols such as the cross, the Bible, the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, and eventually the sacraments of initiation themselves could serve as the organizing principles and generative topics for instruction in the faith. Furthermore, interpreting these symbols as gathering points for the Body of Christ, catechesis after the medium/message model would strive to contextualize these symbols as not only situated within, but as providing the essential structure of this social network. In other words, the engagement of each symbol during the process of catechesis would focus especially on how a particular symbol gathers, animates, sustains and transforms the community around it.

Symbols as significant gathering points in the medium/message approach to catechesis recall Dulles' symbolic communication model explored in chapter two, and both of these models carry the potential for facilitating transformation through engagement with a symbol.<sup>253</sup> The medium/message model, however, brings the added dimension of belonging to the social network, which amplifies Dulles' notion of participatory engagement and demands not only participation but also contribution. Taking the medium/message schema even further, participatory engagement with the symbol according to our model would place greater value on a communal meaning-making, whereby those gathered around the symbol would pool their interpretations and experiences of the symbol together in order to produce meaning. If revelation takes place through the communicative bonds of the social network, then the more the community engages in sharing and dialogue around evocative symbols, the more clearly the Word gets uttered.

This communal form of symbolic meaning-making presents catechesis with both opportunities and challenges. In terms of opportunities, bringing the symbolic elements front and center and re-presenting them as gathering points of the social network of the Body of Christ

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<sup>253</sup> See again Dulles, Models of Revelation. (New York: Orbis, 1992) 136-7.

offers each believer a deeply meaningful and transformative way to engage the content of faith. Beyond fostering intellectual understanding, this approach underscores the importance of the personal and communal accessibility of these symbols as essential elements accompanying one's journey of faith. This approach empowers believers not only to understand the general meaning of a symbol but also to make this meaning one's own by sharing insights, wisdom, questions and experiences with others. In this way, the catechesis that emerges from the medium/message model of revelation is able to integrate content and relationship in such a way that a believer in the process of catechesis grasps a sense of both when engaging with a symbol.

As an example, let us consider the first step of entering into the catechumenate, the Rite of Acceptance.<sup>254</sup> Following an initial faith response and the beginning sense of conversion to Jesus Christ, believers participate in this ritual in order to declare their intention to become members of the Body of Christ. The Rite of Acceptance ritualizes the catechumens' official entry into the community as those seeking full membership, and the main symbolic elements accompanying this rite are the sign of the cross and the Gospels. Catechumens are signed with the cross on their forehead and senses, and are asked to accept the teachings of the Gospel. Additionally, they may be given a cross and a Bible of their own to accompany them on their journey of conversion. In these ways, the Rite of Acceptance invites and facilitates the catechumens' personal engagement with these fundamental symbols of the faith from the very beginning of catechesis.

Both the Bible and the cross are rich symbols to consider as social gathering points of the Body of Christ. First of all, either of these is an important foundational topic for catechetical instruction, whether the books and structure of the Bible, the development of the canon, the theological foundations of revelation and faith, or the cross as a paradoxical symbol of suffering

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<sup>254</sup> See RCIA 41-74

and triumph, death and resurrection, and the Paschal Mystery itself. However, ritual engagement with these symbols through the Rite of Acceptance contextualizes them in a particular way, and also allows for the exploration of the role each of these primary symbols play for the Christian community. Why is it that it was these two symbols that were presented at the very beginning of the catechetical process? What does this imply about the community the catechumen seeks to become a full member of? What potential do these symbols bear for facilitating conversion? Questions such as these highlight the present relevance of these symbols, liberating them from the category of historical artifacts and presenting them instead as animating elements of the life of the community of faith. Furthermore, the actual presentation of each catechumen with a cross and Bible of their own increases the formative potential of these symbols even more, as this signals an invitation for personal engagement of each new believer with these deep, powerful and ancient symbols of Christianity. During the catechetical process, historical and theological meaning, along with communal and personal significance come together around each of these symbols, generating the opportunity for profound understanding and personal transformation, especially if believers actively participate in and contribute to dialogue around these sources of meaning. In this way, catechesis is able to facilitate conversion by engaging believers on a theological, historical, communal and personal level all in one integrated process.

While this is a very significant opportunity for catechesis especially in light of our overall investigation toward a more integrated model, the medium/message approach to catechesis also brings with it its own challenges. As was the case with the critique of the medium/message model of revelation, this approach to catechesis also has to find a balance between fostering communal meaning-making and presenting the established and revealed truths that constitute the content of the faith. In other words, it becomes imperative to maintain a truly integrated

approach to catechesis that incorporates historical and theological elements but also invites the shared and collaborative exploration of their communal and personal significance in each context they are taught. For example, when it comes to engaging the symbol of the cross, our contributions and insights delving into the meaning of the Paschal Mystery may expand the spectrum of meanings this multivalent symbol holds, but not redefine in essence the communally shared theological meaning and significance of Christ's death and resurrection. Striking a balance between communally generated meaning and the established, revealed truths of the tradition will continue to engage us as a significant challenge, especially as communication and sharing of knowledge takes on more and more the participatory, collaborative structure we experience through Internet-mediated communication. Constant and core concepts of Catholic theology, such as revelation, Gospel, dogma, and tradition need to be translated anew in this participatory culture, in order for these to continue to serve as arch-pillars of the content of faith. The challenge that remains is to find the language to adequately communicate constant truths in a culture where knowledge and meaning are networked, fluid, malleable and communally authored.

The medium/message of the social network sheds new light on existing elements of both the theology of revelation and the practice of catechesis. Primarily, this medium/message model puts new emphasis on the communal aspects of both revelation and catechesis, underscoring the communicative bonds that form and sustain community as especially important. These communicative bonds exist especially among believers gathered around the particular symbolic expressions of God's revelatory Word within the life of the community: teaching, worship, service, fellowship. If the communicative bonds connecting people of faith around these symbolic expressions of the Word are the most important elements of the medium/message

approach to revelation and catechesis, then to actively engage in communication is the best avenue for the transmission of revelation and the facilitation of conversion. Such active engagement implies contributing, sharing and collaborating with others in order for meaning to emerge, while it also implies certain deference to the inherent truth a particular symbol as gathering point offers. In other words, in the medium/message model, knowledge and meaning are anchored in the symbol, but are also generated through the social network gathered to engage with these symbols in communal and collaborative ways. In this way, the medium /message model is a model of integration, bringing together the informational content of the symbol with the relational, social network gathered around it through the process of communication. While being aware of the inherent risks of over-emphasizing the communal, the medium/message model nonetheless presents us with a way to re-establish the connection between information and relationship as two inseparable and interdependent elements of the one act of communication.

In this way, the dynamics of Internet-mediated communication offer their most valuable lesson to our investigation of the communication of faith, whether we are analyzing its theological foundations in revelation or exploring its practical implementation through catechesis. This lesson is not just a valuable model for remedying the divergent tendency between information and relationship found in revelation and catechesis, but it actually demands our attention as Internet-mediated communication is generating a new way of engaging with knowledge that is at the same time shaping our thinking and culture. Whether we are seeking a more integrated model of revelation and catechesis or not, Internet-mediated communication is already shaping the overall cultural context in which we teach, worship, serve and share faith. As the emerging participatory culture engendered by Internet-mediated communication surrounds us on and offline, intentional awareness of the lessons the digital culture teaches is a

necessary part of our overall effort of communicating the faith in this cultural context. This dissertation sought to pave the way for this line of thought, while also suggesting that the investigation of Internet-mediated communication as a model for communicating faith is not only necessary but also valuable, in that it offers us an integrated model of informational content and relationship intertwined in one act of social communication.

With these theoretical foundations in place, we now turn to explore the specific ways through which catechesis can incorporate the wisdom we gleaned from our analysis of Internet-mediated communication. Motivated by the ideal of an integrated model of communicating the faith as well as by an intentional awareness of our present, increasingly digital culture, we focus on the new conceptual emphases and skills accompanying participatory culture, suggesting how these can take shape in a catechetical context.

### **Practical Implications of Participatory Culture for Catechesis**

As we explored in our first chapter, participatory culture is a collective term used to describe the social and cultural effects wrought by Internet-mediated communication, especially in its Web 2.0 form.<sup>255</sup> Sharing, collaboration, creative expression, and active participation in a communal setting are hallmarks of participatory culture, where members are not only invited to participate, but are compelled to take part in the community through a strong sense that each member's contribution matters. Our definition of the medium/message as the *social network gathered around nodes of information* also echoes the essence of participatory culture in that it is the active belonging to this social network which is of paramount importance. This active belonging is most clearly expressed through the communicative bonds that connect people and

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<sup>255</sup> See again Jenkins et. al. Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009), as well as in Chapter I, 29-32.

gather them around their shared centers of interest. In order to explore the practical implications participatory culture yields for catechesis, we now turn to imagine the specific concepts and skills this culture emphasizes in a catechetical setting.

### *Foundational Concepts to Retrieve and Re-imagine*

In an effort to acknowledge the importance of participatory culture, the most straightforward route catechesis can take is to create an online presence for the members of its community through social networking, podcasting and blogging and other Web 2.0 tools. However, to jump directly into this medium without thinking through the conceptual foundations is both an unhelpful shortcut and yields a limited perspective. Instead, for catechesis to truly embrace participatory culture, it needs to create occasions on and offline that embody the culture's ethos. Online presence can certainly be an important part of this effort, but participatory culture can also emerge face-to-face, and in conjunction with online presence and interaction. We envision in the broadest sense how catechesis can embody participatory culture in order to facilitate conversion to Jesus Christ, focusing on what are the best foundational concepts for catechesis to retrieve and imagine anew in service of its goal in this cultural context. Two such foundational concepts with rich implications for catechesis in our present cultural context are the communal Body of Christ and the essential ecclesial and baptismal mission to evangelize.

### *Community: Belonging to the Body of Christ*

Participatory culture places much emphasis on the networked affiliations of the members of the community, and any occasion catechesis provides to foster this communal sense of active belonging embodies this aspect. One already-established way to emphasize communal belonging

in a catechetical setting is by intentionally defining the community as Body of Christ, and by actively retrieving and engaging with this theological concept. Body of Christ is a rich and symbolic image, bearing meaning that is at once communal, sacramental, ecclesial, Christological and eschatological, all the while pointing to the Paschal Mystery at the heart of Christian identity and mission. If we retrieve Body of Christ as a way to express membership in the community, this grants catechesis a particular aim, whereby facilitating conversion to Jesus Christ becomes facilitating conversion to Jesus Christ as encountered in the Body of Christ. Catechesis will continue to form the mind and heart of the individual believer, but will also aim to do so by locating the conversion process in a communal setting and toward a communal aim of full membership in the Body of Christ. The liturgical rites accompanying catechesis, along with occasions for service and fellowship all support this aim. The retrieval of the Body of Christ as orienting principle of catechesis also reanimates our understanding of baptismal identity, vocation and mission, encouraging and empowering each baptized member of the Body of Christ to truly own and embrace their membership in the community. Furthermore, emphasizing the baptismal identity that locates one within the Body of Christ can bring the social structure of the Church closer to the networked understanding of society as characteristic of participatory culture. This has significant implications for ecclesiology, as well as pastoral theology and for the various ministries exercised in the Church.

Some particular ways to embody affiliation as contextualized in the communal Body of Christ include creating occasions for the social network of the faith community to widen. In the context of catechesis for those participating in RCIA, the pastoral staff, along with sponsors, mentors, godparents, catechists, and liturgists provide the initial social network for the believer seeking full membership in the community, and consequently, the accessibility, approachability

and commitment of these ministers and volunteers is crucial. In addition, catechesis should gradually foster occasions for fellowship with the greater community, especially in contexts where the catechumens can actively engage and contribute something. Service opportunities with the greater community are one great example for this. Another is establishing a sense of presence on the community's website or the regular bulletin, especially if the website or bulletin makes room for social announcements or has a discussion board. All in all, retrieving the communal Body of Christ as a foundational symbol for catechesis in our participatory culture strengthens the sense of belonging to a greater community and having an important, unique and creative role in it. As such, catechesis should take every step to foster social bonds, create a space where relationships develop, and make new believers feel at home in the Body of Christ.

### *Many Parts, One Body*

Belonging to the communal Body of Christ carries within it a sense of many parts working together.<sup>256</sup> If we retrieve this image as foundational for catechesis in our participatory culture, then Internet-mediated communication's characteristically collaborative meaning-making and problem-solving receives new light here, resonating deeply with this biblical image of cooperation and collaboration. For catechesis this emphasis on collaboration suggests a new direction in terms of creating a more egalitarian learning environment, where all persons gathered have a unique voice in processing and making meaning around the experience of conversion.

While in the learning context the specific roles of the catechist and the catechumen are different, all persons of faith remain in the process of spiritual development and conversion, and have this journey to share. The catechumen is preparing to formalize (but not finish) her

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<sup>256</sup> See Romans 12:4-5, 1 Corinthians 12:12-31

conversion through entry into the community, and the catechist continues on his spiritual journey daily by turning away from sin and conforming to Jesus Christ. The catechist may have more knowledge, understanding and experience of the content of the faith, but he still hears Christ's same call to conversion as the catechumen. Emphasizing the call to conversion as an equalizer among all of those gathered for catechesis allows for a more collaborative space to develop. In this collaborative space, faith is not a specialized subject, but rather a way to make meaning out of life, and as such, all persons of faith have a valid and insightful contribution to make when discussing it, regardless of training. At the same time, those with training are essential guides to steer the group to where meaning can develop, bringing the wisdom and teaching of the tradition in dialogue with the faith-journey of each person.

In practice, we can enhance this sense of communal, collaborative meaning-making by simply sharing the podium. Inviting the input of all can be a group conversation, or it can offer a challenge to each catechumen to take ownership of a topic and work in collaboration with a sponsor or catechist to lead the discussion on it. This second way demands more, but it also empowers the catechumen and teaches her rightful access to the content of faith, while also building the foundations for the catechumen's future baptismal vocation to share in the evangelizing mission of the Church. Again, a sense of collaboration among parts of the communal Body may take place on or offline within the life of the church, but as we saw in chapter four, the online medium can offer a safer and more accessible place to try out new ideas and venture comments and insights. A blog or discussion forum for catechesis may therefore be especially appropriate to enable this sense of collaboration.

### *Fostering the Mission to Evangelize*

Belonging to the Body of Christ and working collaboratively with its many parts brings us to consider what the many parts of the Body are working together for. The essential mission of the Church and all of its baptized members is to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ through word and deed. As such, the Body and its individual parts are working together to make present the Good News of salvation in our world. Retrieving the image of the Body as foundational for catechesis in our participatory culture places due emphasis on each believers call to evangelize and lend his or her voice to the flow of information around us, imbuing it with the Gospel message.

In the context of catechesis, fostering the mission to evangelize first invites us to think about how to facilitate the voice and contribution of believers to become an increasing part of the many languages of the life of the community of faith that speak God's Word. This is also a task of retrieval and renewed emphasis, finding occasions for public witness already part of the catechetical process. For example, the liturgical witness the catechumens provide for the greater community, especially during regular Sunday worship at the dismissal to engage the proclaimed Word, the Rites of Acceptance and Sending, the three scrutinies, and finally the Rites of Initiation at the Easter Vigil are all key moments when the community encounters the voice and witness of each person moved by Christ to seek membership in the community. These liturgical moments therefore cannot be neglected as they are moments when the community encounters the public witness of people turning their minds and hearts to Jesus Christ, and thus they are profound moments of faith response to God's revealed Word. These moments speak and respond to God's Word, and are meaningful not only for the catechumens but also for the community as a whole, which they serve to animate and enrich. Through their public witness of

conversion, the catechumens contribute to the flow of the Word resounding through the gathered Body of Christ.

Another way to think about preparing the voice of new believers for their evangelizing mission is to increase the social presence of the catechists and catechumens for each other with the help of Internet-mediated communication. Often, catechesis takes place for an hour a week, which may or may not include the Sunday dismissal to engage with the proclaimed Word. To create an online space where the group could check in throughout the week to address the current topic or Scripture readings, share insights, resources, prayer requests and to engage in conversation can significantly increase the sense of belonging to a community and impact the process of conversion in a positive way. Furthermore, as all could be granted equal voice and access, this safe online space can reinforce the sense of belonging and collaboration essential to the communal Body of Christ. Catechumens would be encouraged to contribute, comment on and create content on this page, increasing their overall sense of having a meaningful impact and belonging to the community, and preparing them to be an evangelizing presence in the world.

### *Proclaiming the Good News*

In addition to creating and supporting the venues for collaboration and public witness within the Body of Christ, the task of catechesis in our participatory culture also concerns nurturing the creativity and original contribution of the members of the community to develop their authentic evangelizing voice. In other words, catechesis forms believers in what to proclaim, and how to go about doing so in a culture open to their voice and participation. The most direct way to prepare believers for the content and manner of proclaiming the Good News in our participatory culture is during catechetical instruction, and this can be accomplished both

face-to-face and through Internet-mediated communication. Beyond the absorption and reiteration of established content, catechetical instruction suited for a participatory culture invites creative expression and a measure of originality in response to and incorporating the Gospel message. Creative expression and original contribution engaging with the content of the tradition through any catechetical activity that evokes such participation is on target, as long as such creative expression dialogues with the established content and tradition. In this, catechesis instructs believers about the content of faith, but also invites them to make this content their own.

One approach to foster creative expression in catechesis is to incorporate art, film, music and literature into the presentation of the Gospel or concepts of the content of faith. Christian art as a whole demonstrates creative expression in response to the Gospel. We can incorporate art into the catechetical process by inviting catechumens to bring such relevant examples to share, or by engaging with one such example together and inviting the critical and creative response of the participants. Making art together in response to the Gospel is also a viable option, though this may intimidate and hinder some from participating. A more inclusive approach that engages the imagination in a similar way is found in prayer practices, especially those inviting participants to prayerfully imagine themselves in the context of a specific Gospel story, and then share their experience with each other afterward. All of these ways encourage and evoke the creative contribution of participants and can be contextualized on or offline.

In addition to these, the online environment presents its own particular opportunities for creative expression. The Internet is both a resource pool for finding examples and engaging with Christian art, and a communication platform for creating something of one's own in the style of fanfiction or through multimedia sites such as You Tube. Something as simple as a slideshow set to music is already creative expression. In addition, the online environment as a public social

communication space reinforces the connection between creative expression and nurturing the evangelizing voice, since one's original contributions are easily set before an audience to invite feedback and responses, whether through social networking, blogging, YouTube, or a specific online meeting space just for catechesis.

Retrieving the image of the Body of Christ and re-emphasizing the essential baptismal and ecclesial mission to evangelize both have much potential for shaping catechesis that takes seriously the impact of Internet-mediated communication as participatory culture. The practical expressions resulting from the renewed emphasis on these concepts can vary according to resources, staff, context, setting and willingness of all to be open to change. Whether a community starts an online discussion forum or just decides to have more conversations face-to-face, the core ideas of participatory culture can impact the practice of catechesis and yield a more communal process that is at the same time deeply involved with engaging the content of the faith.

To help retrieve these foundational concepts for participatory culture, there are also a variety of particular skills that catechesis as a learning setting can choose to foster, in order to better prepare believers for their life and role of Christians called to proclaim the Gospel in their own cultural and social context. In this final section of the dissertation, we briefly consider these as necessary media literacy skills, benefitting all who seek to navigate out increasingly digital culture, especially with the goal and purpose of evangelization.

### ***Engaging New Skills***

Although catechesis as a process to facilitate conversion most often leads believers to the sacraments of initiation, it also has a long-term vision of seeking to enrich the faith community,

and of preparing neophytes to assume their new identity as Christians in an active and participatory way. Baptismal identity is coupled with the mission to evangelize, as each member of the Body of Christ is called to share the Good News of Jesus Christ in his or her own way and context. Therefore, responsible catechesis not only gets people to the baptismal font, but also prepares them to rise anew in Christ embracing this mandate to evangelize. In order to prepare people to be an evangelizing presence in our world, it is imperative to be aware of the direction and dynamics of our cultural context, especially in terms of communication. We recall from chapter one that as evangelization is concerned with communicating the faith, the evolution in social communication and emerging new media are especially relevant for this primary mission. Therefore, responsible catechesis is also acutely aware of this cultural context in which new Christians are called to be an evangelizing presence, and it models and fosters the skills that allow for fullest participation in the flow of the social communications media of our time. Overall, these are skills which enable people to express, create, access, share, analyze and evaluate information most clearly and successfully in our participatory culture, and for the greatest benefit of communicating with others. As a whole, they can be grouped into three categories, in terms of accessing, processing and sharing information.

### *Accessing Information*

Accessing information in our digital culture is a paradoxical experience that is at once exceedingly convenient but also incredibly challenging. On the one hand, all is at our fingertips, but on the other hand, finding relevant information depends on our browser, coupled with our discerning eye combing over website after website of content in additional research. To establish true access to all the information at our fingertips, we need to be able to sift through,

narrow down and evaluate lots of possible sources at once, while developing our ability to get the best out of tools and gadgets which perform the necessary task of retrieving what we need from the immensity of information online.

In the context of catechesis, the skill to be able to find and evaluate relevant information is especially important to foster if we hope to empower believers to be able to access the wealth of online resources that can enrich faith and spirituality, as well as keeping people of faith connected in a global sense. Providing new believers with the skills to be able to find reliable and trustworthy information online, along with more in-depth resources to develop their knowledge helps them refine their understanding of what falls within Catholic teaching and tradition, and what does not. It also helps one evaluate and dialogue with new and personally produced information more efficiently, as all of us will inevitably encounter more and more of this in our participatory culture. Therefore, catechesis should introduce and model the use of a few fundamental online resources to new believers, such as the Bible, the Catechism, Church documents, diocesan and parish website, and then add others to these such as blogs or platforms that inform and enrich us with spiritual resources.

### *Processing Information*

Once we have found relevant information online, we engage with its content to increase our understanding and to make meaning. Because of the context of participatory culture and the availability of Web 2.0 tools, this engagement is less passive reception and more active contribution. As a result we process information posting it on our profile or blogging about it to invite the response of others, or we immerse ourselves in it to try it on as it happens in fanfiction, 3D virtual environments, or even while constructing our social network profile. Processing

information in participatory culture is therefore more hands-on, experimental, playful and communal in that the input and feedback of others is a significant part of the process.

For catechesis, fostering these skills to process information may take place on or offline. Although catechesis exists in a culturally unique context in which there are foundational, revealed and absolute truths, inviting learners to engage these in a hands-on, fluid, active, experimental and experiential way may be more effective than just telling catechumens to simply accept and believe them. Instead, these skills of processing information encourage learners to make such truths their own, in lieu of holding them at arm's length as externally imposed tenets of the faith. Christian art, music, literature, and cinema have set worthy precedents for such an approach to processing information and should be used in catechesis to model and encourage such hands-on meaning making. Creative expressions, role-play, Ignatian meditation or other adult-appropriate interpretations of godly play may round this out, and the online medium can serve as an especially safe and flexible space for this sort of engagement with content. In terms of preparing catechumens for their own post-baptismal evangelizing mission, this approach also demonstrates a more effective way for them to share God's Word with others that is open, dialogical, inviting and engaging in a diverse culture that is generally suspicious of absolute truths and meta-narratives.

### *Sharing Information*

Perhaps most relevant for evangelization are participatory culture's set of skills centered on sharing information. In our participatory culture, accessing and processing information are inevitably joined with producing and sharing it, as our social context and media is increasingly less hierarchical and more networked. When we share information, we are most aware of our

communal context, as we produce and forward information that we have received from, collaborated in creation with, and ultimately intend for others. So essential is this communal flow of information for the online medium and participatory culture that to decline to be part of it implies living outside of the network altogether, as blocking the input and collaboration of others and hindering the flow of information in a social network structure is nonsensical. The network exists as the sharing and communication of information exists.

Through the communicative bonds established by the Internet we encounter and are shaped by the perspectives of others, and often this perspective presents us with difference. Encountering difference is a gift, as this creates the opportunity for dialogue, mutual growth, and exchange of new perspectives while refining one's established understanding. Very often, catechesis itself is an encounter with difference, where the new believer may be coming from an entirely other cultural and religious context. Furthermore, our cultural milieu assumes that these religious differences will continue to coexist on the horizon alongside the Catholic community of faith in which the believer is seeking membership. For this reason, it is important for catechesis to create a network-like environment for sharing information, in which each person learns to navigate these different perspectives and is able to locate and articulate his religious identity in the midst of these.

For catechesis, this implies avoiding any approach that is insular or closed to our greater and diverse cultural context, because this does not serve believers who are already trying to negotiate these differences and who by their baptism will be called to share the Good News in a diverse, networked world. In practice, this requires modeling dialogue and engagement in cultural comparison, but this needs to be in appropriate balance with due focus on our own content of faith, as dialogue and comparison can best emerge if one is clear on one's own

positions. Furthermore, this encounter with difference does not have to be interreligious or interfaith: different vocations, spiritualities, ministries and service contexts make Catholicism itself diverse, and giving voice to some of these can illustrate and underscore a networked understanding of community. For example, a Benedictine monk, a Catholic Worker representative, an Opus Dei member, Jesuit Volunteers, the Knights of Columbus and Maryknoll Missionaries all bring a different Catholic voice to the table, and accessing these voices helps catechesis depict the communal Body of Christ as a network of these variety of expressions of faith. Exploring the question of how all of these examples can be Catholic together is a great way of demonstrating the possibilities of sharing one's faith in a diverse culture. Using the Internet can especially be helpful for accessing these varied perspectives within and surrounding Catholicism, as well as for discovering concrete examples of sharing one's faith identity in a public way.

As with the retrieval of foundational concepts, these skills of accessing, processing and sharing information may be exercised and fostered on or offline, but over all, they help to firmly locate us within our cultural milieu, and enable us to effectively navigate the social networks of which we are a part. These concepts and skills also naturally reinforce the integration of informational content and relational bonds within the context of catechesis, as they all essentially deal with the communicative bonds that sustain the social network around particular bits of content. In other words, retrieving foundational concepts and fostering these skills are not only ways to keep up with the times, but are also helpful for bringing the content of faith ever closer to the community of believers gathered around it.

## **In Conclusion**

This dissertation sought to lend a voice to the ongoing dialogue between faith and culture, and more specifically, between the Church's fundamental mission to share the Gospel through evangelization, and our digital cultural milieu as propelled by Internet-mediated communication. When analyzing this dialogue in terms of its constitutive elements, communicating the faith in and through our digital culture involved a necessary look at the theology behind communicating the faith, an examination of the pastoral and practical process of expressing this theology, and a thorough exploration of our cultural context. To establish the relevance of our question, in our first chapter we described the increasing socio-cultural relevance of Internet-mediated communication, alongside the Church's clearly expressed intention to take this social communications medium seriously, as articulated by a series of ecclesial documents. Moving on to the constitutive elements of this question, we explored the theology of revelation in chapter two, catechesis as its practical expression in chapter three, and the dynamics of Internet-mediated communication in chapter four. In our analysis we found that revelation, catechesis and Internet-mediated communication share in common a particular dynamic of communication where *what* gets communicated is informational content imbued with an essential sense of personal, relational presence. While revelation and catechesis have experimented with this dynamic and have laid emphasis on the informational and the personal elements in different ways, Internet-mediated communication integrates these elements and holds them together in a necessary symbiosis. This integrated model has wisdom for revelation and catechesis, and as a result, we spent our present and final chapter analyzing and testing out the potential wisdom of Internet-mediated communication holds for revelation and especially

catechesis, imagining a new model for revelation and exploring new approaches to catechesis all in the context of our participatory culture fueled by Internet-mediated communication.

True to our cultural milieu, this dissertation is not a final word, but rather an exploration of the moment where our evangelizing faith intersects our present social context. Instead of suggesting radical revisions, it invites revelation and catechesis to dialogue with digital culture by retrieving and re-emphasizing some of its established components in new ways, so that the Word of God may continue to resound as clearly as possible through the new and emerging ways people are connecting, communicating and forming community. As our culture may quickly change, our specific points and examples could become obsolete. At the same time, our overall effort of immersing ourselves in the study of this present moment where faith and culture intersect is bound to stand the test of time, and models the benefit of this dialogical approach, no matter what new cultural twists and turns lay ahead.

God continues to communicate Godself, offering this revelation most fully through the Gospel of his Son Jesus Christ. As members of Christ's Body, the Gospel is therefore ours to proclaim and disseminate with both shrewdness and wisdom regarding those who hear it. The hearers of God's Word today blog, post, "like," tweet and podcast, and increasingly, they also text and play with apps to communicate while on the move. As sharers of the Good News we need to keep up with this flow, and proclaim Christ through word and deed in a language which best expresses His Word in and to our participatory culture.

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