

The Internet is not just a handy tool for reaching out to prospective members. If we are to understand, evangelize and invite younger generations, we must grasp how the digital age is shaping the whole culture.

Reframing religious presence in a digital culture

BY SISTER ANGELA ANN ZUKOWSKI, MSHH

CASTING THE NET IS A TIMELY THEME for this convocation of the National Religious Vocation Conference (NRVC). The digital age creates new opportunities to virtually cast the net, for religious communities to position themselves within what Pope Benedict XVI calls an “expanding digital civilization.” The virtual landscape is an escalating new frontier for communication. It is fluid, dynamic and growing every minute, every nanosecond. Spending time with you to explore a few specific dimensions of the virtual landscape is an overwhelming challenge. The Internet is a dynamic culture. It is changing as I am speaking with you. Each and every technological advancement is estimated to have a short life span because once unleashed, a new application or technology is already being designed

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Photo: Brother John O'Hara, SA

In her 2010 address to the National Religious Vocation Conference Sister Angela Zukowski, MSHH emphasized the seismic cultural shift that digital communication is creating around the world.

to replace it. The idea of waiting until the innovations settle down in order to discern which technology, application or program an individual, or a community should embrace is out of the question. The time is now. No matter where one is in developing a media and social networking plan of action, waiting is not the solution!

The Vatican document *Aetatis Novae* (1992) initiated a new perspective for contemplating the role of media, or new communications technologies at the service of dialogue and ministry within both the church and the world. The document states:

The Church therefore must maintain an active,

listening presence in relation to the world—a kind of presence which both nurtures community and supports people in seeking acceptable solutions to personal and social problems. Moreover, as the Church always must communicate its message in a manner suited to each age and to the cultures of particular nations and peoples, so today it must communicate in and to the media culture.¹

The Pontifical Council for Social Communications consciously selected the phrase “an active, listening presence in relation to the world” to define the stance those in ministry and church leadership need to assume for proclaiming the Good News. We are to be prophetic witnesses to the Good News by weaving our presence into every aspect of the new media culture. We are encouraged to embrace this new reality as a culture. It is more than a tool, a technique, or a pathway but, rather, a *culture*. As a culture, it reflects a creed (belief), code (ethics/behavior), cult (rituals) and a sense of community (belonging/presence). This perspective makes all the difference when we, as religious communities discern our engagement, or plan of action within its borders. It is within this spirit, I plan to focus our attention today.

Our iceberg is melting

Some of you may be familiar with John Kotter’s fable entitled *Our Iceberg is Melting*,² about a penguin colony in Antarctica. A group of emperor penguins live as they have for many years. Then one curious bird discovers a potentially devastating problem threatening their home—and no one listens. As far back as they could remember, these penguins had a comfortable home on their iceberg.

The story unfolds as Fred attempts to convince the others of their situation. There are a few who cannot accept the reality of Fred’s message. Others are not so sure but definitely do not want to panic their community. There were those who thought they should simply be silent and maybe the perceived reality would disappear. The story unfolds with drama, doubt, fear and finally a decision that they need to discover a solution. After much deliberation they face their reality and embark on a solution that calls for courage: to plunge into unfamiliar and dangerous waters without the surety of a well-defined compass. They even may be eaten by sea lions eagerly waiting to devour them. Once their new iceberg home is discovered they realize there is “no perfect iceberg.” In order to survive, they need to be always ready to change, to adapt.

We, like the penguin colony, discover ourselves within a media cultural shift. A few of us may be experiencing the so called Rip Van Winkle Syndrome: that is, one day we awoke, and the world of communications had radically changed. The familiar tools, skills and even language that were so carefully crafted in our formation years to support us in our ministry, service and life in community had been altered. Several may still remember particular communication tools, or applications that were revolutionary in our own time: from manual to electric typewriters; from erasers to correction fluid; from mimeographs and stencils to copy machines; from electric typewriters to word processors.

Oh, and remember rotary dial-up phones and party lines? Why are we so concerned about social networking today? We had our own form of social networking way back then!

Rapid adaptation to new technology

Technology is not only changing—it’s doing so at quantum speed. It took radio over 35 years before its audience reached 50 million users; cable TV about 13 years; Facebook three years; and YouTube three months! Yes, one day we awoke, and the dawning of a new digital era created a new landscape within which cultures were redefining the meaning of borders, contexts, relationships and even “what it means to be human.”

A new culture with an evolving new language, psychology and techniques embraces us. There are a number here who may feel quite comfortable with the new digital era. Marc Prensky coined the generation that is right at home with the new culture as “digital natives.” Those who continue to find the new digital terrain unfamiliar and uncomfortable he identified as “digital immigrants.”

As I look around this audience, I see both digital natives and immigrants. We members of religious communities do not stand alone but in community to make the difference. We need to use the wisdom and perspective of our years in dialogue with the entrepreneurial spirit of the present age.

In the seminal book: *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1990) argued that people are happiest when they can reach a state of “flow.” If we consider what it means to be “in flow” in an information landscape defined by social networking media, we come to appreciate that Web 2.0 has led us into “the flow,” a channel for being tuned in, attentive to where the information is, which is everywhere. The swelling media landscape is capturing the attention of younger generations with a sense of

their being “in the flow” of information—the urgency of being connected all the time!

Sower and the seed go digital

The parable of the sower and the seed, from Matthew, chapter 14, is a perfect metaphor for ministry within a digital culture. Imagine interpreting the significance of the parable within the context of the digital landscape. How would the parable read? Can you sense sowing the Word throughout the digital landscape of Facebook, Twitter, Blogs, Texting, YouTube, Chat Rooms, etc? This is our ministry and challenge as we stand on the threshold of the 21st century. It is as simple as the parable of the sower and the seed in a digital era.

The new global digital cultural context is shifting how we understand everything around us, not only how and where we resource information, but even more how we think, live and interact with one another, thus influencing a new way of being human in the 21st century. If the point still is not clear, recall science fiction films, such as *Star Wars*, *The Matrix* and more. Stephen Spielberg, George Lucas and a host of others are teasing the ethical and moral dimensions of technology and humanity into what appear inconceivable realities. Yet, in truth, they are predicting a future that demands our full attention for moral critical reflection, meaning and impact.

Lightening fast rate of change

With or without us the new digital era is informing, forming and transforming us with alarming speed. In the mid-90s a collaborative effort of the Archdiocese of Port of Spain (Trinidad & Tobago, West Indies) and the Institute for Pastoral Initiatives (University of Dayton) began the Caribbean School for Catholic Communications. Our primary media tools were an overhead projector, VCR and radio programming equipment (alongside a blackboard, chalk and eraser!). As the years unfolded we added new communications technologies as we observed them becoming accessible to our students within their specific cultural contexts across the Caribbean Islands. Seven years ago we intended to introduce the Internet, Web design, etc. While most students were interested, they found the workshops impractical, due to low access to these tools and applications.

Change comes quickly! Over the past four years our students now arrive fully prepared with personal digital cameras, iPads, cell phones, laptops, a vast array of applications and more. Each one carries a complete

production center in his or her backpack. The Caribbean digital natives had arrived! They are the ones sharing insights on the most recent electronics and applications to support their productions and ministry experiences. We, the instructors, are trying to keep up with them!

Alvin Toffler, in his book *Future Shock* and later in *The Third Wave*, chronicled his view of how technology has changed society. He depicted change as coming in waves. Each succeeding wave marks the introduction of a technological change that transforms the world and the way humans understand themselves, not only in relationship to their immediate context but within the world context. Everything shifts. What we are discovering is that so-called second or third world

countries are leapfrogging ahead of some Western cultures when technology is introduced into their culture. It basically means that they enter into the digital age with the newest (up-to-date) technologies and not by using outdated items—an approach we tend to use in cash-strapped circumstances in the West (such as in our Catholic schools and

parishes). I continue to observe this flourishing reality when I am in Asia, Africa, Oceania and the Caribbean. The digital age vibrates through every fiber of these diverse cultural contexts in one way or another, and the digital reality is picking up momentum and speed.

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Catholic perspective and mandate

In June 2010 Archbishop Claudio Maria Celli, President of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications, addressed the Catholic Media Convention in New Orleans with the following words:

When I reflect on the theme of the new media at the service of the Gospel, I am always reminded of the Gospel exhortation that “new wine needs new wineskins” (Luke 5:38). For all of us who grew up with old media and old patterns of media

consumption, it can be a challenge to appreciate the radical newness of the emerging digital culture. It requires us to change our way of thinking and working. The phenomenon of convergence, the fact that the traditional distinctions between print media, radio and television are fading and the synergies are increasing, requires new forms of cooperation.³

Cardinal Donald Wuerl's 2010 pastoral letter on the new evangelization encourages a robust disposition for employing the new social communications within our ministries and service to the church:

What steps are religious communities embracing to project a robust presence into cyberspace—one that makes a profound statement of the beauty, value and meaning of religious life?

How we communicate must gain access to hearts in a way that the Holy Spirit can reacquaint our sisters and brothers to friendship with Jesus, who alone is the key, the center and the purpose of all human history.... We need to ensure the widest diffusion of our message by means

that reflect the current state of social communications. The development of a more engaging Web site that is designed to help Catholics deepen their relationship with Christ...the goal is to use the new media to invite, engage and to teach.⁴

Pope John Paul II's last writing, entitled *Rapid Development*, (2005) focused our attention on the gift, breadth and depth of communications media for addressing the needs of the church and the world:

In the communications media the Church finds a precious aid for spreading the Gospel and religious values, for promoting dialogue, ecumenical and inter-religious cooperation, and also for defending those solid principles which are indispensable for building a society which respects the dignity of the human person and is attentive to the common good. The church willingly employs these media to furnish information about itself and to expand the boundaries of evangelization, of catechesis and of formation, considering their use as a response to the command of the Lord: "Go into

the whole world and proclaim the Gospel to every creature" (Mark 16:15).⁵

Finally, Pope Benedict XVI encourages the church to embrace the gifts and perspectives young people bring for fostering the church's presence in the digital civilization:

Young people in particular, have grasped the enormous capacity of the new media to foster connectedness, communication and understanding between individuals and communities, and they are turning to them as means of communication with existing friends, of meeting new friends, of forming communities and networks of seeking information and news, and of sharing their ideas and opinions.⁶

Key words and ideas are prominent in these statements and demand our consideration as we contemplate our digital mission: "new wine needs new wine skins," radical newness, and phenomenon of convergence, new forms of cooperation, engagement, precious aid, communication and understanding. Do we have the sagacity to accept this reality as a gift evoking a call, or does it seem more like a threat provoking fear?

Where are we as religious communities of women and men in the digital age? What difference is our engagement with digital resources having on our sense of community, our presence to one another, our outreach to those in need, the awakening of the searching soul to discover God in wintry seasons of the heart? What collaborative, or joint-cooperative steps are religious communities embracing to project a robust presence into cyberspace—one that makes a profound statement of the beauty, value and meaning of religious life in the 21st century?

In an article in a recent *Review for Religious* entitled "Koinonia in a Digital Age,"⁷ Daniel P. Horan offers us an appealing perspective contrasting koinonia in the early church with the modern times. He sees that Christianity in the early church was unified through four aspects of koinonia that contributed to unity and diversity within the church. Fellowship existed among persons, strengthened by writings, complimentary material resources and resilient convictions of a community of faith. There existed a strong sense of *communio* among the faithful that was reflected in their presence and communication. Horan projects the early aspects of koinonia toward our present digital reality. Today people are discovering expressions of koinonia in social networking, texting, blogging, twittering—supported by digital resources available through iGoogle, Web sites, Skype

and other applications. Faith communities find form on discussion boards, chat rooms, e-mail, Facebook, etc. These are contemporary means for contributing to the unity and diversity of the church in a digital age.

Wanted: cyber-missionaries

We are living in virtual pioneering times calling for cyber disciples and missionaries. How do we prepare ourselves, our communities and those in formation for these new callings? What are we willing, or required to invest of our personnel, time and resources to ensure that we are adequately equipped to perform the tasks of our new digital mission?

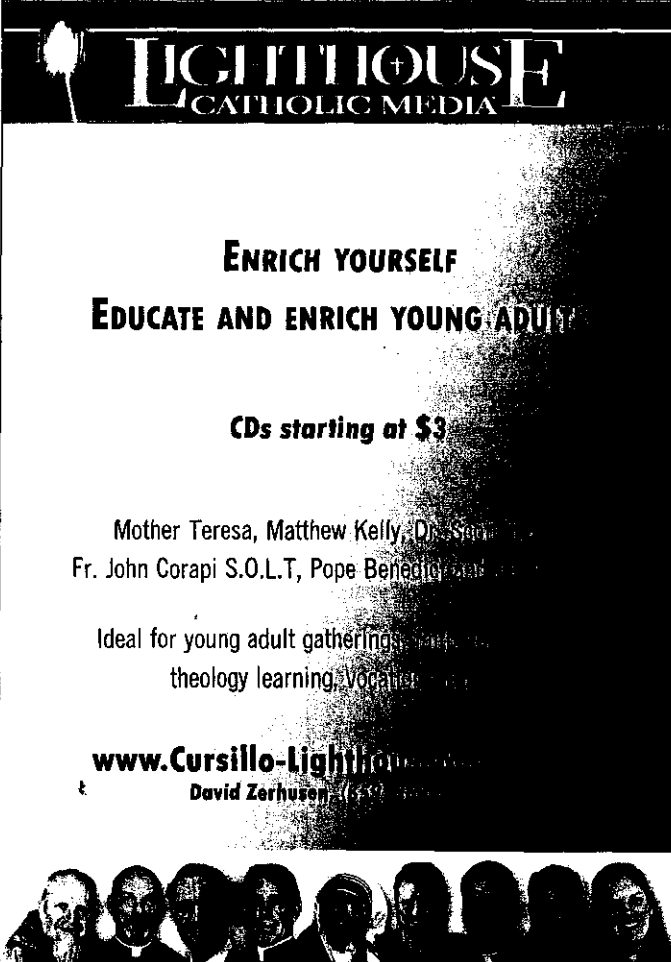
The Pontifical Council for Social Communications has stated: "As a new culture (digital culture), the church needs to position herself within this culture and develop an Internet presence."⁸ If you want to understand a culture, you have to enter into the culture. You have to observe and listen to the dynamics evolving within the culture, even if you feel uncomfortable with the experience. What clues present themselves to your community in order to understand how you or the community is to create your own quality presence within the digital cultural context?

Our response is not simply about engaging in Facebook, Twitter, texting, etc. because everyone else is doing it. (Remember these particular aspects of digital culture will soon disappear. Their replacements are coming off the design boards as you read these words!)

What is essential is to comprehend the digital cultural clues that are holding the attention of the digital natives and immigrants. We need to grasp the language, psychology and techniques of the culture, not as a luxury or a trend, but as a necessity if our presence is to have meaning and impact. Each one of us internalizes the cultures of which we are a part. We carry this forward into our spirituality and ministry experiences. Cultures exist as we bring them into being moment by moment.⁹ This is happening in cyberspace! This new digital civilization is resilient to the digital shifts. Individually we may not feel capable, interested or confident for fitting into this new digital place. However, we can invite, commission and support those who are informed, skilled and enthused to become our digital designers, partners and ambassadors within the digital civilization.

The shadow side of the new culture

There is another dimension of the digital culture we cannot



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ignore. One of my undergraduate students clearly identified it in her term paper entitled: "Immersed in a Culture of Distraction." Her reflections centered on the constant demand of being connected all the time, multitasking through a diversity of applications while lacking the courage to be attentive to the creativity and potential of silence. There was a time when a screen meant something in your living room, but now it is in your pocket, so it goes everywhere you go. It is vibrating, buzzing, demanding our attention. A *New York Times* article reported that the average computer user checks 40 Web sites a day and can switch programs 36 times an hour. My student's question was: Is there an alternative to this demanding presence? She discovered in the writings of philosopher Paul Tillich the difference between loneliness and solitude. He stated that the word loneliness exists to express "the pain of being alone," while solitude expresses

“the glory of being alone.” My student felt that the pressure to be 24/7 digitally available was creating a “loss of self.” “Who am I when I am not connected? Am I held hostage to the immediacy of each digital moment? Who really are my ‘friends’? What constitutes authentic friendship? Is it the number of friends or the quality of friends that matters in my life? How can I be free?”

I teach a college honors course entitled: Vocation and the Arts. The highlight of the course is a 15-day pilgrimage to Italy to immerse ourselves in aesthetic, spiritual and theological experiences of creativity, beauty and wonder. On one trip, during the second evening of theological reflection a student said: “I can’t believe I can actually live without being connected 24/7 on Facebook! I am experiencing a kind of freedom that is releasing me to embark on a new way of

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seeing and being present to our pilgrimage. I find myself undergoing a new encounter with time! I wake up with anticipation for a new discovery in the coming day! I look forward to simply being in conversation, or silent with one another.” That student’s reflection resonated with others as one student after another strove to articulate his or her experience of freedom.

I share these stories only to confirm that our engagement with the digital world is not an either/or but a both/and. While we need to cultivate a robust cyber presence, we can also create experiences in cyberspace that can encourage and lead to the value for solitude and disconnectedness in order to be more fully in communion with God and one another. Nurturing a balance in the lives of our community members, particularly those in formation, is essential if religious communities are to be a prophetic witness in the digital age.

As the global reality unfolds, weaving new tapestries of understanding humanity and religious beliefs, we also discover the rising dilemmas of paradoxes and challenges to the Gospel. A clue may rest in the message of Pope Paul VI’s encyclical *Evangelii Nuntiandi*. It calls us to re-discover the

“hidden energy of the Good News” within the challenge of the evolving global, cyber-missionary space. This statement encourages religious communities to take on a mission to project a robust and vibrant presence within this new “place.”

A prophetic voice from the past

This challenge of embracing new technology is not entirely new. If you are not familiar with the name, Pierre Babin, OMI, I would like to briefly introduce you to him. In addition to co-authoring a book with me (*The Gospel in Cyberspace: Nurturing Faith in the Internet Age*), he was a prophetic leader, sensing that a new approach for stimulating the religious imagination of young people was required if they were to have a profound encounter with Jesus Christ. The traditional catechism approach no longer attracted the youth. The audio-visual era had dawned and offered expansive new methodologies for sparking interest, imagination and commitment to Jesus. In the 60’s, he began paving the way for the conversation we are having today. Babin’s research and praxis with typical uses of audiovisuals back then—that of sprinkling a few slides, video cassettes and songs into existing forms of religious education—led him to conclude that this approach was only a palliative that might even prevent us from seeing the real changes in contemporary culture and communication. Thus he was disposed for a significant encounter with Marshall McLuhan, who would awaken him to a more radical paradigm shift. In an interview I conducted with him, Babin said,

Originally, I had regarded media as external instruments. Little by little, my conventional understanding of media and audiovisual methods changed. The more I contemplated this new revelation, the more aware I became that people were audio visually oriented, so that we could no longer speak to them as we had spoken in the past.

There were three characteristics of modern life in the younger generation that Babin felt the church needed to realize: (1) the resurgence of the imagination; (2) the importance of affective relationships and values and (3) the dissolution of national and cultural frontiers. McLuhan had inspired him to re-examine the function of communication, including the communication of faith. For Babin, the new awakening “was an insistence that was sometimes difficult to bear.” McLuhan managed to help him understand that

technology, or more specifically the audiovisual medium of communication, is the key to understanding our contemporary culture and the evolution of a new human consciousness.

Later in life (late 1990s to early 2000) Babin became intrigued with the emergence, meaning and impact of the Internet within cultures. His perpetually curious mind struggled with the rapid evolution of the Internet. He knew that something radically different was transforming how people think, communicate, act and experience community in a virtual world. Babin strove to make sense of the new reality and encouraged religious who were students at his workshops around the world or at his Center for Religious Communications Formation (in Lyon, France) to embrace the new dimension as their prophetic calling in the 21st century.

Missionary view of shifting realities

Turning from the pioneering of Pierre Babin, I modestly reiterate that a crucial perspective is the realization that we are immersed in a new digital culture or digital civilization. This is no minor concept. The media or digital techniques and resources being employed by immense numbers of people around the world are primarily tools or conduits for individuals or groups to urge advocacy, share information or express opinions, beliefs and perspectives. The evolving digital civilization's creeds, codes, rituals and sense of virtual community defines the culture along the way and will always create new challenges and opportunities to contemplate.

What does it mean to be a religious community in a digital age? What is our specific contribution to the formation and transformation of a new digital world order? How can we release the "hidden energy" of the Good News via expanding digital portals and conduits? How do we cultivate a perennially creative disposition for encouraging and supporting digital literacy as an essential characteristic of our basic formation, ongoing formation and vocation programs?

Remember the digital context is a culture where people spend quality time. Sixty-one percent of adults who regularly go online and 73 percent of online teens interact with one another on social networking Web sites. People spend 500 billion minutes per month on Facebook. The average Facebook user spends 55 minutes per day on the site. Fifty million messages daily (or 600 messages per second) are posted on Twitter, a micro-blogging site with 145 million users. YouTube has 24 hours of new video uploaded every minute and receives two billion daily page views.¹⁰

Creating a digital presence, posturing ourselves in the

8 ways to get noticed online

1) Create engaging virtual environments The various forms of online presence for your religious community can be developed with an eye toward drawing people in and engaging them. Can people interact with you? Can they ask questions, share ideas, get involved? People with social media and Internet skills can help you manage this aspect of engagement so that there are appropriate boundaries alongside interaction.

2) Promote digital environmental flexibility Can your various online presences be updated and adapted to changing ministries and needs?

3) Make your presence aesthetically attractive Is your presence adapted to the age of the desired audience? Is your online presence attractive to those you want to attract?

4) Allow human and material resources to interact Does your online presence let you share the riches of your community? What do you have to offer? Gospel reflections? Prayer for intentions offered virtually? Help with discernment? Can digital media help your community to live its charism more fully?

5) Nurture a sense of community and presence Can you bring people together virtually? Can you offer a "safe place" to talk about vocation within a community of kindred spirits?

6) Be available 24/7 You cannot make yourself perpetually available, but technology may allow you to connect in spite of the day or hour.

7) Create a sense of a living space Is your online presence regularly updated, with fresh information, new photos and occasionally a new design?

8) Stimulate the religious and spiritual imagination Virtual guests should desire to return often to your virtual site or experience.

—Sister Angela Zukowski, MSHS

various venues of cyberspace is “casting the net” in the 21st century. Over the years I have worked with religious communities as they have designed visionary multimedia communication plans. As the planning team became familiar with the limitless possibilities, a concern for creative

The breadth and depth of our spiritual traditions and religious lives hold a treasure house of wisdom experiences. We only need to re-imagine how to position these into the digital milieu.

personnel, time, digital resources and funds became barriers to stellar plans. There are times a religious community will opt for a design that is nice, simple, non-interactive and cost effective. Yet, as indicated earlier, there are characteristics that digital natives are now accustomed to that cannot be ignored if a community’s digital presence is to have

impact and stimulate return visits and engagements.

There is so much richness within religious communities in our dedication to proclaiming the Good News and serving the People of God. If our digital presence does not reflect

using multiple modalities of communication with dynamic options, our virtual site may be visited once but then ignored. Hit indicators (telling how many times someone has navigated to our site) do not always offer sound data about whether individuals have spent *quality* time exploring us. The quantity of “hits” only indicates that they bumped into us unconsciously, consciously or accidentally.

What might happen if religious communities banded together to create a vibrant, collaborative Digital Communications Plan for promoting their life? By putting our limited resources into a stellar design, we may be able to turn the tide of conversation from “fewer, grayer and smaller communities” and “few individuals contemplating religious life” into an energetic discussion of the thousands of women and men serving God in diverse ministries and lifestyles. In effect we could turn around the spiraling down conversation and contemplate a spiraling up of strengths, gifts, numbers and diversity with an expansive common goal.

Building bridges, forming bonds

As we look at ways to engage with digital media, we will continue to have the digitally poor and rich within our church, civic and world communities. Yet the gap is closing rapidly as other cultures leapfrog ahead of the West. As the Internet and digital tools become more available, affordable and more comprehensive, with a plethora of apps (applications) and become more compact and more sustained by solar power, they will become better integrated into all cultural contexts. One morning this past October a discussion on National Public Radio concerning the future of social media captured my attention. In reference to the recent elections in which social media (interactive, “friend”-driven platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter) were dramatically employed, a commentator stated: “The next time around, the practice of social media may be such an integral part of the process we won’t even notice it.” The knowledge that immediate access to information is power is driving the momentum. The realization that effective communication can be a bridge, bond and balm is an essential ingredient for refining digital awareness and skills within our ministries.

Re-imagining religious life calls for both a contemplative way of being and nurturing cyber apostolic communities and ministries. As mentioned earlier, there is a value for disconnecting, as well as connecting in a digital age. Religious communities can create immense digital pathways for plugging into the sacred. The breadth and depth of our

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virtualvins.org/learn-the-tools The Vincentian Family provides guidance into social media.

nonprofitorgs.wordpress.com Blog by social media guru Heather Mansfield is packed with helpful tips.

spiritual traditions and religious lives hold a treasure house of wisdom experiences. We only need to re-imagine how to position these into the digital milieu. Nevertheless, defining the new boundaries for cyber-apostolic communities to traverse the vast frontier is the imaginative challenge today.

Future vocation ministry scenario

Imagine the following scene on an iPad, Smartphone, or laptop computer—anywhere, anytime. A prospective member is inspired by a personal, one-on-one informal encounter with a sister, brother, or priest. Or, he or she was enlightened by a film, song or a prayer experience that awakened his or her inner spirit to question: “I wonder if I have a vocation?” Or, this person has googled “Catholic vocation” and linked to NRVC’s virtual community. If you have seen the movie *Avatar*, you have a sense of what I refer to as an avatar.

Scenario: a person googles “religious community,” or “Catholic vocation” and connects to the virtual community of the National Religious Vocation Conference (NRVC). There is a cartoonish character (called an avatar, a sort of three-dimensional “alter ego,” or persona for individuals to identify themselves with along the journey). An NRVC Avatar Team Member welcomes the guest; the inquiring avatar glides through a vast virtual field, past a series of multicolored buildings. Each building reflects a state of life: lay, religious, married, clergy, single. The avatar inquirer turns and reads a glowing amber sign that reads: “Welcome to the Franciscan Brothers and Sisters!” On his or her left and down the line he or she sees the Mercys, Benedictines, Mission Helpers, Marianists, Carmelites, Sisters of St. Joseph, the Dominicans, Glenmarys and more. The inquiring avatar opens the door and sees avatars of two other young people in conversation with a sister, brother or priest avatar concerning spirituality, vocation and ministry. A sister avatar invites the small group to visit her community chapel for prayer and then journey to the community’s ministries around the country or world. The inquiring avatar can also pursue other doors to participate in spiritual exercises or encounters with the community.

If the inquiring avatar feels the need for personal help, all she or he needs to do is “ask” the religious avatar by typing a question. Or if this is a virtual religious community wired for sound, simply voicing the question aloud elicits a response. If the inquiring avatar feels like taking a break, he or she walks to the virtual gardens or stops by the chapel or community room to chat with other avatars who are considering religious life. The inquiring avatar is invited to join a virtual inquiry

prayer community with the virtual religious community. The inquiring avatar may request to have a real life, one-on-one visit with the community vocation director. Or he or she could spend a weekend with the religious community.

The inquiring avatar may visit as many virtual religious communities as are present on the NRVC site—thus capturing the breadth, depth and richness of religious life. This is just one example of what NRVC might imagine for the future. The virtual experience never replaces real-time, personal encounters. But before people are ready for more direct contact, a virtual tour such as I’ve described could give people a sense of religious life. The benefits of such an experience could be endless. Can you imagine it?

Our future is limited only by our lack of imagination. Graced with the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, we have confidence to navigate into the digital frontier. Trusting in this Divine Presence, we dare to go where we never dreamt of going before because we have faith and hope and are grounded in love! We know who we are, who we are called to become, and we courageously cast our net into the future! ■

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