

# The Catholic Internet: Seminary Technologies Impacting the Teaching and Learning Environment of the Church

Reverend Daniel E. Harris, CM, D.Min.; Victor J. Klimoski, Ph.D.; Beverly Lane; Sebastian Mahfood



## The Cyber Church

The seminary or theological school is a world unto its own for the kind of community that flourishes within it. It pursues a comprehensive program of intellectual, cultural, pastoral, and human formation for the purpose of instilling in its priesthood candidates "an abiding priestly identity, founded in Christ Jesus and in his Church, a cooperative priestly ministry, comprised of teaching, sanctifying and leading and an integrated priestly spirituality, embracing celibacy, simplicity, obedience, and prayer."<sup>1</sup> In similar fashion, it seeks to form men and women preparing for lay ecclesial ministry with a profound sense of mission, bounded by knowledge of the tradition, the professional competence to exercise leadership on behalf of the community, and a personal embodiment of the vision of discipleship enjoined by Christ.

By ordination and formation through well-crafted degree programs, we seek to perpetuate the faith as a living and transformable reality in the lives of God's children in particular with the parish church at the center of our social lives. We want people to come together through the Eucharist to share their love and faith, so we prepare men for ordination and women and men for

lay ecclesial ministry for the purpose of actively representing God's church through their work in the community.

The knowledge our students garner of the media technologies affecting the third-millennium society into which they are entering will help them in their vocations, and it is for this reason that seminaries and theological schools around the country are engaging in educational technology initiatives designed to train students not only to be consumers of computer assisted instruction, but also to be producers and employers of media content intended for today's church.

The Catholic Church is ideally poised for its engagement in activities of acculturation within cyberspace and is remarkable for the amount of energy it has already invested in the development of materials for the World Wide Web. In

the Google categories for church denominations in October 2003, there were 57,099 entries, of which 25,594 addressed issues in the Catholic Church with Methodists (4,455) and Lutherans (4,150) having the next highest number of entries.<sup>2</sup> Certainly, there is a reason why Catholics have taken the lead on this, not the least of which has been the constancy of Pope John Paul II in

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his determination to make of cyberspace a place of evangelization. On January 24, 2002, in a speech titled "Internet: A New Forum for Proclaiming the Gospel," the pope argued that the Internet can offer magnificent opportunities for evangelization if used with competence and a clear awareness of its strengths and weaknesses. Above all, by providing information and stirring interest it makes possible an initial encounter with the Christian message, especially among the young who increasingly turn to the world of cyberspace as a window on the world. It is important, therefore, that the Christian community think of very practical ways of helping those who first make contact through the Internet to move from the virtual world of cyberspace to the real world of Christian community.<sup>3</sup>

As a result of the pope's dedication to a flourishing church presence in cyberspace, the Pontifical Council for Social Communications published a mandate concerning it on February 22, 2002, in a document titled "The Church and the Internet." It was urged that priests, deacons, religious, and lay pastoral workers should have media education to increase their understanding of the impact of social communications on individuals and society and help them acquire a manner of communicating that speaks to the sensibilities and interests of people in a media culture. Today, this clearly includes training regarding the Internet and how to use it in pastoral ministry. Web sites offering theological updating and pastoral suggestions, therefore, would be quite useful.<sup>4</sup> In this context, then, what is being done with technology to further educational goals in scripture, homiletics, church history, pastoral counseling, and systematic and moral theology is not only being translated into sound pedagogy but is also consonant with the larger vision of the church to have her people engage one another more efficaciously through this extension of our consciousness.<sup>5</sup>

### Extending the Classroom within the Community

Because of the mandate of the Holy See on media literacy, the question that all seminaries and theological institutions must be asking themselves at the turn of the millennium no longer can be concerned with *whether* these technologies will be useful; rather, the question they must be concerned with is *how* they will be used

most efficaciously.

The evolution of this question had little to do with the technologies themselves, for those are always changing as newer tools replace older ones in months instead of decades. To enhance pedagogy, seminaries and theological schools around the country are making use of technology in ways that strengthen their goals in and beyond the classroom. In St. Louis, Missouri, Kenrick-Glennon Seminary faculty members Father John Paul Heil and Dr. Anne Marie Kitz, for instance, took five Scripture students on an intercultural study tour to Turkey in the summer of 2002 and equipped each student

with a Palm M500 personal digital assistant. Downloaded onto each of the Palms, which held only 8 megabytes of data (equivalent to roughly 8 million keystrokes), were all the mass readings, all the cultural information about the sites that would be visited in Turkey, all the church history concerning the travels of Paul through what is now the Turkish countryside, the entire Bible, and, for a pleasant diversion while at Troy, the *Iliad*. While at

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the various museums and archaeological sites, the students could read the texts concerning the places they were visiting and study over the long drives places they had been or were going to—all with a device that fit into the palm of the hand and weighs only a few ounces. This device in the spring of 2002 cost \$249, and the one serious lament was that it could not display pictures of the artifacts that were missing from the sites where they had been found. In the spring of 2003, the seminary purchased Dell Axim X5 Pocket PCs for all the transitional deacons with full color picture capability that have memories expandable to over a gigabyte (equivalent to a billion keystrokes) with wireless connectivity for only \$223 apiece. Just as we train on one technology, a newer and better one that more readily adapts to our needs comes along. The training focus cannot, therefore, rest on one's mastery of any given tool; instead, the training focus rests on how to generalize a given tool's capacity to fulfill particular needs.

Broadening this model to a seminary-wide instructional technology initiative, the challenge for teachers is to learn the principles of technology as extensions of themselves in their coursework. Once the professor makes the leap over the conceptual hurdle engendered by these new technologies, the question rightly boils

down to methods. Father Lawrence Brennan, for instance, who teaches systematic theology at Kenrick-Glennon Seminary, decided that he wanted to prepare the students for a discussion on secular humanism, but he did not want to have to force that discussion into the few moments he would have at each break in his lecture over the subject. So, he posted the 20-page lecture he would have given orally on his Blackboard worksite and required each student to read it two weeks before the class session in which it was to be discussed. Further, he created five discussion forums, each dealing with a particular aspect of his article, and directed students to make a response in any of the forums and then reply to one other student in a different forum. In the two weeks before the scheduled class discussion, there were 128 responses with Father Brennan present throughout the discussion as he responded or commented on student postings. On the day of the actual classroom discussion, then, Father Brennan already knew what all the students were thinking about the topic (rather than the five or six who would have dominated the class), and all the students also knew the perspectives of each of their classmates. The synergy produced a discussion of much greater depth and value than there would have been had all the students shown up for class having read the article at breakfast. The crux of the experiment, as a result, lay both in the technology and in the technique, and ultimately it proved that students could better prepare themselves for class when using the technology than they could when not using it.

The use of virtual discussions took another variation for Father Heil and Dr. Kitz, who were looking for a better way to prepare their students for writing final papers. They agreed that a common template should be used for both New and Old Testament Scripture studies and that students should engage in a process of peer review before the final drafts were submitted for grading. The professors created a Web-based exegetical process requiring students to post their developing project materials incrementally throughout the course of the semester on a seminary Web site. This accomplished two impor-

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tant pedagogical goals: The professors could better guide a student's work in process between the deadlines imposed for each segment of the paper, and the student's sense of audience for the work being done suddenly escalated, which caused a bit of healthy competition between some students to improve their projects. Ulti-

mately, it took the students' natural propensity toward triage, the phenomenon by which students deal with their coursework in the order in which it comes due rather than at healthy increments throughout the semester, and redirected it from being goal-oriented to process-oriented. The students still complete their work, but they now take more time to involve themselves in the act of doing it. Furthermore, online publication of their works in progress brought up all kinds of important issues for the students to engage—the nature of intellectual property rights, plagiarism, and ethics—to name a

few. Some of these issues were resolved institutionally in Kenrick's password protection of all student Web sites, while other issues were resolved by the students themselves by their actively seeking permission from the legitimate copyright owners to use pictures and audio clips within their Web projects. Skills like these have to be learned by hands-on experience and by engaging in forums that require them to learn them as they go along.

### **Extending the Classroom beyond the Community**

Sometimes technology offers a way to address problems that had long resisted a resolution. Father John Francis Clark, Kenrick-Glennon's assistant professor of homiletics, decided to broaden the peer response forum by putting his student homilies online for the class to evaluate. Father Clark's problem was that in a 75-minute class he did not have time for all the students to give focused responses to the homilies of their peers. At best, students received a hastily written evaluation from each of their classmates done during the 6-8 minute homily and a short sentence from each student right after the homily on what was done well and on what needed improvement. By putting the student homilies

online, Father Clark recognized that members of the class would be able to actually study the homilies, stop the videos at various points, and type comments and suggestions into discussion fields, referencing the exact time in the video where the comment was being directed. He undertook this innovation in an environment new to the technologies and with students who did not yet understand the nature of the Internet in its re-creation of a classroom teaching and learning environment.<sup>6</sup>

Father Clark's next thought concerned how to extend the peer response environment interculturally so that students in other seminaries around the country might evaluate the homilies of his students and allow the reciprocal arrangement of his students evaluating the homilies of others. This is when he contacted Father Dan Harris at St. John's Seminary in Camarillo, California. St. John's Seminary students reflect the changing ethnic makeup of the church on the west coast of the United States. Students originate from about 15 different countries. The typical homiletics class of 30 students might have no more than a handful of students born in the United States. Since most of the seminarians will serve as priests in the United States, they are expected to develop preaching skills appropriate to this culture. These students have few peers who can provide helpful critique in this area since they themselves are also struggling to become acculturated to the church in the United States. Conversely, seminarians from Vietnam, Mexico, Korea, and other countries do not hear a wide sampling of peers preach with a native United States voice. For these and other reasons, Fathers Harris and Clark planned an online homily exchange program that would offer a richer pool of peer critique. While this plan has yet to be put into practice, it has all the promise of extending any given teaching and learning environment into other Catholic institutions around the country, carving out a new consortium of homiletics practitioners who will regularly improve themselves through intercultural critique.

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### **The Focus Is on Teaching Teachers to Remain Producers of Their Teaching and Learning Environments**

To achieve this level of technological fluency requires a commitment on the part of the institution to instill within its community the idea that our technologies are, in Marshall McLuhan's terms, extensions of ourselves in the world.<sup>7</sup> St. John's Seminary, for instance, conducts an annual faculty computer camp the first week of August. The mornings typically feature interactive presentations and hands-on experimentation with hardware and software to enhance teaching and learning. The afternoons involve individually supervised preparation of technological materials for each participant's fall semester courses. Faculty members receive a stipend for this training.

An outside expert conducted the first camp, but it is now team taught by Dan Harris, the coordinator of instructional technology, and Luke Dysinger, professor of systematic theology and an avid proponent of technologically enhanced learning.

Of course, there are different ways to engage faculty in media education training. Kenrick-Glennon Seminary, for instance, provided each faculty member with a one-course reduction in teaching load so that a whole semester could be spent with an educational technologist learning how to develop a transactional pedagogy. The Pontifical College Josephinum in Columbus, Ohio, on the other hand, outsourced an assessment of the institution's early efforts with educational technology with a consultant from the Research Center for Educational Technology located at Kent State University. The resulting recommendations clearly identified the need to place technology initiatives within the context of pedagogy and learning and became the basis for developing faculty training initiatives.

In January 2003, several of the Josephinum's faculty members (including top administrative personnel) traveled to Kenrick-Glennon Seminary to see first-hand how technologically enhanced pedagogies benefited the program. This was followed by a spring workshop for

the Josephinum faculty during which two presenters from Kenrick demonstrated techniques for engaging students in a variety of theological disciplines through the use of course Web sites, online discussion, and other technology-based applications. In the coming year, the Josephinum will collaborate with the Technology Enhanced Learning and Research of the Ohio State University to assist its faculty with PowerPoint, Blackboard, and specialized projects. The developing trend in theological teaching and learning, therefore, is in the direction of teaching faculty to be producers rather than consumers of the technologies available to them, and that will assist them in their efforts to remain producers rather than consumers of their own teaching and learning environments.

As a result of learning how these new mediated communication and research technologies can be used to generate efficacious teaching and learning environments, faculty members have begun to develop projects intended to engage students as producers rather than consumers of theological inquiry. Sister Carolyn Thomas of the Josephinum, for instance, has used Blackboard discussion capabilities in her Synoptic Gospels course to encourage student reflection of a commonly viewed video. Working in groups, students were asked to evaluate the video for its biblical and theological accuracy in addition to its pastoral effectiveness. Each group posted their findings to the course Web site and followed up with peer review in critiquing the work of other groups.

Dr. James Yeager, also of the Josephinum, has created multimedia presentations to illustrate the musical periods and traditions covered in his liturgical music courses. Using PowerPoint presentations with imbedded sound, image, and musical notation files, he has integrated resources to enrich the students' appreciation of sacred music.

As an alternative to the term paper, Father William Lynn at the Josephinum has provided students with the option of creating a PowerPoint presentation for his courses in Theological Anthropology, Theology of the church and Theology of the Priesthood. For this assignment, students create a presentation applicable to the pastoral setting on some aspect of the course material. This has proved to be a popular assignment as students value the practical experience gained in combining technology skills and theological studies with pastoral applications.

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Once faculty members engage in a few successful projects, like Dr. Lawrence Welch at Kenrick Seminary, who had his ecclesiology students critique parish Web sites for asynchronous discussion, they are more willing to grow beyond their earlier attempts, leading Dr. Welch, for instance, into experimenting with interactive Web-based audio projects. Other professors take note of this, like Father Michael Witt at Kenrick Seminary, and begin their training with a desire to engage in even bolder initiatives, like interactive Microsoft Producer videos using PowerPoint and FrontPage to engage learners in project-based and collaborative learning. The technologies themselves only provide solutions—the real talent and energy lie in the professor who constructs the environments in which these answers might be sought.

At the School of Theology in Collegeville, Minnesota, faculty involvement with technology has emerged as people dealt with “just in time” needs. Sister Helen

Rolfson, OFM, teaches spirituality and has acquired thousands of slides of art depicting the various schools of spirituality and expressions of the spiritual life. Managing this avalanche of visuals was problematic until the slides were copied to compact discs. Now she has orderly access to her collection and can readily use the collection for online teaching.

Father Dale Launderville, OSB, was puzzling over what texts to require of students participating in the early Christianity study tour he was leading through Rome, Greece, and Turkey before seeing a demonstration of the effect Palm pilots had on Father Heil and Dr. Kitz's intercultural study tour. As a result of that response to an immediate problem, Father Launderville is currently developing a course on the “Footsteps of Paul” that incorporates the results of the study tour and uses several different applications to create a Web-enriched course.

Jim Rafferty, director of learning technology resources for St. John's and the other seminaries in the Minnesota Consortium of Theological Schools, has been very intentional in promoting applications that meet very specific teaching needs. This enables faculty to “enter the game” at the level a member chooses where she or he can gain and test mastery with a new teaching tool. Invariably, success builds on success, as a faculty member says, “Okay, now that I can use this tool, what would I do to....” This sort of creativity emerges natu-

rally as good traditional pedagogues become good thoughtful users of new teaching resources.

### The Shifting Paradigm from the Transmission Model to the Transaction Model

A problem that is more insurmountable than evolving technologies within an instructional technology initiative is changing the attitudes of people who have already developed pedagogical mastery around the older technologies and see no reason to change what they are doing to adapt to the newer ones. The problem that pedagogical traditionalists face with newer technologies is not the learning curve they entail but the paradigm within which they have grown comfortable and that gives them their sense of mastery.

A professor who teaches through the “Roman model” of lecturing to students presumes that his or her years of acquired wisdom can be transmitted to the students through rote lecture and note taking. This “transmission model” rests on the assumption that the students come to class to learn what a particular professor knows. Fostering collaborative learning among students, therefore, through such strategies as group presentations and asynchronous discussion activities may simply appear superfluous. More pointedly, for the traditional pedagogue, emphasizing active student engagement encourages the “blind leading the blind.” It is more efficient for these professors rooted in a transmission model to just tell students what they should know and then test their ability to recall that information.

A professor who teaches under a “transaction model,”<sup>8</sup> however, knows that a student’s ability to repeat information does not guarantee that the student has understood an idea much less how ideas become knowledge, contributing and informing parish pastoral practice. The professor, then, teaches students how to engage the course materials in ways that cultivate them as active inquirers rather than consumers of theological information. After all, the classroom should be a learning lab, which means it should be dominated by informed, disciplined discussion rather than by lecture.<sup>9</sup> If the professor really is concerned that the students have a record of the course *dispensae*, he or she would do better

just to give them the text and have them read it before class so that they come to class already knowing everything the professor would have told them while they were there. Perhaps by providing the *dispensae* in an interactive format, the professor can create an environment in which the face-to-face meetings are more meaningful than data transfer. Then, the real teaching and learning could begin since the students would have already prepped themselves for discussion based on the professor’s own lecture materials.

What the new instructional technologies enable us to do is to find efficacious—not merely effective—ways in which to bring about the kind of ideal classroom reality we want to create, and this serves as a model for

the kind of priest or lay ecclesial minister we want to form. Because the ability to shift the paradigm is so essential to a faculty member’s finding a positive value in the use of technology in the classroom, it may help the reader to seek concrete methods within his or her own classroom environment that lend themselves to interactive student involvement. In order for those earlier examples provided by the various professors from the institutions in which the authors teach to have any real meaning in the context of a teaching and learning environment, the rhetorical strategy, or the method the

professor uses to intentionally communicate with his or her students, must adapt to the transaction model. The professor has to consciously outline what it is that he or she desires to accomplish with a given activity in which the *students* act as producers rather than consumers of their teaching and learning environments and then develop some methods by which to assess the outcomes of that activity based on that outline.

It is one thing for the faculty to learn how to transform their teaching and learning environments along a transactional model, but it is quite another for students used to the transmission model to be able to respond efficaciously. Without a concomitant effort at training the students to be producers rather than consumers of their teaching and learning environments, no work a professor does in the classroom will have the intended effect on student learning. It is not enough for students to be asked to respond to a question on an

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online discussion board unless they are also taught the nature of mediated communication in asynchronous learning communities. It is not enough for students to build Web sites or even develop PowerPoint presentations unless they also develop a sense of media literacy and how the use of technologies affects social relationships.

For these reasons, institutions that invest their resources entirely in faculty training initiatives and place little effort in student training initiatives will discover that the sustainability of their educational technology programs is at risk. In a decade, perhaps, students entering theological institutions will come to the classroom already wired for mediated engagement in a third millennium society, but for the present our institutions primarily receive students in their mid-30s whose awareness of the mechanics underlying the technologies they are required to use may not be as astute as their professors'. If we are to require these students to be interactively engaged in classroom discourse, then it makes sense that we would also teach them how to do that when the discursive structure of the classroom changes as a natural consequence of the use of various technologies for teaching and learning. For this reason, all technology initiatives ought to be developed around a principle of *community* formation, and students should have training opportunities similar to those their professors are receiving.

### Moving into Cyberspace

Much of what we do with the use of technologies in the classroom comes not only in the form of PowerPoint applications, but also in the form of online course templates that allow us to engage students in asynchronous discussion outside of class to prepare them for synchronous discussion during class. Moving coursework online does more than reinforce the teaching and learning structure of the residential community; it can also create teaching and learning environments where none existed before. At Kenrick, three online courses have been integrated into the seminary curriculum for the fall semester of this year. The first, New

Testament Greek, has already been taught entirely online very successfully by Father John Paul Heil. The second, a year-long course in master's thesis writing, is being taught by Sebastian Mahfood with only eight face-to-face meetings in nine months. The third, a course in Mariology, will be taught almost exclusively online by Father Gregory Lockwood from Cincinnati, who could otherwise not come to campus to teach. This past academic year, in fact, Kenrick Seminary broadcast a student on internship named Steven

Fowler into the classroom using a laptop and Web camera, enabling him to continue to reside 140 miles away from campus while participating in face-to-face real-time classroom discussion. In a similar manner, Sister Susan Wood, SCL, associate dean at St. John's University School of Theology in Collegeville, developed the "virtual monastery," an online learning resource center offering graduate level courses and workshops for members of religious communities unable to send members to Collegeville. By developing online course materials and changing the venue for assessment of a student's encounter

with them, institutions can move data in ways that better enable student interaction and resolve age-old problems of scheduling and distance.

These kinds of asynchronous learning opportunities being developed by an increasing number of theological schools and seminaries do not seek to erode or replace the value found in face-to-face learning environments. On the contrary, developed thoughtfully and with full faculty support, they add to rather than detract from access to quality learning experiences. As Pope John Paul II noted:

It is clear, then, that while the Internet can never replace that profound experience of God which only the living, liturgical and sacramental life of the Church can offer, it can certainly provide a unique supplement and support in both preparing for the encounter with Christ in community, and sustaining the new believer in the journey of faith which then begins.<sup>10</sup>

The third millennium technologies are evolving. We as a church must evolve with them in ways that edify our mission in the world or risk having them used

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in ways that do not. The teaching and learning environments of our seminaries and theological schools are the appropriate places to introduce those who will lead as priests and lay ecclesial ministers in a mediated world and enable them to engage that world as shapers of its future for the glory of Christ and the mission of his church.<sup>11</sup>



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## Notes

1. Kenrick School of Theology, St. Louis, Missouri, mission statement.
2. See [http://directory.google.com/Top/SocietyReligion\\_and\\_Spirituality/Christianity/Denominations/](http://directory.google.com/Top/SocietyReligion_and_Spirituality/Christianity/Denominations/) for continuous updates on these numbers. It may be of interest to note that the Pontifical Council for Social Communications expressed concern in February 2002 that there were sites in existence that labeled themselves Catholic but did not adhere to the imperatives of the Catholic Church.
3. [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/messages/communications/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_mes\\_20020122\\_world-communications-day\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/messages/communications/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_20020122_world-communications-day_en.html). The speech was given May 12 for the 36<sup>th</sup> World Communications Day.
4. *The Church and the Internet*, The Pontifical Council for Social Communications, February 22, 2002, [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/pccs/documents/rc\\_pc\\_pccs\\_doc\\_20020228\\_church-internet\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/pccs/documents/rc_pc_pccs_doc_20020228_church-internet_en.html).
5. Marshall McLuhan writes in *Understanding Media* (1964) that our technologies are extensions of ourselves in the world, so that the car is an extension of the foot, the book of the eye, the computer of the central nervous system, and, by extension, cyberspace of the collective consciousness. Father Pierre Teilhard de Chardin also writes of these technologies enabling us to build a noosphere of collective thought that will ultimately create a Christosphere through which the mass of humanity will see the face of God.
6. See Glenn Byer, CJ; John Clark; Sebastian Mahfood; and Lawrence J. Welch, "Generative Neo-Cyberculture: Theological Discourse in the Modern Seminary," *Teaching Theology and Religion*, vol. 5, no. 2 (2002), pp. 113-117.
7. *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, 1964.
8. "Transaction," in our sense, is a dialogic exchange between students, instructors, and course materials. See *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* for Paulo Freire's views on this.
9. See *The Church and the Internet* from the Pontifical Council for Social Communications, February 22, 2002: "It is important, too, that people at all levels of the Church use the Internet creatively to meet their responsibilities and help fulfill the Church's mission. Hanging back timidly from fear of technology or for some other reason is not acceptable, in view of the very many positive possibilities of the Internet."
10. "Internet: A New Forum for Proclaiming the Gospel." See also *The Church and the Internet* from the Pontifical Council for Social Communications, February 22, 2002: "The Internet is relevant to many activities and programs of the Church—evangelization, including both re-evangelization and new evangelization and the traditional missionary work *ad gentes*, catechesis and other kinds of education, news and information, apologetics, governance and administration, and some forms of pastoral counseling and spiritual direction. Although the virtual reality of cyberspace cannot substitute for real interpersonal community, the incarnational reality of the sacraments and the liturgy, or the immediate and direct proclamation of the gospel, it can complement them, attract people to a fuller experience of the life of faith, and enrich the religious lives of users. It also provides the Church with a means for communicating with particular groups—young people and young adults, the elderly and home-bound, persons living in remote areas, the members of other religious bodies—who otherwise may be difficult to reach."
11. For more information on any of the examples cited, please contact any or all of the authors at their email addresses.