

Internet — A New Forum for Proclaiming the Gospel POPE JOHN PAUL II

Dear Brothers and Sisters:

The Church in every age continues the work begun on the day of Pentecost, when the Apostles, in the power of the Holy Spirit, went forth into the streets of Jerusalem to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ in many tongues.

Through the succeeding centuries, this evangelizing mission spread to the far corners of the earth, as Christianity took root in many places and learned to speak the diverse languages of the world, always in obedience to Christ's command to preach the Gospel to every nation.

But the history of evangelization is not just a matter of geographic expansion, for the Church has also had to cross many cultural thresholds, each of which called for fresh energy and imagination in proclaiming the one Gospel of Jesus Christ. The age of the great discoveries, the Renaissance and the invention of printing, the Industrial Revolution and the birth of the modern world: these too were threshold moments which demanded new forms of evangelization. Now, with the communications and information revolution in full swing, the Church stands unmistakably at another decisive gateway. It is fitting therefore that on this World Communications Day 2002 we should reflect on the subject: "Internet: A New Forum for Proclaiming the Gospel".

The Internet is certainly a new "forum" understood in the ancient Roman sense of that public space where politics and business were transacted, where religious duties were fulfilled where much of the social life of the city took place, and where the best and the worst of human nature was on display. It was a crowded and bustling urban space, which both reflected the surrounding culture and created a culture of its own. This is no less true of cyberspace, which is as it were a new frontier opening up at the beginning of this new millennium. Like the new frontiers of other times, this one too is full of the interplay of danger and promise, and not without the sense of adventure which marked other great periods of change. For the Church the new world of cyberspace is a summons to the great adventure of using its potential to proclaim the Gospel message. This challenge is at the heart of what it means at the beginning of the millennium to follow the Lord's command to "put out into the deep": *Duc in altum!* (Lk 5:4).

The Church approaches this new medium with realism and confidence. Like other communications media, it is a means, not an end in itself. 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.

At a subsequent stage, the Internet can also provide the kind of follow-up which evangelization requires. Especially in an unsupportive culture, Christian living calls for continuing instruction and catechesis, and this is perhaps the area in which the Internet can provide excellent help. There already exist on the Net countless sources of information, documentation and education about the Church, her history and tradition, her doctrine and her engagement in every field in all parts of the world. 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.

There are nevertheless certain necessary, even obvious, questions which arise in using the Internet in the cause of evangelization. The essence of the Internet in fact is that it provides an almost unending flood of information, much of which passes in a moment. In a culture which feeds on the ephemeral there can easily be a risk of believing that it is facts that matter, rather

than values. The Internet offers extensive knowledge, but it does not teach values; and when values are disregarded, our very humanity is demeaned and man easily loses sight of his transcendent dignity. Despite its enormous potential for good, some of the degrading and damaging ways in which the Internet can be used are already obvious to all, and public authorities surely have a responsibility to guarantee that this marvellous instrument serves the common good and does not become a source of harm.

Furthermore, the Internet radically redefines a person's psychological relationship to time and space. Attention is rivetted on what is tangible, useful, instantly available; the stimulus for deeper thought and reflection may be lacking. Yet human beings have a vital need for time and inner quiet to ponder and examine life and its mysteries, and to grow gradually into a mature dominion of themselves and of the world around them. Understanding and wisdom are the fruit of a contemplative eye upon the world, and do not come from a mere accumulation of facts, no matter how interesting. They are the result of an insight which penetrates the deeper meaning of things in relation to one another and to the whole of reality. Moreover, as a forum in which practically everything is acceptable and almost nothing is lasting, the Internet favors a relativistic way of thinking and sometimes feeds the flight from personal responsibility and commitment.

In such a context, how are we to cultivate that wisdom which comes not just from information but from insight, the wisdom which understands the difference between right and wrong, and sustains the scale of values which flows from that difference?

The fact that through the Internet people multiply their contacts in ways hitherto unthinkable opens up wonderful possibilities for spreading the Gospel. But it is also true that electronically mediated relationships can never take the place of the direct human contact required for genuine evangelization. For evangelization always depends upon the personal witness of the one sent to evangelize (cf. Rom 10:14-15). How does the Church lead from the kind of contact made possible by the Internet to the deeper communication demanded by Christian proclamation? How do we build upon the first contact and exchange of information which the Internet makes possible?

There is no doubt that the electronic revolution holds out the promise of great positive breakthroughs for the developing world; but there is also the possibility that it will in fact aggravate existing inequalities as the information and communications gap widens. How can we ensure that the information and communications revolution which has the Internet as its prime engine will work in favor of the globalization of human development and solidarity, objectives closely linked to the Church's evangelizing mission?

Finally, in these troubled times, let me ask: how can we ensure that this wondrous instrument first conceived in the context of military operations can now serve the cause of peace? Can it favor that culture of dialogue, participation, solidarity and reconciliation without which peace cannot flourish? The Church believes it can; and to ensure that this is what will happen she is determined to enter this new forum, armed with the Gospel of Christ, the Prince of Peace.

The Internet causes billions of images to appear on millions of computer monitors around the planet. From this galaxy of sight and sound, will the face of Christ emerge and the voice of Christ be heard? For it is only when his face is seen and his voice heard that the world will know the glad tidings of our redemption. This is the purpose of evangelization. And this is what will make the Internet a genuinely human space, for if there is no room for Christ, there is no room for man. Therefore, on this World Communications Day, I dare to summon the whole Church bravely to cross this new threshold, to put out into the deep of the Net, so that now as in the past the great engagement of the Gospel and culture may show to the world "the glory of God on the face of Christ" (2 Cor 4:6). May the Lord bless all those who work for this aim.

(From the Vatican, 24 January 2002, the Feast of Saint Francis de Sales)