Digital Catholicism: Internet, the Church, and the Vatican Website

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Introduction

On the 12th of December 2012, Pope (now emeritus) Benedict XVI sent a Tweet (Addley 2012). This act of communication using the latest trend in information technology garnered little more than bemusement from some. Journalists found the stage managed launch of the Pope’s Twitter account a light hearted distraction from the many pressing issues vying for their attention around the globe that day, including war in Syria, civil unrest in Mali, and economic stress in Greece. But the first Tweet sent by a pope symbolises deeper issues that have greater significance for the Catholic Church. In the twenty-first century the Church continues to look for new ways to engage with global citizens in modern times. The Church is entering a new phase called “digital Catholicism”, which entails the use of online media technologies as tools for evangelisation, while at the same time evangelising cyberspace itself.

This chapter argues that as digital Catholicism emerges, it is being modelled on a particular vision of the Church. That a digital Catholicism is emerging is illustrated by the increased attention that the Church is giving to its online media outlets and the growing use of the Internet by Catholics and Catholic organisations for religious purposes, along with the proliferation of websites dedicated to Catholic subject matter. These websites include the Vatican website to be discussed below. However, in a number of respects which will be discussed in what follows, the way that Vatican.va is administered mirrors the organisational arrangement of the real-world Church. Just as the real-world Church is centred on the papal office and the Vatican hierarchy, the Church’s virtual presence reflects a similar pattern. However, as this chapter will also show, this pattern is challenged by the post-Conciliar ethos of the Church which supports the precepts of the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), and which includes an emphasis on evangelisation through social communications, a commitment to the role of the laity, closer relations with other religions, and the pursuit of religious freedom. This chapter will begin with an assessment of digital Catholicism and current research on Internet and religion relevant to the Catholic Church’s presence on the Internet. It will then examine the wider context of the Internet’s influence on modern societies, including major transformations in culture and economics and the rise of a
post-secular social order. The relevance of this context is important due to the concern expressed at Vatican II for developing a closer relationship between the Church and modern society. Following on from this discussion will be an analysis of a series of major documents published by the Church which guides its use of information technologies. These texts include the Vatican II document *Inter Mirifica* (1981[1963]), the post-Conciliar document *Communio et Progressio* (1981[1971]), and *The Church and Internet* (2002). In light of these documents, the chapter will then critically assess the Church’s official website, Vatican.va, to examine the extent to which the Church has incorporated its guiding principles into the website.

**The Vatican and Internet: The Rise of Digital Catholicism?**

In 2002 theologian George Weigel, writing about the clerical abuse crisis in the United States, commented that:

> Americans are now used to living in circumstances in which major news events are instantaneously reported, information can easily be retrieved from a virtually limitless supply of online newspapers, online magazines, and Web sites, and interested parties are in frequent contact with each other about each breaking story and every ground breaking commentary on it. American Catholics assume that their Church leaders in Rome are similarly plugged in. They are not. As odd as it may seem, given the conventional wisdom that the Vatican is a wealthy and efficient bureaucracy, the Vatican is in fact way off on the roadside of the information superhighway.

*Weigel 2002: 124*

Although Weigel may be correct about the degree to which the Catholic Church was “plugged in” to information technology in 2002, in the time since, the Church has come a long way in its application of these technologies, and is now effectively utilising the Internet as a communications device. This innovation in religion, “using technology to spread the gospel” (Putnam and Campbell 2010:161–162), is evident not only in the Church’s official website Vatican.va, but also in the explosion of the number of Catholic related websites online. There are now large numbers of Catholic websites run by parishes, dioceses, lay Catholics, Catholic universities, Catholic businesses, religious orders, Catholic charitable organisations, Catholic schools, Catholic periodicals and journals, and Catholic non-profit bodies. Those interested in Catholicism can find an extensive amount of information on the World Wide Web, from historical and