

The Use of the Internet in the Pastoral Practice of the Church (Sister Sara)

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Communicating via the Internet

The manner of expression of the Internet is, in the first place, that of presence: to communicate on the Internet you have to be on the Internet. You enter an open stadium where everyone is playing in the same way. If you open a web page, send a newsletter, run a forum, it means that you're sending a message unaltered to the world. It's obvious that this equates with a challenge to the identity and anonymity of individual sites.



But there's also a problem which is much more serious and profound, from what appears, for the champions of exclusive technology and functionality. Indeed, qualitative answers in the world of the Internet, unless they're searchable within it, must be drawn from outside, through a continuous recall of the power of identity and of human relations.

Emphasis has already been given to the fact that not everything can be said by the media or on the Internet. Despite that, the Net can announce that there is human communication beyond the Web, in a place which is specific and available. This locus is the Christian community, which hears the word of God every day and passes it on, which prays and shares the Body and Blood of Christ. So the success of a site which wishes to be recognized as Orthodox is, paradoxically, one which motivates individuals who are browsing to switch off their computers and to go and find the Christian community living here and now, with us and around us.

We would like now to suggest some simple, basic principles which might be followed in planning a Church website:

1. The attention of the Church towards the world of the Internet, as a tool capable of "offering marvelous opportunities for spreading the Gospel", equates to an unparalleled historical opportunity which requires from the Christian community a creative effort to exploit its potential to the full. The Church is approaching the Internet. Like all the other means of communication, it is a means, not an end in itself. The Web may provide opportunities for spreading the Gospel, provided it is used with knowledge and a clear realization of its strengths and weaknesses. Above all, in offering information and piquing interest it makes a first encounter with the Christian message possible, particularly for young people who increasingly have recourse to cyberspace as a window on the world. It is therefore important for the Christian community to think out very practical ways to help those who are coming into contact with it for the first time through the Internet, so that they can cross over from the virtual world of cyberspace to the real world of the Christian community.

2. The Web has proved particularly suitable in favouring a form of "community" which does not, in any way, replace the real community, but is added to it, offering new and authentic experiences for exchanges and encounters and utilizing existing relations between members of the Christian community. If it be true that the wealth of a Christian community lies in the relations between the members who constitute it and that these relations are expressed with authentic creativity through the work of the parish priests, the Catechism teachers, the pedagogues,

volunteers and so on, why should it not be possible to bring this wealth to the Web, offering an unprecedented opportunity for an exchange of experiences, easily accessible even for people a long way off?

3. Special attention must be paid to all of those who are outside the “galaxy” of Orthodox sites. There may be many people surfing who are full of the desire to acquire some orientation. They should be able to find a ready and intelligent welcome, conceptual clarification and eagerness of heart. With this in mind, we should take into account the fact that, while it is almost impossible actively to censor texts which are considered heterodox, it is, nevertheless, very easy to exercise indirect, negative censorship when, for example, the message is not passed on in its entirety, when it is unclear or when the environment is very complicated or ambivalent. The intentions may be of the best, but the result will certainly be failure.

(extract from Sister Sara’s doctoral thesis entitled *Η χρήση του Διαδικτύου στην Ποιμαντική Πράξη της Εκκλησίας*, pp. 87-8.)