Abbot's Congress, 2016

Introduction

The means of social communications, especially the internet is a new comer to neighbourhood of monastic communities.[1] With rare exceptions, the computer has impacted every monastic community, both male and female. The swiftness with which it has made its presence felt, has left many a monastic community wondering about its proper place in the monastic way of life. In a recent address Pope Francis observed, "The speed with which information is communicated exceeds our capacity for reflection and judgement, and this does not make for more balanced and proper forms of self-expression."[2] **Have we sufficiently taken stock of the possible long term effects of the internet on the community, its life of prayer, relationships and asceticism?**

Continuous dialogue

Just as the Church has taken "a fundamentally positive approach to the media (internet),"[3] so must a monastic community that has decided to use this powerful tool. Carefully distinguishing monastic perfection from the necessary but prudent use of the media of social communications, the monastic community must assess the real impact and implications of the use of the internet on the progress of the monastic way of life. The internet is here to stay! Within the monastic community there must emerge a continuous dialogue that shapes the way the Abbot and community will decide how to use this powerful means of communication for the glory of God, the strengthening of mutual love and the work of the community. **Do we have ways within the community of adressing these challenges?**

Separation from the world

One of the primary elements of monastic life is separation from the world. The internet, on the other hand, offers direct, immediate, interactive participation in the affairs of the world. This quality of the internet is without boundaries and has its own special characteristics. No porter can control the traffic entering the enclosure through this door! The fundamental ethical principle whereby "the human person and the human community are the end and measure of the use of the media of social communications"[4] is also a principle at work in the monastery. The mission of a Benedictine monastery in the Church and in the world however, also stands in

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[1] In 1981   IBM announced its first Personal Computer and Microsoft created DOS. In 1983 Jon Postel, Paul Mockapertis and Craig Partridge designed the Domain Name System (DNS).

[2] *48th World Communications Day*, Pope Francis, June 1, 2014.

[3] *The Church and the Internet*, PCSC, Feb. 22, 2002, 1

[4] *Ethics in the Internet*, Pontifical Council for Social Communications, February 22, 2002, 3.

contrast to life in the world in virtue of our promise of *conversation morum*.[5] **How can we balance the use and value of the internet with the authentic mission and life of a Benedictine monastery? Could the Benedictine virtues of listening and hospitality can offer a way to humanize the internet?**

Monastic obedience: Accountability, accessibility and anonymity

Like the Church, communication is of the essence of Benedictine life. The Church's practice of communication (and a monastery's) should be exemplary, reflecting the highest standards of truthfulness, accountability. One of the attractions of the internet for many is that it offers a type of total individual liberty. In general it is opposed to any mindset that favours legitimate regulation for public responsibility. By nature it is relatively anonymous, accessible and with limited accountability. The Benedictine vow of obedience and the commitment to monastic life, on the other hand, favours personal relationship, interactions that are transparent but with discrete boundaries, and responsible accountability. A common problem that can arise in monasteries using the internet without proper hourly limits is that individual monks not only waste time surfing the net, form relationships which could weaken and divert their energies from seeking God. **How does the accessibility of the internet weaken the call to obedience and transparency?**

Monastic fraternity and community

A realistic solution to the lack of accountability in the use of the net is to promote, foster and provide greater opportunities for monastic fraternity. We live in a time when many have to learn to move from a cyber community to real community life. Religious life is marked by living in community as did Jesus and the early church. Traditional experiences of community life in a Benedictine community have been somewhat eroded by the frequent use of social media. The culture and experience of fraternity needs to be nourished and preserved with greater vigilance today against the logic of self-sufficiency which the media can produce in us. **What can a community do to strengthen its own fraternal life in a hyper-digitalized culture?**

Monastic poverty: Frugality in equipment and hardware

The renewal of computer equipment may also pose a particular challenge to all monastic communities called to live out the virtues of monastic frugality and simplicity of the Rule. Besides the maintenance of computer hardware required for common use, individual needs can also strain a small budget. Furthermore, computers are complex and technical instruments and need greater skills for effective use than did tools of the past, such as telephones, typewriters and radios. Computers have combined all the qualities of these earlier tools into one! Once a community becomes dependent upon computer technology for some of items essential activities (guesthouse, supplies, finances, educational work) the cost of maintenance grows

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[5] *A Statement on Benedictine Life*, Congress of Abbots, Sept 1967, 24f.

proportionately. **How does a community balance monastic frugality and the need for maintenance of computer equipment?**

Purity of Heart and chastity

The pandemic addiction to pornography, even among believers today, especially males, also affects monastic life. It is not only the young who are prey to indiscriminate use of the media. Those of our confreres who are entrusted with heavy responsibilities for the monastic life are also very vulnerable. So are the elderly who having "retired" from monastic life often find themselves enmeshed in inappropriate viewing of pornography. No filtering devices are able to screen out everything inappropriate. The abundance of indiscriminate and uncontrolled images that bombard the eyes when on the internet affect, in the long run, the purity of heart and mind of the monk. They retard and stain his life of prayer. Purification from images, in the past, took careful self-discipline and time. St. Benedict cautions monks who return from travel to be discrete about what they share in the community. Today there is no need to travel to see these indiscrete things! **How have we addressed this painful challenges adequately in many of our communities?**

The presence of God

In conclusion, the internet introduces into the Church's repertoire a special path of dialogue with others. We must meet people on the virtual highway of information technology in such a way as to insert the presence of God and the integral human presence into it. **To what degree are monastic communities called to take up this task? Would monastic involvement in the internet help people to form standards of good taste, truthful, moral judgement and the formation of the conscience?**[6]

6 *Ethics in the Internet*, Pontifical Council for Social Communications, February 22, 2002, 6