# REALITIES AND OMISSIONS OF CATHOLIC DIOCESAN WEBSITES

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### 1. Introduction: Objectives and Context.

It is not possible to present in a few pages all the significant aspects present or absent in the websites of Catholic dioceses. On the one hand considering the number of dioceses that have websites, as well as for the great number of elements on a single site. The fact is that many of these websites have thousands of pages. This paper tries to present a brief synthesis of a major research carried out in the last four years on the official websites of some of the biggest Catholic dioceses worldwide.[1]

Briefly the main objectives of this paper are:

1) Understanding how the institutional communication activities of Catholic dioceses are carried out through their websites; and

2) Through a comparison of the contents and services offered by these websites, offer an overview of the main elements present in these kinds of websites and some of the omissions that may hinder the communication goals of their promoters.

With respect to websites and institutional communications in Catholic dioceses, it seems necessary to have prior understanding of several issues that are not addressed here for reasons of space. It would be sufficient to mention a few.

First, a minimum knowledge on the nature and structure of the Catholic Church is required. The Church has a divine and a human dimension, and both affect what she communicates and how she communicates. The deposit of the Faith, the truth of the Revelation, the message of salvation cannot be diluted in Church communication, and websites —just like any other instrument of communication employed by Church institutions— have to respect this reality. Moreover, the territorial organization of the Church into dioceses —or other analogous entities— will also be an essential element reflected in the official websites of such entities.

Secondly, it is necessary for someone communicating on behalf of any Church institution to know the basic Catholic doctrine on communication. In particular, practitioners should be familiar with documents like the Pastoral Instructions *Communio et Progressio* (1971) and *Aetatis Novae* (1992), the Papal messages for the World Communications Day, and recent texts like *The Church and the Internet* and *Ethics in Internet*, of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications (2002).[2]

Thirdly, studying the development of the activities of institutional communications makes it advisable to understand certain concepts of this discipline and, particularly, what the specific activities of institutional communications of Catholic Church's institutions are. For the sake of simplicity, we provide here a definition of institutional communications which may serve as a theoretical reference point for this paper. Thus, institutional communications can be defined as:

> "The type of communications undertaken in an organized way by an institution or its representatives, and directed to the people or groups of the social area in which the institution acts. Institutional communications has the goal of establishing quality relationships between an institution and its audiences,

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[1] The complete results of the research are due for publication in the coming months.

[2] The tradition of Papal messages for the World Communications Day was begun by Pope Paul VI in 1967, and continued annually by his successors, John Paul II (1979-2004), and Benedict XVI (2005-2006). All these documents can be found at the Vatican website: www.vatican.va.

helping it to attain a level of social awareness and a public image consonant with
its goals or activities."[3]

From this definition it becomes clear that institutional communications activities will always be directly related to the nature of the institution, in our case the Catholic Church. But, what activities of the Church can be termed institutional communication? Is it not true that almost any activity done by a Church institution or a Church representative has an institutional dimension? In fact, who can deny that the diplomacy of Vatican delegations or the cultural activities promoted by Church's charities do have an institutional dimension?

In order to avoid excessive generalizations, our study considered only those activities which derive from the Church's documents on social communications. In synthesis, these activities may be reduced to five: Media Promotion, Media Relations, Media Education, Pastoral Care of Media Professionals, and Internal Communications. This is not the place to explain each of them in detail. Let us just say that these activities permeate all website communication carried out by Catholic dioceses.

## 2. Methodology.

### 2.1. Theoretical Framework:

The model employed in this study was the *Website Communication Model (WCM)*. The *Website Communication Model* is a comprehensive framework for analyzing website communication.[4] The *WCM* may be explained with a metaphor that compares the different components of a website with the elements of a business-oriented service like a restaurant or a coffee shop. Indeed, in this kind of business, one can identify four basic elements:

1) Eatable or usable objects such as food, beverages, cards, dice or billiards;
2) Means for serving the food and beverages and, in general, all the objects that allow the previously listed objects to be made or enjoyed. For example, plates, glasses, covers, tables and chairs, the kitchen and its tools, the premises, a table, a TV set, etc.

However, a coffee shop or restaurant is not real, "alive," without:

3) A community of people who manage it, cook the food, serves the tables, etc. (owners and employees); and
4) A community of people who frequent it to eat, drink, play, stay with friends, etc. (clients).

Similarly, in a website we have: (1) contents and services; (2) technical instruments or functionalities that allow us to use those contents and services; and, most importantly, the people: (3) website managers (i.e., owners and webmasters), and (4) visitors. A site is a complex and multidimensional reality and none of these elements, whether physical (1 and 2) or human (3 and 4), can be neglected in analyzing it.

These four website dimensions have to be analyzed from different perspectives. In the first place, each of them has to be considered on its own, because their complexity requires specific studies to be carried out in order to make useful conclusions. Secondly, the mutual interactions of these four website elements

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[3] See José María LA PORTE (2002). Voice "Comunicazione Istituzionale," in Franco LEVER; Cesare RIVOLTELLA; & Adriano ZANACCHI (2002). *La comunicazione. Il Dizionario di scienze e tecniche*, p. 292 (personal translation). For a deeper study of institutional communications, see José María LA PORTE (2003). *Comunicazione interna e management nel no-profit.*

[4] The "Website Communication Model" (WCM) is an evolution of the "Coffee Shop Approach" (CSA), a terminology first employed by Davide BOLCHINI, Lorenzo CANTONI & Daniel ARASA (2004). "Teaching Websites as Communication: A 'Coffee Shop Approach'," in Lorenzo CANTONI & Catherine MCLOUGHLIN, *ED-MEDIA 2004, Proceedings of ED-MEDIA 2004. World Conference on Educational Multimedia, Hypermedia & Telecommunications*, pp. 4119-4124. The bases for the model had already been developed before in Lorenzo CANTONI & Nicoletta DI BLAS (2002). *Teoria e pratiche della comunicazione;* and Lorenzo CANTONI, Nicoletta DI BLAS & Davide BOLCHINI (2004). *Comunicazione, qualità, usabilità.*

have to be studied, because they are not autonomous but need each other to exist. Then the website as a whole needs to be studied with respect to its relationship with its environment, since the website and its elements get meaning and value only in a given context. In fact, the different elements of a website, as well as the site as a communication project take on specific meanings when placed side-by-side with other websites of the same kind, so-called "competitor websites". The *WCM* may be represented graphically as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. The *Website Communication Model – WCM*
*(designed by Lorenzo Cantoni, 2003)*[5]
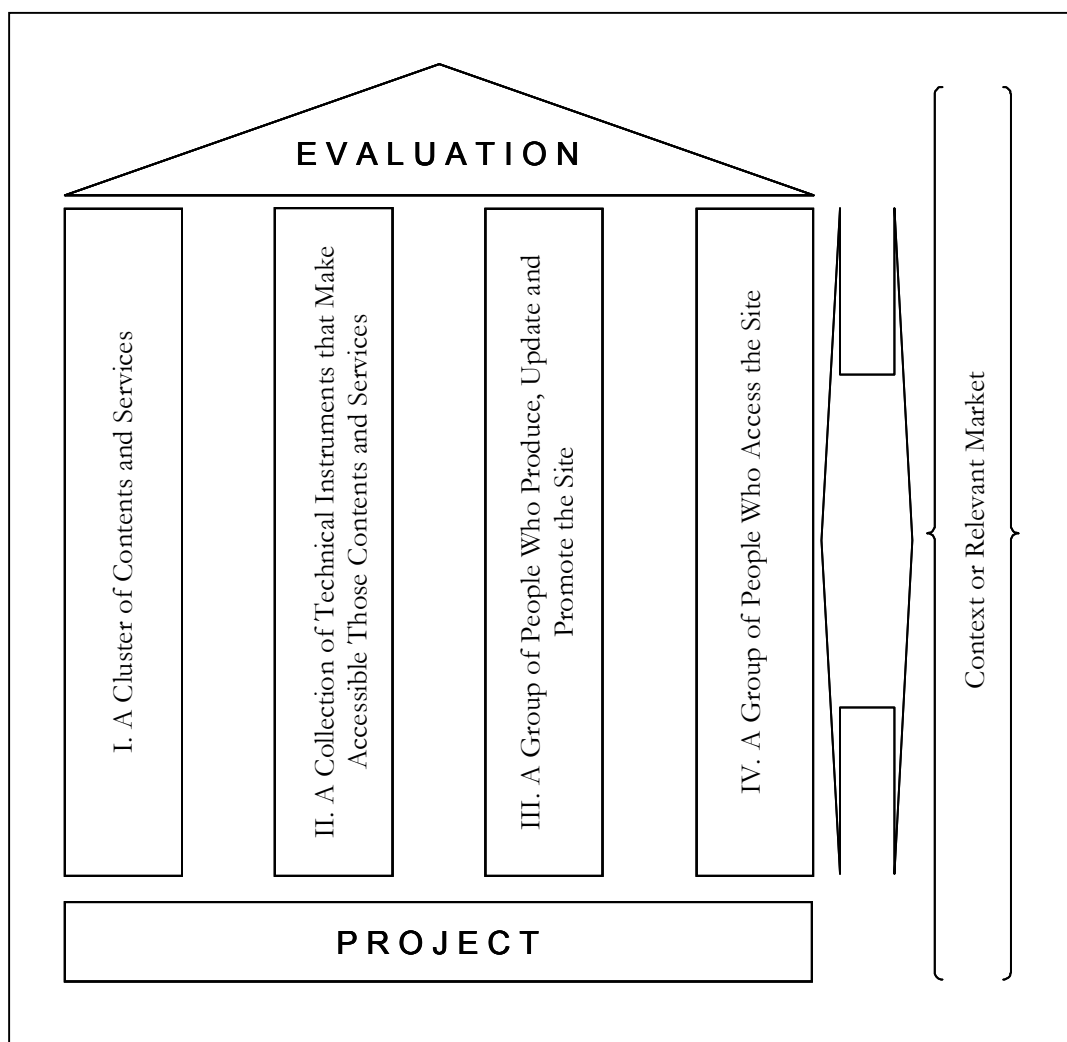


Our goal is to underscore that only by analyzing these elements together can a website study be considered "comprehensive." As a matter of fact, authors like Van der Geest have helped to see that it is becoming more evident day after day that a connatural comprehension of the different dimensions of a website is necessary if quality communication is to be provided through the Internet. Van der Geest shows how technical skills are necessary but not sufficient, since quality Internet communication demands a keen understanding of the electronic medium and a proficiency in technical and non-technical communication aspects as well. Having this broad overview is essential when projecting and evaluating website communication.[6]

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[5] Pillars I and II of the graphic are things, while pillars III and IV are persons. Project and evaluation activities are cross-pillar, while the relevant context/market affects all the elements.
[6] See Thea M. VAN DER GEEST (2001). *Web Site Design is Communication Design.*

### 2.2. Strategy of Analysis:

The research for this project lasted from late 2002 to April 2006, the first two years of which were dedicated to literature review of website communication, and sample selection. Website analysis was carried out during the period 2004-2005, with later additions at the beginning of 2006. Then followed the recording of the results.

Data collection followed these phases: 1) Sample selection; 2) Observation of the evolution of the websites; 3) Information exchange with the webmasters of the sites under study; 4) Design and compilation of table showing the website elements; and 5) Interviews with journalists.

1) Sample Selection:

As it was impossible to analyze the websites of all dioceses with web presence, a selection was made from the sites of the largest Catholic dioceses all over the world. This study makes no claim as to the superiority or otherwise of the samples selected, as they are only examples from which useful insights might be gotten. There is no doubt however that the dioceses selected for the study can be considered important ones, as they have the highest number of Catholics, a quality that should make their leaders put special efforts at communicating with the faithful. Presumably, large dioceses are comparatively more likely than smaller dioceses to promote an intellectual reflection on the use of the Internet for Church communication.

All the dioceses selected had an active website when the sample was taken, since this was an essential condition to be included in the research. It is possible that while the study was being done, other dioceses among those that were not chosen might have started up their own websites.

In order to keep a worldwide perspective, the first criterion for the selection of the sites was geographical, that is, choosing representative dioceses from all the continents: Africa, Asia, Europe, Oceania, North America and Latin America. The distinction between North America and Latin America was due to the fact that both regions presented such linguistic, ethnical and religious differences, among others, that it was possible to consider them as two different entities. This criterion is also why the dioceses of Central America and of Mexico were grouped together within the Latin American region.

In order to use a manageable and, at the same time, representative sample, the number of dioceses to be studied was restricted to nine, according to a proportional distribution of dioceses by continent: two dioceses from Europe, one from North America, three from Latin America, one from Africa, one from Asia, and one from Oceania. Quantitative and qualitative criteria were combined in selecting the nine dioceses.[7] The nine websites selected were from important cities from all over the world: Bogotá (Colombia), Johannesburg (South Africa), Los Angeles (USA), Madrid (Spain), Manila (Philippines), Melbourne (Australia), México (Mexico), Milan (Italy), and São Paulo (Brazil).[8] Table 1 shows the Catholic population of the sample of nine dioceses.

Table 1. Evolution of the Number Catholics of the Selected
Dioceses during 2002-2005.

| Diocese / Year | 2002 | 2003 | 2004 | 2005 | 2006 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|

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[7] The selection of the sample was done on August 23, 2002. On this date, the dioceses selected from Europe, North America, Latin America, Asia and Oceania had a website, while it was not the case for the African dioceses. The website of the African diocese was included later.

[8] The website of the dioceses are the following: www.arquidiocesisbogota.org.co (Bogotá); www.catholic-johannesburg.org.za (Johannesburg); www.archdiocese.la (Los Angeles); www.archimadrid.es (Madrid); www.rcam.org (Manila); www.melbourne.catholic.org.au (Melbourne); www.arzobispadomexico.org.mx or www.arquidiocesismexico.org.mx (México); www.chiesadimilano.it (Milano); www.arquidiocese-sp.org.br (Sao Paulo).

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Bogotá | 6,067,029 | 6,544,026 | 3,546,186 | 3,279,690 | 3,525,716 |
| Johannesburg | 700,000 | 700,000 | 700,000 | 700,000 | 704,000 |
| Los Angeles | 4,148,720 | 4,197,635 | 4,206,875 | 4,174,304 | 4,349,267 |
| Madrid | 3,155,840 | 3,235,000 | 3,345,000 | 3,359,000 | 3,420,000 |
| Manila | 8,699,253 | 8,699,253 | 2,719,781 | 2,719,781 | 2,719,781 |
| Melbourne | 995,797 | 1,012,797 | 1,029,182 | 1,029,182 | 1,029,256 |
| Mexico | 7,283,712 | 6,999,402 | 6,999,402 | 6,999,402 | 7,103,000 |
| Milan | 4,789,148 | 4,922,597 | 4,903,686 | 4,860,053 | 4,844,138 |
| São Paulo | 6,679,000 | 6,767,000 | 6,713,100 | 5,935,807 | 5,154,347 |
| **Total** | **42,518,499** | **43,077,710** | **34,163,212** | **33,057,219** | **32,849,505** |

2) Observation of How the Websites Evolved:

The observation of the websites lasted a period of two years (2004-2005). We tried to discover general typologies or categories within the websites that were, at the same time, exhaustive and mutually exclusive. The categories were determined in a dialogue with the sites themselves following an opportunistic approach; that is, the researcher did not determine in advance the typologies that a diocesan website could or should have, but observed the categories they actually offered. Observing the sites over a period of time allowed the researcher to group or divide the different categories individuated with the aim of facilitating the analysis.

The observation of the websites included checking the information they contained, contents and services, and their effective application. This effectiveness was verified in different ways. One way was to register to the website newsletter and later checking to see if they were sent as promised (and not only affirming that a website had a newsletter as said); sending emails and waiting for reply; checking regularly how often news was update; verifying if links functioned, among others.

3) Exchange of Information with the Webmasters:

The task of establishing a table showing the contents and services of the websites was not based only on the personal observation of the sites. It was the result of combining researcher's hypotheses, dialogue and observation of the websites, and exchange of information with the webmasters. The webmasters for the nine websites selected were interviewed to confirm the categories observed previously by the researcher. In most of the cases, the questions posed to the webmasters required a justification of their choices as well as an explanation of the activities connected to the websites.

Webmasters were interview through open-ended questionnaires that included queries related to the four elements of the *WCM* (contents and services, technical instruments, managers, and visitors). Several experts and practitioners in institutional communications and website communication were consulted for the elaboration of the questionnaires.[9] In most of the cases, the questionnaires were sent by email (including follow-ups, when necessary). For the dioceses of Milan (Italy) and Madrid (Spain), the interviews were undertaken personally by the researcher with visits *in situ*. In the case of Los Angeles (USA), a first interview was done by a close collaborator of the researcher. Later, the researcher contacted directly the webmaster via email to clarify and complete the interview. Besides a numerous exchange of short emails, a total of eight complete interviews were done by email (including 10 different people); other eight people

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[9] The interviews were approached following the criteria and suggestions established in previous research on interactive applications such as those of Janet E. ALEXANDER & Marsha Ann TATE (1999). *Web wisdom. How to evaluate and create information quality on the web*; Mike KUNIAVSKY (2003). *Observing the User Experience. A Practitioner's Guide to User Research*; or José Luis ORIHUELA & María Luisa SANTOS (2004). "Guía para el diseño y evaluación de proyectos de comunicación digital," in José Ignacio BEL MALLÉN (Ed.). *Comunicar para crear valor. La direccion de comunicacion en las organizaciones*, pp. 397-416.

were interviewed personally). The interviews were conducted between July 20, 2004 and February 16, 2005.[10]

4) Establishment of the Table Presenting the Websites' Elements:

The table of websites' elements was determined according the four pillars of the *Website Communication Model (WCM)*. The final table contained a total of 34 categories or variables grouped as follows: 20 categories for contents and services (pillar 1); 5 categories for technical instruments (pillar 2); and 8 categories for managers and visitors (pillars 3 and 4).

The Table can certainly be improved upon, but it is an attempt at a "snap-shot" of the current situations of the websites under review. It therefore seems a starting point from where to begin a reflection on how institutional communications of Catholic dioceses could be improved. The number of categories could be modified, as it did not include all the possible elements a diocesan website can have, describing only what they currently have. The Table should in fact be adapted to different types of websites. The validity of the table lays in the fact that this study did not try to offer only a heuristic analysis, but sought rather to be an instrument to realistically portray diocesan websites. Realism imposed also offering a workable number of categories.

It goes beyond the objective of this paper to explain each one of the categories of the table. Let us just say that the pillar related to contents and services (pillar 1) was the group with the highest number of categories (20) because most of the information came from the direct study of the websites. It is however necessary to recall that the four pillars of the *WCM* are inter-related and, therefore, that these categories cannot be understood independently from the categories of the other pillars. Pillar 2 (technical instruments) included only five categories. An in-depth analysis of the technologies behind the creation and maintenance of a website could provide more elements, but since ours was a study of websites as communication instruments, we limited ourselves to presenting those that significantly impacted on the contents and services. Finally, the eight categories of pillars 3 (managers) and 4 (visitors) were presented together, since management embraces the interaction between managers and visitors of the website. Many of the elements related to these two pillars were arrived at through data provided by the managers of the websites, mainly the webmasters.

5) Interviews with Journalists:

Journalists and media in general play an essential role in the building up of public opinion, also among Catholics.[11] Dialogue with the webmasters confirmed the importance of considering journalists as an important community to be consulted or, at least, understood in order to carry out an effective website communication. For this reason, we decided to do in-depth interviews to a panel of journalists that could improve the study of the websites, as well as the information provided by the webmasters. The sample of journalists was selected from among *Vaticanologists* (journalists who cover the Vatican, usually accredited to the Press Office of the Holy See) and other religion journalists.

The total number of journalists interviewed was 41. Though it may seem a small group compared to the total number of journalists working in Rome, they were very qualified to respond satisfactorily to the questions proposed. Among other aspects, these interviews brought to light the adequacy between a target segment of the audience (journalists) and the contents and services of the websites. Several characteristics justified the selection of this category of journalists:

a) Availability: Rome has a high number of Vatican correspondents and journalists, who are experts on religious information.

b) Identification: *Vaticanologists* were easily identifiable and could be contacted directly, since they are grouped under the International Association of Journalists Accredited to the Vatican (AIGAV). Other

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[10] Chronology of interviews: Madrid (May 2004), Milan (July 2004-October 2005), Bogotá (September 2004), Johannesburg (September 2004), Melbourne (October 2004), México (November 2004), São Paulo (February 2005), and Manila (February 2005).

[11] The personal practical experiences of the researcher, himself a journalist, is another argument in favor of considering journalists as a group that needs to be taken into account when projecting website communication of Catholic institutions, and particularly of dioceses.

religion journalists could be reached through the public database of the *Associazione della Stampa Estera in Italia*.[12]

     c) Internationality: their cultural diversity helped to avoid cultural prejudices or misunderstandings and allowed for more broad-based conclusions. Journalists from all the countries of the diocesan websites under study, were selected. In some cases it was very difficult to find journalists dedicated to religious information (such as in Colombia, South Africa, and Australia). Table 2 shows a distribution of the number of journalists interviewed per the home country of the mass media for which they worked.

Table 2. Number of Journalists Interviewed by Countries
of the Mass Media for Which They Work.

| Mass Media's Country | Number of Journalists |
|---|---|
| International[13] | 9 |
| Italy | 7 |
| Spain | 7 |
| Mexico | 5 |
| USA | 4 |
| Philippines | 3 |
| Brazil | 3 |
| Colombia | 1 |
| South Africa | 1 |
| Australia | 1 |
| **Total** | **41** |

     d) Professionalism and expertise: journalists who are permanently accredited to the Press Office of the Holy See are more focused on religious affairs than are journalists who work for other sections. This characteristic explains why these journalists are better prepared and more experienced in their field. *Vaticanologists* and religion journalists were also presumed to be qualified users of Catholic diocesan websites.

     e) Cross-media: journalists from different mass media were included in the sample. Working under different degrees of pressure and time-frames should make them evaluate differently the information provided by websites. The cross-media distribution is presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Distribution of Journalists
by Type of Mass Media.

| Type of Mass Media | Number of Journalists |
|---|---|
| Newspaper | 13 |
| News Agency | 8 |
| Periodical | 6 |
| News Agency (international) | 4 |
| Press Office | 3 |
| Radio (international) | 2 |
| Periodical (international) | 2 |
| TV Network | 1 |
| Radio Network | 1 |
| TV News Agency | 1 |
| **Total** | **41** |

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[12] The Foreign Press Association in Italy was founded in 1912 to offer services and assistance to foreign newspaper correspondents in Italy. The Foreign Press Association represents more than 800 media organizations from 54 countries. The main office is in Rome. See www.stampa-estera.it [Last visit: April 20, 2006].

[13] "International" refers to a media outlet whose reach extends beyond a single country.

f) Journalists working in Catholic or secular media: in order to obtain a major balance in the answers, journalists were selected from varying professional contexts. The fact is that journalists working for Catholic media have different interests and perspectives from their colleagues working for secular media, in their use of diocesan websites. The sample was made up 2/3 by journalists working for secular media (27), and the rest (14) working for Catholic outlets.[14]

g) The distribution between men and women was purely coincidental, resulting in 15 women (37%) and 26 men (63%).

The phases devoted to data collection were not independent and it was sometimes necessary to conduct them in parallel. In fact, the information provided by the webmasters on several occasions resulted in modification of the researcher's observations. In the same way, the interviews with journalists altered some webmaster's perceptions, while some categories of the table were made clearer after the interviews with journalists. The data analysis was obviously carried out at the completion of the preceding five phases.

### 3. Results.

Several caveats are necessary before presenting the results. First of all, the results are not in any way an ethical judgment. The aim is only to be of service to those in charge of diocesan websites, offering them suggestions on ways to improve or learn from others. It must be said that, in general the selected websites were quite well done, which does not preclude the possibility of improvement. Secondly, a brief presentation such as this one cannot but make generalizations that unfortunately may not be entirely correct. For instance, elements that may be called positive might not be so in some websites and, conversely, aspects that could be improved upon in one website might already be well-presented in others. Finally, speaking about websites without seeing it in practice makes it more difficult to understand some of the elements referred to. We suggest that the reading of these pages be accompanied by observations of the websites in question.

For the sake of simplicity, we will present only a very few examples of the results of the entire research done using the *Website Communication Model* structure:

- First, we present the results related to the analysis of the contents and services' categories; specifically, bishop's information, languages, and press sections;

- Secondly, the results related to the instruments and technology of the websites, particularly, the use of multimedia features, file formats and technical requirements; and

- Thirdly, the results on the analysis of the management and the relationship between promoters and visitors: email interaction with visitors, analysis of statistics, and financial issues and donations.

### 3.1. Contents & Services:

1) Bishop's Information:

Diocesan websites are official websites. It is therefore normal that one of their most important sections is dedicated to the bishop: biography, pictures, speeches, pastoral letters, messages, books, contact data, etc. In fact, information about the bishop is a common feature of diocesan websites and, in most of the cases, a quite extensive one.

The result we present here does not relate however to the content of this section itself. Each website team —with the bishop's approval— will decide on what information about the bishop to be provided in the website. Our goal was to determine the "positioning" of the diocesan website in response to an Internet search for information about the bishop. The important aspect of this search was not only to determine if information about the bishop was easily found on the Internet through search engines, but rather *where* it was found. Although diocesan websites may not be the only ones with information about their bishops, they should rightly be the first ones offering this information. The results reflect with how much success each diocesan website has been able to present to the Internet world its leading official. By way of example, a search was done on April 1, 2006 for the bishops of Johannesburg (Buti Tlhagale), Melbourne (Denis J. Hart), Milan (Dionigi Tettamanzi), and São Paulo (Claudio Hummes). The results are presented in Table 4.

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[14] Catholic mass media is here understood as a media owned by a Catholic institution or any other confessional media. Secular means any non-Catholic mass media.

Table 4. Search of the Bishop's Name of Each Diocese in
Google, Yahoo and MSN Search Engines.

| Search (April 1, 2006) | Google (com) | Google (national) | Yahoo | MSN |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| "Buti Tlhagale" (Johannesburg) | 1$^{st}$ position | (google.co.za) 1$^{st}$ position | 1$^{st}$ position | 1$^{st}$ position |
| "Denis J. Hart" (Melbourne) | 1$^{st}$ position | (google.com.au) 1$^{st}$ position | 3$^{rd}$ position | 1$^{st}$ position |
| "Dionigi Tettamanzi" (Milano) | *11$^{th}$ position* | (google.it) 1$^{st}$ position | *41$^{st}$ position* | 6$^{th}$ position (second address) |
| "Claudio Hummes" (São Paulo) | *Not among the first 100 results* | (google.com.br) *30$^{th}$ position* | *Not among the first 100 results* | *11$^{th}$ position* |

The results showed the difficulties that some websites had obtaining a good "positioning" of official information about their bishops. There were certainly very positive results as in the case of Bishop Buti Tlhagale (Johannesburg), the only one in which the diocese was in first position in all the searches, or of Archbishop Denis J. Hart (Melbourne), the search of whose name made the diocese appear within the first five positions of the results in all the search engines. Other cases gave different levels of success according to the search engines in question: Cardinal Dionigi Tettamanzi (Milan) obtained the positions 11$^{th}$, 1$^{st}$, 41$^{st}$, and 6$^{th}$. The webmaster of São Paulo ought to worry a little bit, considering that the search for the name of his cardinal Claudio Hummes, did not offer much encouraging results.[15]

The same search done with the name of the bishop might be applied to other aspects such as the Title and Description of the site. If they are not well-presented, they do not get properly indexed by search engines and so even if the sites have very good content they would still not be really accessible because they are not "visible."

2) Language:

As it is obvious, diocesan websites are written in the local language, since their target —and most of their users— are local residents. However, Internet is a global network and any website may be consulted from all over the world. It might be unnecessary and onerous for a diocese to translate the entire site, but helping external visitors to consult some information in a common language could be profitable for both the diocese and the user. The results of the research showed that very few of the websites from non-English speaking countries have taken this further step.

Even if diocesan sites were done for a specific target, it seems advisable to translate into English some important contents such as the biography of the bishop, diocesan Quick Facts, or particular statements that may be of interest beyond the geographical limits of the diocese.

The convenience of translating into English is more obvious with respect to journalists, since offering information in a language they understand helps to avoid misrepresentation (English has become the *lingua franca* in communication and the Internet). As an example, one of the journalists interviewed affirmed, "It is very frustrating checking for information on a foreign website and, for example, finding all the information in Korean." Indeed, strong support for English texts in diocesan websites was expressed by most of the journalists on our panel. In multicultural areas, specific translations may also be extended to other languages.

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[15] It does not seem necessary to mention how important it is to appear on the first page of search engine results (usually among the first ten results), in order to be realistically considered "visible".

3) Press Section:

There are high disparities among the press sections of the different diocesan websites studied, according to their needs and resources. While some dioceses have highly developed and complete sections, others are quite simple. As more and more journalists use the Internet as their first source of information and to get press releases and other data on Church institutions, managers of diocesan websites need to consider giving more importance to their press section. Press contact information may be essential, but not always enough.

Granted that some journalists may have ideological prejudices against the Church, most of them are not ill-intentioned when writing about Church issues. The fact is that they are ignorant of the basics and more importantly, lack time for reflection. By offering useful and necessary tools through the official website, Church press offices can help journalists give accurate information about their institutions, within the limits of what can be offered through this medium. Among others, journalists are interested in chronologically ordered news, archive for background information, glossaries explaining theological or ecclesiastical terms, (such as can be found on website of the diocese of Johannesburg), texts written from a journalistic perspective (not just homilies), press releases, and so on.

Moreover, website managers should understand that in the exercise of their profession journalists visit diocesan websites as outsiders. Websites should therefore clarify the distinction between the pastoral and informative aspects: the first more directed towards an internal public, while the latter is more interest to journalists.

Finally, a negative discovery arising from this study is that in general, there is little contact between the press offices and the team running diocesan websites. Both departments fulfill different communication functions, for while press offices are mainly concerned with responding to media queries, webmasters update and maintain the website. However, more intercommunication between these two departments is advisable. As earlier mentioned, many journalists begin their research from the internet but do not stop there. It is therefore necessary to offer them accurate information on the site, particularly through the "Press Section" link. At the same time, it is important to prepare diocesan officials well to be able to respond to media enquiries, for example by email, and not only.

### 3.2. Technical Instruments:

1) Audio-Video:

Websites provide users with a multimedia experience. Texts may be an essential part of the website, but they can be enhanced with audio and video features. In recent years, an increasing use of audio and video resources have been observed on diocesan websites, one interesting example of which is the use of mp3 files for sacred music, or for devotions (such as the Rosary on the Los Angeles' diocesan website). Podcasting technology (featured during this seminar) was used by the dioceses of Madrid (Gospel) and Los Angeles (Rosary).

There is no question that multimedia features can enrich the experience of website's visitors. For example, listening to a Gregorian chant may be much more attractive than only reading the score and the lyrics, and watching a short video message of the bishop presenting the goals of the diocese may have more impact than just reading a mission statement.

Together with audio and video, webmasters need to consider the possibility of offering high quality pictures. The website may become an inexpensive channel for providing images to the media, always respecting of course the copyright of the authors. This option moreover makes it possible to use the most appropriate images for the activities and members of the diocese.

Communication practitioners know that good quality images have an enormous potential to promote Catholic values and might be a more powerful instrument to spreading the Gospel more than long-winded theological explanations. Photo-galleries of Christian paintings or architecture, accompanied by suitable catechetical references will greatly help the task of evangelization.

2) File Formats and Technical Requirements:

Webmasters of diocesan websites studied made tried to ensure that their sites were accessible from most common technological platforms and a wide variety of users. There was a generalized understanding of the importance of using common software standards, and many of the websites included downloading options for different contents (PDF, Real Player, etc.). One positive step was the effort of the Diocese of Los Angeles to make its site content compatible with PDAs, a device in widespread use in the US, and which will facilitate constant access to contents and services of interest to users. In any case, each website team should take into account the technologies employed in their geographical area. For example, the use of Macromedia Flash ®  (by the website of the Diocese of Bogota) might create access problems for those visitors with non-advanced Internet technologies.

### 3.3. Management & Visitors:

1) Response to Email:

Interactivity is one of the strongest characteristics of websites and, at the same time, it may become one of their major flaws. When an email address is offered to the public, a response to enquiries is expected. If this response is not forthcoming, the resulting frustration may lead to the loss of visitors. Though most of the websites were quick in replying to emails, it was not the case with all of them, as for example São Paulo. On a general web forum, an Internet user left this message: "*Dear webmaster: please, reply my message. If you cannot reply, don't provide an email; I'll call you on phone*".

Webmasters need to evaluate the real possibilities of replying all email queries. Two useful criteria to keep in mind are:

    a) *Be ready to reply emails*: This requires dedication of time and human resources to answer serious enquiries within a reasonable period of time. This does not mean that the webmaster alone should undertake this job, as he may be assisted by other diocesan officials.

    b) *Simplify the contact information*: Internet users are not usually familiar with all the official designations of personnel within the diocese or of the website. As such, on a first level it may be advisable on the home page to provide very few email addresses, in order not to confuse the visitor. For example, one address could be for the webmaster (for technical enquiries), one for general information (any non-technical question), and one for the press section (for media professionals). Emails addressed to any of these three would need to be re-routed to the officials concerned (pastoral, vocations, administration, liturgy, etc.). The burden of re-routing these mails belongs to the webmaster and cannot be put on the visitor. An example of an excessive use of email addresses was on the website of the diocese of Milan.

2) Analysis of the statistics:

Many diocesan webmasters used software to analyze the visits to their websites. Statistics are one of the few objective means to ascertain the real usage of our websites and it should be employed to their highest potential, especially when quality software for analysis is available for free.[16] The real problem is that most of the people in charge of websites do not know how to (or do not have the time!) to interpret and take advantage of the usage statistics.

The analysis of statistics cannot be reduced only to a presentation of numbers and graphics, or to a verification of a growing or decreasing number of visits. These data are the bases for an evaluation of the deficiencies and merits of the website. Webmasters and communication officers need to analyze them together: the first can offer their technical expertise in presenting the results in a comprehensible way; while the latter can develop communication strategies thanks to their practical and theoretical background. Among other effects, accurate and regular study of the statistics might induce those responsible for the website to reinforce sections of particular interest, to change pages with a high exit-rate, to "buy" the most-searched words in specific search engines, to discover potential publics from an analysis of the back links, and so on.

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[16] An example of a freely available software for analysis of website's statistics is Quest Software.

3) Financial Issues & Donations:

Very few diocesan websites provide complete financial information on the activities of the diocese. Only Los Angeles offered extensive information in this regard that could be downloaded from the website.

The serious need that local Churches have of financial help for social and welfare activities should encourage webmasters to take advantage of the website to inform, encourage and facilitate solidarity. Transparency implies explaining how financial resources are employed, savings invested, and so on. From a communications' standpoint, transparency may prevent unfounded criticisms of Church's institutions based on stereotypes such as that of excessive wealth or opulence. The importance of being transparent in financial issues should not only be in response to legal obligations but has much to do with the image that the institution—the diocese— tries to project and the activities that it tries to promote. Fostering donations for social activities, participation in non-profit organizations and so on requires a trustworthy image. Donors have the right to know how their money is used, and so report about the budget and balances have to be detailed.

Although most of the webmasters complained of low budgets, none of the websites analyzed seemed to consider seriously the possibility of having sponsors as a means to raise money. This measure will require prudence and balance in order that the sponsor's identity does not conflict with the nature of a Catholic institution.

Solidarity can also be fostered through the website; first, by reminding donors about the tax advantages of their donations, and secondly by making it possible and easy to make donations online for specific projects. The website of the Los Angeles Diocese, for example, had provision for online donations for its *Catholic Education Foundation.*

## 4. Conclusions:

The observations presented in this paper are just a brief synthesis of a wider research. They however show a few general conclusions that can be helpful to those in charge of websites and communication offices of Catholic dioceses.

*a) Websites are a multidimensional reality:*

Launching websites is not only a matter of combining software with contents and services. People are a key element. What our website is going to have will depend on who we plan to reach, and who will run it.

A useful framework to follow in launching new websites and revising existent ones is the *Website Communication Model (WCM).* According to this model, a website must be considered from several perspectives: first, according to its four pillars (contents & services; technical instruments that make these contents accessible, services; managers; and visitors); second, in the interaction among these pillars; and, third, in the website's relationship with its surrounding context. Considering all these elements makes website communication more effective and efficacious, becoming a very helpful instrument in the mission of the diocese.

*b) Both webmasters and communicators are needed:*

To manage websites adequately both technicians and communicators are equally necessary. Some websites seem to lack communication objectives and appear as mere aggregations of content and software. There is often discordance among the different communications officials regarding the aims of the website, which becomes evident in the presentation of the final output. Other times, the aims declared are too general (evangelization, education, information, and so on).

Left in the hands of technicians alone, as is frequently the case in small organizations who entrust their websites to volunteers with basic training on software design, diocesan websites may include unnecessary contents or even contents not in consonance with the website's communication goals. Before including contents, services, graphical or software features, website managers should consider their need and congruency. The question they need to pose themselves before including or excluding anything on the site

should not be 'why not?', but 'why?' or 'what for?'. This reflective exercise is connatural to a communication formation.

### c) Information versus evangelization?

Catholic webmasters are imbued with a healthy desire to spread the Gospel. Many cannot make up their minds between developing websites with a more 'evangelizing' approach (devotions, virtual communities, spiritual advice, etc.), or a more 'informative' approach (official information, press releases, archives, etc.). In our opinion, there is no real tension between information and evangelization in Catholic diocesan websites. The best way for diocesan websites to contribute to the mission of evangelization is by offering accurate, up-to-date and complete information. Indeed, diocesan websites are indispensable points of reference for the institutions they represent, and need to offer the essential official information that anyone would require from their institution.

This fact does not preclude that diocesan websites include features more directed to promote evangelization. Two interesting examples of apostolic initiatives in diocesan websites are those of the dioceses of Los Angeles (with a section or link called 'Interested in the Catholic Church?'), and Melbourne (with a section called 'How to Become Catholic'). Both sections offer essential explanations of the Catholic faith and facilitate contacts for God-searchers in perfect harmony with the institutional nature of their websites. At the same time, managers of diocesan websites have to focus on their institutional area considering that many other website initiatives are already carrying out activities on behalf of evangelization, such providing information on Magisterial documents, fostering Catholic marriages, or promoting devotions.

### d) Website and press office collaboration:

A major synergy between the website team and the communications office is desirable for a higher quality of the media relations activities of Catholic dioceses. As it was shown by the results, it often happens that managers of diocesan websites (webmasters) and managers of the diocesan communication office (media relations, public affairs, spokesperson, and so on) work too separately, with not much contact among them. Empowering both the website and the office of communications with a higher degree of collaboration will improve the effects of their work: media managers may rely on the possibilities offered by the website as for example the possibility of having online their archives, background information, newsletters, and so on. Webmasters on the other hand can take advantage of the inputs provided by the office of communications either in relation to content and services (such as press dossiers, news, or texts written in a short and attractive journalistic style), or related to strategies of communication (goals, campaigns, "hot" topics, etc.).

In addition, it is important for effective communication that those in charge of communication have access to all necessary facts and persons in the diocese, such as the bishop and the heads of the different departments. At the same time, webmasters have an essential role in making available information to the press officers in the appropriate formats (audio-video streaming, downloads, attractive graphical design, essential software requirements, etc.).

The decision of unifying or separating the website department and the office of communications will depend on the internal structure of the diocese, but the need for closer relationships demands regular meetings, and more comprehensive meetings at particular times of the year to plan future strategies and evaluate previous activities.

### e) Continuous education and training of the webmaster or website manager:

Even though the role of the webmaster is mainly focused on technical aspects, it is also true that webmasters of diocesan websites have an important role with regard to content. In many cases, it is often the webmaster who decides on a day-to-day basis what content to put and how, what corrections to be done, what external links to include, and so on; therefore, the webmaster has a total control of the website.

This responsibility calls for an adequate training of the webmaster. Webmasters need to be abreast with the technological developments needed to implement the best resources in their websites.[17] Second, webmasters need to have a high degree of responsibility in constantly improving their own personal knowledge and understanding of the Catholic faith. They are not communicating neutral content and only a deep affinity with their faith will make it possible for them to correctly present the nature of the institution

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[17] Since the dioceses have usually financial problems, webmasters may keep a constant eye on the developments of freeware available.

they work for. Finally, webmasters should have the desire to increase their education in communications, not only from a technical perspective but also from a theoretical point of view. This implies familiarity with trends in public opinion, interest in current affairs, basic understanding of media dynamics, basic awareness of Internet usage tendencies, and so on.

The "weight" of personal education does not however fall on the webmasters alone. Diocesan media managers should be also encouraged to improve the quality of their job with better preparation. While media officers may be better prepared communication-wise, they need to put more emphasis in improving their training in the other two areas: technology and Catholic doctrine. Basic understanding of technology will enable communicators to plan and program realistic strategies, and will facilitate mutual understanding with the website's team. Furthermore a deep knowledge of the Catholic faith will enable them to be authoritative spokespersons for the diocese.

Complete training and education is not however a "free activity." It requires effort and investment in time and financial resources. It can be partly resolved through short courses, seminars, or intensive programs, but a more profound preparation is necessary for a responsible and professional communication leadership. There are no magic solutions and the only way to tackle the problem is team work. Webmasters and media officials need to foster the training of collaborators and future successors. It may not always be possible for the bosses themselves to leave the day to day work in order to undergo the required training. Therefore, other people can be sent in their stead to be trained at schools or programs in communications while they remain in the "trench". That way they can count in the future on younger people even better prepared than themselves to continue their job. This strategy pays off in the long-term. Hence those in charge of diocesan communications, whether at the media office or at the website, need to convince their superiors that setting aside a budget for training personnel is as important as —or even more— than having a budget for material needs.

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This author is aware that it may be one thing to address these issues from a university and hence make proposals that may not always be possible to undertake in practice, since dioceses have different resources and interests. It is however our hope that most of our observations be useful to the majority and, at least, may encourage an effort to improve the already high professional standards of Catholic diocesan websites and offices of communication.

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