The Church in a Wired World
(or "The Church in the Internet Age")

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How can Catholic organizations better communicate information to web media? How can they spread the message of the Church to Catholics who are on the web?

A big part of the challenge involves tailoring your information for the web. People don't always read the web passively like a newspaper; they use it proactively, searching for content they want. If your information can meet a need, it will benefit both you and the readers.

So what kind of religious information do people look for on the web? As an editor at the multifaith web magazine Beliefnet, I find that most readers want content that falls into these categories:

- Information that helps them understand **Jesus' life and teachings.**
- Features about the **Bible**—devotionals, study guides, answered questions.
- Simple, easy-to-understand **FAQs** (Frequently Asked Questions): What is the Sacrament of Reconciliation? What happens during it?
- Features about **prayer and how to pray.**
- **Personality quizzes**: What's your prayer style? Which saint are you most like?
- Lively, unusual **first-person stories about spiritual experiences**: for example, an essay about receiving a sacrament.
- **Q&As** (Questions and Answers) or "Ask the Priest": "Can I have a Muslim couple as my baby's grandparents?" "My father is very ill. What can you tell me about Catholic hospices?"
- Features on **spirituality in music, movies, and celebrity/pop culture**, especially when audio or video are made available. For example, "What is Mel Gibson's chapel like?"
- Non-scholarly, inspiring features about **angels and saints.**
- Articles and resources about **marriage, couples and relationships**. For example, an essay about Natural Family Planning written by a couple who practices it. Or an "Ask the Priest" column by a Catholic woman dating a Hindu man.
- **Family activities** for Catholics and other Christians.
- **Explanations of very basic concepts** we think everyone knows—but they don't. For example, "Who is Pontius Pilate?" or "What does Pentecost mean?"
- Articles and resources about **depression, fear, stress, and other mood problems**. For example, prayers to say when you're depressed.
- **Devotional guides.** For example, recommended Bible readings and devotional material for adults who take care of aging parents.

Here are **top search terms** from our website (as of early 2006):

1. angels
2. divorce
3. Bible
4. Catholic
5. Prayers
6. death

7. forgiveness
8. marriage
9. love
10. fasting
11. abortion
12. saints
13. sex
14. intelligent design
15. depression
16. Christianity
17. inspiration
18. homosexuality
19. gratitude
20. Gnostic
21. faith
22. rosary
23. evolution
24. grief
25. psalms

Not every topic here will match the information you provide in your work. Understandably, communications professionals more often announce events and share bishops' statements. However, whenever there are points of contact between your information and the content web users want, play up that information. If you are involved in a diocesan website and want more people to visit your site, try to address some of the topics above. Provide clear, short, practical information on the sacraments, relationship questions, and similar topics.

In many cases, web media editors will go to websites first when they have questions about Church teaching. On the sites, they may look for information or for experts they can call. When this happens, be ready with lists of experts who can speak on various topics. For example, Beliefnet recently updated its features on the crisis in Darfur. We needed religious leaders to summarize their activities related to Sudan. By searching the website of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, we found a good spokesperson.

Media organizations may also need experts for features that are not related to news. For example, Beliefnet recently needed an expert to talk about depictions of Mary Magdalene in art. Other topics we have needed experts on are the Gospel of Judas, evolution, *in vitro* fertilization, and the Iraq war. In some cases, we need the Catholic position on controversial issues so that we can create comparative charts like this one, which defines the beliefs of the Abrahamic faiths: http://www.beliefnet.com/features/abrahamicfaiths.html

If you put lists of experts on your website in a place that is easy to find, more people will learn of the information you provide—and will hear the Church's message. Searchable databases of experts, like http://www.religionsource.org, are also very helpful.

Experts should also use terms that are **understandable** to all people. For example, if they are talking about euthanasia, they should avoid using the Catholic terms "extraordinary means" and "ordinary means," unless they can quickly and easily explain the difference.

In the past, Catholic communications personnel and Catholic experts knew who their **audience** was. If a secular newspaper called them, they knew how to frame their responses. If a diocesan newspaper called them, they also knew how to speak to that newspaper's readers.

On the web, it is not always possible to know who your audience is. **Non-Catholics** may use a search engine and find a statement given to a diocesan newspaper. Because of this, Catholic communications personnel must be careful to envision all the possible readers of web content, and be very clear.

When accurate and up-to-date content about Catholic topics is not available online, problematic content rises to the top of the web. For several years, material from the 1910 Catholic Encyclopedia came up at the top of the list when terms like "Catholicism and Judaism" were googled. This 100-year-old material contained descriptions of Judaism as a "barren fig tree which Jesus condemned": http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/08399a.htm

If inaccurate information is released on the web, it is very difficult to correct; it spreads to many unlikely places over the internet. An example of this was a recent erroneous news article from Scotland about the Vatican's stance on Judas.

For up-to-date content to rise to the top of search engine lists, the content should be relevant, easy to understand, and contain words that many people might search with. For example, some Catholic websites might refer only to "Christ" or "Our Lord." When this happens, people searching using the word "Jesus" will not pull up such websites.

Take advantage of popular pages on your website to draw more traffic to other pages. For example, if Catholics visit your website to see if a certain day is a Holy Day in your diocese, make sure that information is prominent on your homepage. Then place content you'd like to highlight around that.

To understand how your site's content might fulfill user needs, type commonly searched-for terms, like "marriage," into the search engine of your department's website and then into Google. See what turns up. The material turned up by Google will represent what most people are searching for. If your site's search engine does not turn up relevant, useful material, consider contracting someone who knows about search optimization**.** If that is not possible, consider rewriting some text for the web so that it more closely meets users' needs.

Here are additional web tips for Catholic communications professionals:

- Provide **lists of experts** on your websites. Magazines and newspapers often need Catholic experts on these topics: Marriage and relationships; preparing to receive a sacrament; biotechnology and morality.
- Have experts create **easy and short FAQs** about their topics. In FAQs, **avoid excess theology** and distill information down to its fundamentals. If a topic is complicated, include links to additional information.
- "Chunk" the information in press releases, using **bullet points.**
- Create a **list of common terms** with their definitions and post it on your site.
- People may read your website years after it was posted. So if there is no **date** on your web information, do not say "last month, Bishop Smith announced…"—say "In December 2005, Bishop Smith announced..."
- Use **photos** on your web pages when possible.

- To spread Catholic events or news, consider reaching out to **popular Catholic weblogs** in your area. Ask the bloggers if you can email them press releases or info. However, do not bury bloggers with information that is not of interest.

Now more than ever, it is important that people be able to find accurate information about Catholic teaching on important issues. By tailoring your content to meet user needs, you can increase awareness of your work and spread the Church's message.

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