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INTERNET – CHURCH – COMMUNICATION

Cyberspace is the most public space of our universe today, open to everyone, who has the access to Internet. It is the modern version of the Agora – an open space in which free public discourse can be conducted without mediation of those that in authority and without the agenda specific to the mass media[1]. With more than billion users, Internet represents the most significant development in the sphere of global communication, and its continual rapid expansion has surpassed all scientific predictions. The virtual construct of the cyber-realm also represents the fastest growing alternative reality known to humanity – a new digital habitat for the human mind. It is obviously a space that cannot be ignored for many reasons[2].

However, theology has not felt very comfortable with the new media and, beyond utilizing its commercial space through various religious web pages, has made little or no attempt to engage in influencing its public arena. Theology usually excuses its passivity in Cyberspace through a general attitude of negativism and criticism focused on the emerging ethical dilemmas within the context of the new media. These ethical concerns are legitimate and deserve a serious reflection.

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[1] Cf. M. Drożdż, *Osoba i media. Personalistyczny paradygmat etyki mediów,* Tarnów 2005; M. Drożdż, *Logos i Ethos mediów. Dyskurs paradygmatyczny filozofii mediów,* Tarnów 2005; K. Ligęza, *„Areopag” środków społecznego przekazu jako wyzwanie dla ewangelizacji współczesnej kultury w nauczaniu Jana Pawła II,* Kraków 2000; *Religia a mass media. Znaczenie środków społecznego przekazu w kulturze religijnej Polski,* ed. W. Zdaniewicz, Ząbki 1997; A. Lepa, *Pedagogika mass mediów,* Łódź 1998.

[2] Cf. *Internet – fenomen społeczeństwa informacyjnego,* ed. T. Zasępa, Lublin 2001; *Internet – nowe technologie ku społeczeństwu przyszłości,* ed. T. Zasępa, Lublin 2003.

Yet, their very existence demands our engagement in constructing a viable moral response to the ethical struggles of the digital realm[3].

On the one hand, the theological content sites enrich the cyberspace, on the other hand, the Internet effects on our theological phrases and thoughts[4]. This interaction expressed by the Roman Catholic Church as follows: „As more than just a technological revolution, today's revolution in social communications involves a fundamental reshaping of the elements by which people comprehend the world about them, and verify and express what they comprehend. The constant availability of images and ideas, and their rapid transmission even from continent to continent, have profound consequences, both positive and negative, for the psychological, moral and social development of persons, the structure and functioning of societies, intercultural communications, and the perception and transmission of values, world views, ideologies, and religious beliefs. The communications revolution affects perceptions even of the Church, and has a significant impact on the Church's own structures and modes of functioning All this has striking pastoral implications. The media can be used to proclaim the Gospel or to reduce it to silence in human hearts. As media become ever more intertwined with people's daily lives, they influence how people understand the meaning of life itself"[5]. If Church can do anything about Internet phenomenon, then it is to articulate her demand on the identity of the virtual world and the real world. In view of that, the author presents the Internet from the perspective of the Roman Catholic Church teaching underlining the three issues: impersonality, varies kinds of addictions connected with the Internet and Cybercommunity.

IMPACT OF THE INTERNET ON PERSONALITY AND IDENTITY

People are building a new world by using and developing the Internet. They use these simple bits to create databases, homepages, portals, blogs, chats, forums, e-mails, etc., but it seems that the story of the tower of Babel can be repeated in the 21st century when we want to create a virtual world according to our ideas, demands and wishes. Nevertheless, theology has to know and inform the public that the virtual world should not be another world than world created by God. It would be a fatal error to consider the cyberspace, which is out of the reality.

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[3] Cf. A. Augustine, *Seeing Beyond the Screen: Towards an Understanding of the Significance and Function of Cyberspace as Media, Social and Sacred Space,* unpublished lecture given during the conference „Public Theology in Central Europe", 25–28 March 2004 in Debrecen; M. Drożdż, *Osoba i media. Personalistyczny paradygmat etyki mediów*, Tarnów 2005.

[4] Cf. T. Kodácsy, *Public Theology and Cyberspace,* unpublished lecture given during the conference „Public Theology in Central Europe", 25–28 March 2004 in Debrecen.

[5] Pontificium Consilium de Communicationibus Socialibus, Pastoral instruction *Aetatis novae* (AeN), 22 II 1992, n. 4.

At first sight it seems that it is a stereotypy, and people think this temptation does not endanger us, but observing the directions and motivations of Internet using, may can assess the happiness of building of bricks, and the intention of creating a new city or tower startling appears again.

In recent sphere of communication people send and receive information in two major forms, through sound and picture. In comparison of these two information-carriers, technically the sound is more fragile and unstable than the picture. Considering a computer network, we can recognise that computers can easily forward a hundred volumes lexicon from one computer station to another as a data file. With modern network cards and cables, it is no problem to carry megabytes or a gigabyte in a second. Nevertheless, when we want to send a sound-type information, then the computer sometimes frightened to do this, the applications run slower, and the resources of the machine focus on sending or receiving sound-type data. The computer must save time in case of breaking or delaying of information – buffering. The reason of this phenomenon is the nature of sound. In order to transport sound is not enough to make computers and networks, which can communicate rapidly with each-other, but this communication must be continuously come to pass. The sound, because of its wave-nature, is information if it is continuous and ceaseless[6].

In theology, the proclamation of Good News is based on the more unstable equipment, on the sound. „So faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ" (Rom 10:17). There are people between Scripture and faith, who have been speaking and hearing the word of Jesus Christ[7]. God deemed sound good to mediate his message among people. „Communication in and by the Church is essentially communication of the Good News of Jesus Christ. It is the proclamation of the Gospel as a prophetic, liberating word to the men and women of our times; it is testimony, in the face of radical secularisation, to divine truth and to the transcendent destiny of the human person; it is witness given in solidarity with all believers against conflict and division, to justice and communion among peoples, nations, and cultures" (AeN 5). So, the lack of human speech is the crucial point in the relationship of theology and Internet. It does not mean the change of the monitors for the loudspeakers, and it would not be a good solution to persuade mouse to move instead of a click. But without verbal contact we lack for personality and fragility in cyberspace. Obviously, engineers have been making efforts to develop faster and faster data-transfer on the Internet and more beautiful graphics on monitors, but it have not been so important for them if the person at computer was identical with

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[6] T. Kodácsy, *Public Theology and Cyberspace*, unpublished lecture given during the conference „Public Theology in Central Europe", 25–28 March 2004 in Debrecen.

[7] Cf. A. Jeż, *Jezus Chrystus w kontekście ludzkiej komunikacji*, Tarnów 2002; R. Czekalski, *Katecheza komunikacją wiary. Studium z katechetyki fundamentalnej*, Płock 2006.

the user on the Internet. It is one of the most expensive software-system what can hold the personal identity during the using of computer[8]. It is not at all important on the Internet, who is the person sending e-mails or surfing on the Net.

The most distinctive of the Internet lifestyle could be summarized as „surfing," „networking," „searching for community" and „change". Fact that the Cyberspace is mostly used for the purpose of social interaction, reminds us that social alienation[9] is a condition pre-existing to the creation of the Cyber-world. In that case, plugging into the Net, viewed as an extension of human beings around the globe, and building communal relationships not on the basis „of common location, but of common interest" are expressions of utilizing communication in search of belonging[10]. „Networking" brings the sense of equalization of the significance of all contributors whose simultaneous presence on the Net constitutes its texture. „Change" presents a search for harmony between form and meaning, or finding one's true form and meaning on the journey in the context of the net-linked humanity[11].

The search for belonging takes the shape of „surfing" – a journey into unknown territories. „To live in the digital universe means taking a journey with hope to find co-travellers with whom to share the experience and dialogue about its meaning. Therefore, in the midst of the digital landscape, theology could assume the form not of an oracle, but of a road sign – a pointer along the way, inviting the traveller to take the road, yet not volunteering all the information about the journey – thus, allowing it to become a personal discovery (an experience of an encounter with the divine). Theology should assert the promise of arrival for those who undertake the travel on the basis of their commitment. This guidance should be done in transparency, vulnerability, and willingness to confess our own insufficiency of vision and understanding. In this way, theology is transformed from a museum curator into a sojourner, experiencing anew the wonder of the discovery and the trepidation of the unknown. Yet, in the midst of its confessed limitations, theology should nurture hope and trust built upon the experience of God's character"[12].

Rejecting the nostalgic option for a return to „pre ICT age" we need to search for the possibility of theology in the confrontation with the Cyberspace[13]. The

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[8] Cf. T. Kodácsy, *Public Theology and Cyberspace*, unpublished lecture given during the conference „Public Theology in Central Europe", 25–28 March 2004 in Debrecen.

[9] Cf. J. Mastalski, *Samotność globalnego nastolatka*, Kraków 2007; E. Prijatelj, *Psiholoska dinamika rasti v veri*, Maribor 2008.

[10] Cf. J. Cobb, *Cybergrace: The Search for God in Cyberspace*, New York 1998.

[11] Cf. A. Augustine, *Seeing Beyond the Screen: Towards an Understanding of the Significance and Function of Cyberspace as Media, Social and Sacred Space*, unpublished lecture given during the conference „Public Theology in Central Europe", 25–28 March 2004 in Debrecen.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Cf. H. Lombaerts, E. Osewska, A. Scerri, *Information and Communication Technology*, in: *Catholic Education European and Maltese Perspectives. Church Schools' rsponse to future challenges*, Floriana, Malta 2004, p. 113–130.

interactive nature of the Cyberspace medium also outlines the need of an open dialogue, able to facilitate and sustain Christian forum. This assertive inclusivity should point to the sacredness of life in all of its locations. It should celebrate life's diversity and uniqueness as flowing out of God's infinite creativity, and emphasize the necessity of sustaining the dignity of all life amidst its diversity. Internet is a multi-cultural vehicle, providing a neutral space for dialogue. Theology in Cyberspace should also focus on the omnipresence of God and thus claim the Net as a location of unquestionable relevance for the theological endeavour. It could illuminate digital existence with the insight, that in spite of our physical and mental location, God is always the immediate environment of our soul[14].

As human beings living in XXI century we experience the relief of being located and found and discover that the grace of God is inseparable from His all-knowing omnipresence. Surrounded by His presence, love, grace, we are strengthened through hope to press forward on our life pilgrimage. The recognition of the omnipresence of God illuminates our perception of life as a journey, as well as the context of the Cyber-lifestyle as wandering. The knowledge that God is present along the way informs our navigational choice and His omniscience forces us to deal with the inner motivation of our actions. It also surrounds us with the clarity that true worship is not linked to our physical location (being on or off the Internet) but to the positioning of our being in relationship with God Himself (cf. John 4:23). The Spirit searches our depths and communicates the depths of God (cf. 1 Cor 2:10). As we encounter the truth about ourselves in the context of God's Truth (Jesus Christ, Who is the Way, the Truth and the Life – cf. John 14:6), we are set free to become who He calls us to be (cf. John 8:32); we are empowered to take our shape as the Spirit (the agent of incarnation of Christ-likeness) births Christ in us. The fragility and interconnectedness of life is easily discernable in Cyberspace. Any virus, which is usually the outcome of a lack of moral responsibility to the social life on the Internet can quickly spread through the digital links and devastate or exterminate multiple locations of cyber-life. Recognizing this vulnerability has created a growing urgency for developing cyber-ethics as a part of the vaster need for techno-ethics evident in the diverse life of the information society. In that context, theologians, ethicists, educators are obliged to construct moral response to technologically driven dilemmas[15].

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[14] Cf. A. Augustine, *Seeing Beyond the Screen: Towards an Understanding of the Significance and Function of Cyberspace as Media, Social and Sacred Space*, unpublished lecture given during the conference „Public Theology in Central Europe", 25–28 March 2004 in Debrecen.

[15] Cf. A. Augustine, *Seeing Beyond the Screen: Towards an Understanding of the Significance and Function of Cyberspace as Media, Social and Sacred Space*, unpublished lecture given during the conference „Public Theology in Central Europe", 25–28 March 2004 in Debrecen.

VARIES KINDS OF ADDICTIONS

The Internet presents special problems for the Roman Catholic Church: One of the most important of these involves what today is called the digital divide, which creates two groups, the rich and the poor, on the basis of access, or lack of access, to the new information and communication technology. The causes and consequences of the divide are not only economic but also technical, social, and cultural. Precisely, the Internet transmit and help install a set of cultural values connected with thinking about human being, social relationships, family, religion. The postmodern paradoxes spread via ICT often challenge and overwhelm traditional values and cultures. Obviously, varies cultures have much to learn from one another, and merely imposing the world view, values, and even language of one culture upon another is not dialogue but cultural imperialism. Cultural domination is an especially serious problem when a dominant culture carries false values inimical to the true good of individuals and groups. The Internet is transmitting the value-laden message of Western secular culture to people and societies in many cases ill-prepared to evaluate and cope with it. The sheer overwhelming quantity of information on the Internet, much of it unevaluated as to accuracy and relevance, is a problem for many. But we also are concerned lest people make use of the medium's technological capacity for customizing information simply to raise electronic barriers against unfamiliar ideas[16]. That would be an unhealthy development in a pluralistic world where people need to grow in mutual understanding. While Internet users have a duty to be selective and self-disciplined, that should not be carried to the extreme of walling themselves off from others. The medium's implications for psychological development and health likewise need continued study, including the possibility that prolonged immersion in the virtual world of cyberspace may be damaging to some.

Despite of openness and publicity of cyberspace, the Internet is the most adaptable space to escape from real world. This hiding is usually subconscious, and the Internet offers a lot of facility to do this. When a user sits down before a monitor, a new virtual world opens in the real world where the user is living. If this virtual world becomes to the living-space of the user, even more than the real, then the Internet-addiction is present. We may talk about varies kind of addiction connected with the using of Internet. There are five specific types of Internet addiction[17]:

1. Cybersexual Addiction – Individuals who suffer from Cybersexual addiction typically are either engaged in viewing, downloading, and trading online pornography or involved in adult fantasy role-play chat rooms.

2. Cyber-Relational Addiction – Individuals who suffer from Chat Room Addiction become over-involved in online relationships or may engage in virtual

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[16] Cf. Pontifical Council for Social Commission *Ethics in Internet*, 22 II 2002, n. 1–14.

[17] Cf. Compulsive Surfing, in: http://www.netaddiction.com (19 I 2010).

adultery. Online friends quickly become more important to the individual often at the expense of real life relationships with family and friends. In many instances, this will lead to marital discord and family instability.

3. Net Gaming – Net gaming encompass a broad category of behaviours including obsessive online gambling, gaming, shopping, or stock trading behaviours. In particular, individuals will utilize virtual casinos, interactive games, e-auction houses, or e-brokerage houses only to loose excessive amounts of money and even disrupt other job-related duties or significant relationships.

4. Information Overload – The wealth of data available on the World Wide Web has created a new type of compulsive behaviour regarding excessive web surfing and database searches. Individuals will spend greater amounts of time searching and collecting data from the web and organizing information. Obsessive compulsive tendencies and reduced work productivity are typically associated with this behaviour.

5. Computer Addiction – In the 80s, computer games such as Solitaire and Minesweeper were programmed into computers and researchers found that obsessive computer game playing became problematic in organizational settings as employees spent most days playing rather than working. These games are not interactive nor played online.

The consequences of all kinds of addiction[18] are far from the upshots of the other addictions like drug or alcohol, but the realisation of addiction is quite difficult in cyberspace. Like hard drinker keep repeating to the very last that he or she can stop drink any time, the Internet-addicted person hardly confront with the fact of hours spending at computer.

In the cyberspace people can hide behind a nickname on chat, a dynamic IP address in web browsing, an unauthorised address in e-mail, or any workstation in an Internet café. This implies the problem of virtual community. The users can change their identity, username, sex and behaviour. It looks like a carnival where everyone may change his or her mask. But in the community we do not use the masks, we are truly ourselves with the pluses and minuses[19].

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[18] Cf. M. Griffiths, *Does Internet and Computer „Addiction" Exist? Some Case Study Evidence*, „CyberPsychology & Behavior" 3 (2000) n. 2, p. 211–219; M. Griffiths *The Role of Context in Online Gaming Excess and Addiction: Some Case Study Evidence*, „International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction" 8 (2010) n. 1, p. 119–125; J.B. Gray, N.D. Gray, *The Web of Internet Dependency: Search Results for the Mental Health Professional*, „International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction" 4 (2006) n. 4, p. 307–318.

[19] Cf. T. Kodácsy, *Public Theology and Cyberspace*, unpublished lecture given during the conference „Public Theology in Central Europe", 25–28 March 2004 in Debrecen.

SEARCH FOR A REAL COMMUNITY ON CYBERSPACE

There are varies of Christian web pages, religious blogs and chats. Churches intends to propagate ICT as help for Religious Education in schools: development of digital literacy for all as an essential dimension of life in the years to come[20]. There are many discussion about creating a good Christian web page, because Internet is not just about technology and information, but primarily about humans, human interaction, communication and community. More and more people use this new medium as a basic means of communication, seeking information and community. In this context, by examining the Internet from a theological, pedagogical and catechetical perspective we may learn new ways of being community. If we analyse all the aspects more carefully, the Internet is a medium which allows people to communicate with each other and to build up virtual communities. That is why, if theologians, educators, pedagogues, teachers of RE and catechists want to offer the catechetical and pastoral care, they must initiate discussions about social or existential topics and build up virtual communities as the beginning for the real one. Probably someone, who experience the virtual communities may start to search the real community to support the his/her growth of faith.

One area for research concerns the suggestion that the wide range of choices regarding consumer products and services available on the Internet may have a spill over effect in regard to religion and encourage a 'consumer' approach to matters of faith. Data suggest that some visitors to religious web sites may be on a sort of shopping spree, picking and choosing elements of customized religious packages to suit their personal tastes. The „tendency on the part of some Catholics to be selective in their adherence" to the Roman Catholic Church's teaching is a recognized problem in other contexts; more information is needed about whether and to what extent the problem is exacerbated by the Internet. Similarly, the virtual reality of cyberspace has some worrisome implications for religion. First of all virtual reality is no substitute for the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist, the sacramental reality of the other sacraments, and shared worship in a flesh-and-blood human community. There are no sacraments on the Internet; and even the religious experiences possible there by the grace of God are insufficient apart

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[20] Cf. The first and only known use of webside in books for Religious Eduaction in Poland are: *Jesteśmy rodziną Jezusa. Podręcznik do nauki religii dla ucznia klasy I szkoły podstawowej*, ed. E. Osewska, J. Stala, Tarnów 2008; *Jezus nas kocha. Podręcznik do nauki religii dla ucznia klasy II szkoły podstawowej*, ed. E. Osewska, J. Stala, Tarnów 2009; *Jezus przychodzi do nas we Mszy Świętej. Podręcznik do nauki religii dla ucznia klasy III szkoły podstawowej*, ed. E. Osewska, J. Stala, Tarnów 2010; *Bóg mnie woła. Podręcznik do nauki religii dla ucznia klasy IV szkoły podstawowej*, ed. E. Osewska, J. Stala, Tarnów 2007; *Bóg mnie kocha. Podręcznik do nauki religii dla ucznia klasy V szkoły podstawowej*, ed. E. Osewska, J. Stala, Tarnów 2008; *Bóg mnie przemienia. Podręcznik do nauki religii dla ucznia klasy VI szkoły podstawowej*, ed. E. Osewska, J. Stala, Tarnów 2009.

from real-world interaction with other persons of faith. Here is another aspect of the Internet that calls for study and reflection. At the same time, pastoral planning should consider how to lead people from Cyberspace to true community and how, through pastoral care, teaching and catechesis, the Internet might subsequently be used to sustain and enrich them in their faith commitment[21].

CONCLUSION

The Internet is the latest and the most powerful in a line of mass media. The Internet offers benefits and advantages from a religious perspective, carring news and information about religious events, ideas, and personalities, yet the same time creates many problems. The Roman Catholic Church should use the Internet creatively in order to meet their responsibilities and help fulfill the Jesus Chris's mission. Many difficult Internet-related questions call for theological, pedagogical and educational consensus. The wide territory of the Cyberspace is the direct challenge for theology with the opportunity to actively engage in shaping its future ethical content. Understanding the Cyberspace as a global cognitive arena, and critically engaging in its discourse provides a context for impacting and forming the future society.

[21] Cf. Pontificial Council for Social Commission, *The Church and Internet*, 22 II 2002, n. 8–9.