

## RELIGIOUS LIFE AND THE NEW MEDIA: BEING IN RELATION OR BEING CONNECTED? \*



Religious life always mirrors the changes taking place in society. Religious communities are microcosms within which people who enter it bring with them all the baggage they acquired prior to their entrance, but also all the material received from contact with the outside world. In this way, the religious community finds itself managing all the stimuli introduced into it through its members. In recent years a good part of this material has been mediated by new communication tools: cell phones, the Internet, e-mail, social networks....

When a person enters religious life, he/she still has a considerable amount of work to do on the psycho-affective and spiritual levels. It is therefore necessary to be vigilant to see if the times and spaces offered by real interactions are sufficient or if they are progressively replaced by virtual connections.

Beyond the risks that must be monitored, the problem raised by the new media, their rapid diffusion and the immediacy of their use is, in my opinion, mainly anthropological and educational, and could be summed up in the distinction between the more superficial "being connected" and the more profound "being in relation." The risk is that the *superficial* becomes normal and the *more profound* becomes uncommon. Monitoring this difference is vital for the quality of relationships within the religious community and the life of the religious.

It is inevitable that in religious life there will be a gradual increase in what is happening in the secular world: a large part of life takes place online. In fact, the very image of the Web can offer us an opportunity for deeper spiritual reflection.

The element to reflect on from a spiritual point of view is what pushes a person *toward* the Net. The desire for communication, which often takes the form of a desire for friendship, cannot be understood solely in the light of the development of the new technologies. Rather, it expresses a desire for relationships—a thrust rooted in human nature.

Communion is possible only where communication is active. The desire for connection is therefore not simply a modern form of relating to others, but the outward expression of a deep-

er need for what is in fact human. However, it is necessary to take advantage of this desire for connection to help ourselves and help others discover the deeper and more divine identity present in us.

The question we face as religious is not simply if and how we use the new media, but rather if we are mindful of the time in which we live and in which we are called to proclaim the Gospel. The difference between two different ways (being connected or being in relationship) may say something about ourselves, but it says even more about the spirit of the time in which we live.

We must ask ourselves if and how it is possible to integrate the use of new communication technologies into religious life. Since religious life is called to play a serious educational role, that is, to be a model for others, it is necessary for religious to question themselves about how use of the new means of communication is influencing their lives as consecrated persons.



The advantages and resources offered by the new technologies are undeniable, including with regard to the proclamation of the Gospel. The commitment of the believer, and in particular of the religious, must be to reject compromises that affect the quality of one's relational life, and instead to safeguard empathy and responsibility, expressed as care of others.

In the context of community life, this means not replacing one's own community, with its inevitable hardships and misunderstandings, with a virtual community, where it is certainly more rewarding to be because it is a community that can be turned off when we are tired or busy with other things. But the virtual community, although it is a place where we can proclaim the Gospel, is not a community that helps us grow. The virtual community can inform us, but it cannot convert us. Conversion passes through the fatigue of encounter, and this is the heart of the Gospel.

Fr. Gaetano Piccolo, sj

\*This summary by SICOM was authorized by the author.