THE INTERNET AND THE CHURCH OF THE FUTURE

The Coming of the Fourth Church

John R. Quinn

WHEN THE GREAT GERMAN THEOLOGIAN, KARL RAHNER, stood in St Peter's during the sessions of Vatican II, he saw some 2,300 bishops. He noticed that they came from every race, language and culture, from all over the world. Such experiences led him and others to say that with the Council the Church had for the first time become a world Church. And so people spoke of the coming of the third Church, the world Church.

The first Church lasted from the time of the Apostles until the conversion of the Emperor Constantine in the year 313. The second Church, often called the European Church, lasted from the conversion of Constantine until Vatican II in 1962-65. The third Church was the world Church beginning, let us say, in 1965. With Vatican II, the Church was no longer only European in its culture and make-up. There were two obvious signs of this passage from a European to a world Church. Bishops in Asia and Africa were no longer European-born missionary bishops, but native Asians and Africans. And Latin— a European language—ceased to be the Church's language: Roman Catholic worship all over the world used a wide variety of native languages.[1]

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[1] See the two essays in Rahner's *Theological Investigations*, vol. 20 (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1981): 'Basic Theological Interpretation of the Second Vatican Council', pp. 77-89; and 'The Abiding Significance of the Second Vatican Council', pp. 90-102.

I believe, however, that alongside the world Church and within the framework of a world Church, we must now speak of the coming of the fourth Church. The fourth Church is the Church of globalisation, of broadband communication, the Church of the Web and the internet. The difference between broadband communication and past means of communication is like the difference between a two lane road and a six lane motorway. With fibre-optic cable and satellites, for instance, you can now have a thousand television channels to choose from, whereas in the past there were three or four. We have not yet begun to imagine what all this will mean for the Church. But without question its impact will be immense.

A generation ago, Vatican II noted a cultural shift that was taking place:

> The human race is moving from a more static view of things to one which is more dynamic and evolutionary, giving rise to new combinations of problems which call for new analyses and syntheses.[2]

Even then, we were in transition from an essentialist or static view of reality to a more dynamic, evolutionary worldview. People now are not content with what is. There is an underlying sense that things will always be improved, and that it is only a matter of time until we discover how. The internet can only strengthen this trend.

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[2] *Gaudium et spes*, n. 5.

In his book, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*, Thomas Friedman describes his mother, who lives in Minnesota, playing bridge several times a week on the internet with three people in France. When he expressed surprise at this, his mother replied that the week before she had been playing with people in Siberia. We may not yet know clearly what all that means, but instinctively we sense that there is something very different and something very important going on here.

Friedman confirms the far-reaching implications we suspect:

> The globalisation system is . . . characterized by a single word: the *Web*. . . . In the Cold War we reached for the 'hotline', which was a symbol that we were all divided but at least two people were in charge—the United States and the Soviet Union . . . in the globalisation system we reach for the internet, which is a symbol that we are all increasingly connected and that nobody is quite in charge.[3]

If we are to be more closely connected, what does this mean for the Church of the future? What does it mean for the Church of the future that the internet is bringing with it a world in which 'nobody is quite in charge'? It will not be possible to think about shaping this future Church unless we face the great positive potential, and the drawbacks, of broadband communications and the internet. I would like to highlight three particular features of the internet which will have a significant effect on how the Church exercises authority and carries out her mission.

Bypassing Authority

First, the internet bypasses authority. Take medicine as an example. Drugs are normally tested over a long period of time and then given approval by a government agency. At that point doctors may prescribe the drug. When you have a problem, your doctor will examine you, make a diagnosis and prescribe the approved drug if indicated. They will prescribe how much you should take, and how often you should take it. Now, however, you can go on the internet, get a diagnosis and find all the medications listed which could be used for your condition, and you can obtain that medication even if it is not approved yet. No

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[3] Thomas L. Friedman, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree* (New York: Random House, 2000), p. 8.

authority—no doctor, no government, no drug expert—has played a part in this process.

The same dynamic will be at work in people's religious lives as well. Anyone can go on the internet, use the name 'Catholic' or 'Christian', and promote any doctrine or practice or movement, without the knowledge or endorsement of any theologian, pastor, bishop or pope. Today, any parishioner, or non-parishioner for that matter, can use a computer to circulate or promote anything. The Web makes instantly available to anyone who wants it any doctrinal idea or position imaginable.

If Rome publishes a document on stem-cell transplants and rejects using embryos for this purpose, you can read it immediately on the internet. But you can also instantly read an opposing view written by a scientist in Germany or a theologian in South Africa. No Church authority is capable of preventing anyone anywhere in the world from being exposed to this mass of conflicting information. There is no gatekeeper to decide what religious doctrine can or cannot go on the internet, and no gatekeeper to determine what doctrine may or may not be called orthodox doctrine.

It is not surprising, then, that already cyberspace communities of faith are growing on the internet. Not long ago, I met a man who told me that he and others from a variety of places met regularly on the internet for discussion about doctrinal issues and had their own lay synod. Tom Beaudoin has described this phenomenon in some detail and observes:

> The medium is uniquely able to accommodate both like- and different-minded users who want to form cyberspace communities of faith . . . There is much anecdotal evidence that such cybercommunities of faith . . . can and do thrive in cyberspace.

Surprisingly, the book goes on to speak even about virtual monasteries in cyberspace:

> The net is increasingly becoming a virtual monastery for the spiritually dispossessed. As in 'real' monasteries, a user may seek community at specific times or in particular sites, and there are myriad opportunities for self-reflection, prayer, meditation, and Scripture studies. There are even on-line monasteries, in which

users can listen to chanting monks, gaze on brilliant iconography, and read holy manuscripts without interruption.[4]

Everything Beaudoin describes here is being done in a way that bypasses all Church authority. But it is not an anarchic world, not a world without authority: the internet itself becomes the authority. For many people, especially for young people, something is more authoritative and therefore more believable if it is on the internet. The medium itself competes with other kinds of authorities: government, the Church, and professional authorities such as medicine.

Eroding Brand Loyalty

A few years ago, an article in *The Wall Street Journal* (14 September 2000) reported that shoppers buy national brands more than store or local brands, and cited the internet as a major factor. Again, something similar could be said with regard to the Church. The internet breaks down 'brand loyalty'. People do in fact stay with a brand they like until they are persuaded that something else is better or easier to get. If you use Ivory soap you are likely to keep buying Ivory soap. But with the internet, people can browse around and see different products, find out how they are made, get comparative prices and learn how a different product works in comparison with Ivory soap. These discoveries can break down the brand loyalty of customers to Ivory soap and lead them to a new product. The same principle applies in the religious sphere. Many people are Christian because they were brought up Christian and lived in a Christian environment. But with the internet, everything is available, and, as mentioned before, there is no gatekeeper to filter it, explain it or black it out. Religions and religious beliefs and practices of all kinds are on the internet. It follows

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[4] Tom Beaudoin, *Virtual Faith* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), pp. 88-90.

that there is clear potential for the 'brand loyalty' which people have to their Church to break down.

This erosion of 'brand loyalty' occurs not just at the national or international level, but also more locally. Take this example: a man we will call M. J. Griffin owns a bookstore in San Francisco. He has been on Geary Boulevard for forty years. But many of his customers have discovered www.amazon.com. As more and more of his customers go to the internet, Griffin is forced by lack of business to close. What happens on the internet affects what happens at home, at the local level. Thus we cannot simply regard the internet as a global phenomenon; in a Church context, we must ask how this powerful new development will affect the ministry and mission of parishes and dioceses.

The Click

The third feature of the internet is flexibility and choice: the button. If you see something on the internet that does not attract you or hold your interest, you just click and go to something else. If Catholic offerings on the internet are presented with no grasp of the signs of the times, with no thought for the needs and psychology of people today, and in dated language, they are not likely to hold general interest. People will switch to something else.

When the printing press was invented in the fifteenth century, church authorities were afraid of it, and uncertain of how to deal with it. What would happen, they thought, if everyone could have a Bible and read it? What would happen if books could be printed that were doctrinally misleading or even erroneous? There were legitimate pastoral reasons for concern. So it is with the internet. The implications of the internet, while not entirely clear, will certainly be far reaching and have a profound effect on the Church. The internet is bringing the world, and thus by necessity the Church, into a qualitatively new era. We will have to find new answers to the question of how, in actual practice, the Word of God and the teaching of the Catholic Church are to be authenticated in a media world where there is no authority. The apostolic teaching office in the Church must surely remain. But how will it carry out its mission in the world that is coming to be?

Discerning the Future

The Church must recognise that this new global reality of the internet will transform the relationships in which it is involved, both those among its own members and those which it forms as it engages in mission. It needs to ask in a new way, 'What do we bring that they need? How will they each understand us? How will they know that we want to understand them?' These are crucial issues for our future, our children's future, and the future of the Church and her mission. The developments now foreseeable have the potential to be deeply disturbing and disorienting.

If we seek to shape the Church of the future, then daring and imagination, not anxiety, must be our driving force. Daring is not defiance. Nor is it worldly prudence and calculation. It is not timidity or fear. It is not recklessness. We need to test the spirits; we cannot rush after fads. But neither can we reject every new idea and impulse without examination. Though *Daring must be our driving force* some of these may be silly, harmful and counterproductive, many are positive, and critically necessary for the Church if it is to fulfil its mission.

If we look back at the Reformation period, we see that the reform movements, some of which were led by saints, did not succeed in preventing the split in Western Christendom. The movements that stayed within Catholicism did not probe the issues sufficiently radically. They saw abuses on the part of bishops and clergy, and their solution was to put things back the way they were: make the bishops live in their dioceses and not at the royal courts; make the priests and the canons live by the regulations governing their lives. They did not, however, ask the more radical questions that were pressing: about how the bishops of the time all came from the nobles, whereas most of the priests came from the peasant and poorer classes; about how uneducated the clergy were; and about the kinds of formation that the clergy needed. Moreover, this lack of radicality was matched by a delay and hesitation on the part of Church leaders. Hubert Jedin, one of the most respected historians of this period, points up how Luther first made his stand in 1517, and yet as late as 1562—45 years later—the

*They persevered faithfully
in the TEACHING of the APOSTLES,
in the COMMUNION,
in the BREAKING of the BREAD,
and in the PRAYERS*

ACTS 2:42

work of Catholic reform had not even begun.[5] We would do well to learn from this experience.

Nevertheless, there are also some factors in the Church's life which will remain perennially. In Acts, we are told that the first believers in the Resurrection 'persevered faithfully in the teaching of the Apostles, in the communion, the breaking of the bread and the prayers'.[6] We can see here antecedents of what later theology would call the Word of God, the sacraments and the apostolic office. Moreover, we can also recall the Church's prophetic teaching about the abiding presence of Christ to us:

> . . . underlying so many changes there are some things which do not change and are founded upon Christ, who is the same yesterday, today, and forever . . . . [t]he key and the focus and culmination of all human history are to be found in its Lord and master.[7]

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[5] See, for example, Hubert Jedin's *Crisis and Closure of the Council of Trent: A Retrospective View from the Second Vatican Council*, translated by N. D. Smith (London: Sheed and Ward, 1967 [1963]).

[6] This is a literal translation of Acts 2:42.

[7] *Gaudium et spes*, n. 10.

What, then, can we say about how the Spirit is leading the Church through the great cultural transformation represented by the internet?

Most importantly, no matter how great and pervasive the power of the internet is, it will not remove the need for the Church. In *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*, Friedman says,

> There is nothing about globalisation or the internet that eliminates the need for ideals or codes of restraint on human behaviour. The more we are dependent on this technology, the more we need to come to it armed with our own ideals and codes of restraint. . . . And we certainly don't want to be unifying mankind through the internet without any value system, without any filters, without any alternative conception of meaning other than business and without any alternative view of human beings other than as consumers looking for the lowest price.[8]

And he draws the important conclusion: 'But these much-needed values are best learned off-line . . . in their church, synagogue, temple or mosque'. In this new world of the internet, the Church will be more necessary than ever.

Moreover, we can see the power of the internet as a providential sign of the times, calling the Church to rediscover an emphasis on the original mandate of Christ: to make *disciples*. We have emphasized the mission to go out and teach and to baptize, but we have not placed sufficient emphasis on the mandate to make disciples, in the full sense, of those whom we teach and baptize.

When the Church was beginning, people came to belief because of the testimony of those who had seen, lived with and experienced Jesus.

> We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us—we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. (1 John 1.1-3)

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[8] Friedman, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*, p. 470.

The mission of the Church is not just to form a body of people who know the doctrine about Jesus, but to make disciples in the full New Testament sense of the word. For in the New Testament, the disciple is the one who experiences Jesus, who lives close to Jesus, who hears his word, and who feels the impact of his presence. The fourth Church will demand, more than any of its predecessors, disciples who are truly rooted in Christ Jesus. Once again, an observation of Friedman's helps us make the point:

> What makes the internet so exciting and troubling is that, unlike *The New York Times* for example, it has no editor, no publisher, no censor. . . . But precisely because the internet is such a neutral, free, open and unregulated vehicle for . . . communication, personal judgment and responsibility are critical when using this technology.

Or we might quote Paul VI: 'Modern people listen more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if they do listen to teachers, it is because the teachers are witnesses'.[9]

The shaping of the future Church will depend crucially on disciples who are themselves shaped, shaped by their drinking from the living waters at the fountain of God's Word. Our new context only confirms the teaching of Vatican II:

> . . . the synod *strongly* and *specially* urges all the faithful . . . to learn by frequent study of the Scriptures 'the surpassing worth of knowing Jesus Christ'(Philippians 3.8).[10]

The Fourth Church will remain the Church of the Bible—the Book of the Third Millennium. The biblical Word will perhaps be communicated in ways we are only beginning to imagine, but it will remain central—central not as a weapon, but as the unceasing fountain of life. Through this Word, disciples will be formed, heralds of Christ. We can remember how John the evangelist summed up the whole purpose of his gospel: it was written 'so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name' (John 20.31).

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[9] *Evangelii nuntiandi*, n. 41.
[10] *Dei verbum*, n. 25 (emphases added).

Shaping the Church of the future is and will be no simple task. It is complex and challenging. It is also exhilarating. It will require hard work and evangelical daring.

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