

## Facebook as a monastic place?

### The new use of the internet by Catholic monks

**A**lthough Catholic monasteries are theoretically out of the world, monks and nuns more and more use the internet, both for religious and non-religious reasons. While society at large often takes it for granted that monks are out of modernity, monastic communities have been adopted this media from relatively early on, and we cannot say that they have come late to its use. The internet can offer monasteries a lot of advantages because it allows monks to be in the world without going out of the cloister. Nevertheless, the introduction of this new media in monasteries also raises a lot of questions about the potential contradictions it poses with other aspects of monastic life.

This paper does not deal with online religious practices, but seeks to research the use of the medium by monks and nuns even in their daily lives, and attempts especially to investigate the potential changes it brings to monastic life.

Having explained how monks and nuns use the internet in their daily lives, I will endeavour to explore how it can also endanger some dimensions of monastic life, as well as how monks respond to this potential threat. As a particularly striking example –because it reopens a lot of questions also asked about the internet in general – I have chosen to explore the use of the social network Facebook by monks. This article is based on field inquiries made in French and Austrian monasteries between 2009 and the present, including interviews conducted with monks and nuns, as well as a study of the monastic websites and Facebook pages, in particular 50 profiles of Austrian nuns and monks.

I am speaking specifically here about nuns and monks, so about religious people living in a contemplative monastery, not about apostolic orders which are already in the world even if the distinction is not always so clear.

## Monks on the web: a religious use?

### *Rapid adoption but permanent differences*

Although society often assumes a negative relationship between monasticism and modernity, monks have adopted modern technologies quite quickly, as is precedented, historically, by their use of the printing press or the telephone (Jonveaux 2009). It is almost taken for granted today that monastic communities have access to the internet. When we ask the question if they have such access, some monks reply that it goes without saying; otherwise, as an Austrian Cistercian monk says, 'we could not use the car to go to Vienna, either, but would have to use horses instead'. Monks want to emphasise they are not outside modernity and they strive to combat the romantic and medieval image of monasticism in society, as it is conveyed in the film *The Name of the Rose* (1986), for instance. Nevertheless, not all communities use the internet in the same way and we can point out some differences according to some variables.

The first of these is gender. Although 93.8 per cent of the male Benedictine communities in Austria have a homepage, only 61 per cent of the female Benedictine communities do. This difference between male and female can also be observed in society in general, although it is always less pronounced. One explanation for this is that the women in religious communities are often older than their male counterparts and are for this reason less interested in new technologies. But nuns are also more out of the world than monks because of stricter rules of seclusion and they have, as a consequence, fewer contacts with people or activities outside the monasteries. Seclusion and relationship to the outside world can also explain differences between the monasteries of different European countries. As we can see in Table 1, Austrian, German or Belgian Benedictine monasteries are more likely to have a homepage than Italian or French monasteries. Yet monks of the first group are, as a

**Table 1. Benedictine communities which have a homepage**

Country	Website		Total
	Male communities	Female communities	
Austria	93.8 %	50.0 %	81.8 %
Belgium	81.8 %	11.8 %	39.3 %
France	48.5 %	53.2 %	51.2 %
Germany	94.3 %	58.5 %	51.2 %
Italy	51.6 %	18.5 %	28.4 %

result of their history, more invested in worldly activities. Austrian monks for instance have been active in schools or parishes since the reforms passed by Joseph II between 1780 and 1788 which meant that they could be suppressed if they did not have a 'utilitarian' activity in society (Schmitz 1942). By contrast, French monasteries have been developed after the Revolution – when they lost their lands – and the new religious foundations of the nineteenth century were based on a romantic ideal of medieval monasticism, with an internal economy of production. The use of the internet is also connected to deeper dimensions of the monastic identity and the local history of each country. We can naturally imagine that this gap will be reduced in time as with this one between men and women in society for their use of new technologies.<sup>1</sup> But differences related to the nature of the relationships between the world and the monasteries are particularly visible.

***Being in the world from the cloister: new opportunities for modern monasteries***

Monasteries are theoretically out of the world and their distance from it is expressed in their rules of seclusion. Even when they perform social activities in society, they are always symbolically out of the world. As Max Weber explains:

Concentration upon the actual pursuit of salvation may entail a formal withdrawal from the 'world': from social and psychological ties with the family, from the possession of worldly goods, and from political, economic, artistic and erotic activities – in short from all creaturely interest (Weber 1978: 542).

Even if monks and nuns would like ideally to stay in their monasteries in order to lead a perfect, contemplative life, they sometimes need to go into the world for economic or religious reasons. The internet can for this reason present a great opportunity to them, because it means they can be present in the world without leaving the monastery. French monks, for instance, who have an economy of production, also need to sell their products outside the monastery. Online selling through the internet can be a very effective way for the monks to reach customers more widely than they can with mail order selling.

1 In 2001, 60 per cent of internet users were men, whereas they represented only 51.4 per cent of users in 2009 (Médiamétrie 2009).

Thanks to their websites, they can acquire a new visibility in the secularized society through a religiously neutral medium. Furthermore, monks intend also to use the internet as a new medium for evangelization. Pope Benedict XVI has even encouraged use of the internet for this purpose: 'In this field too we [Christian people] are called to proclaim our faith that Christ is God, the Saviour of humanity and of history', and he invites them 'confidently and with an informed and responsible creativity, to join the network of relationships which the digital era has made possible' (Pope Benedict XVI 2011). Monks say it is important for them to be where people are. Yet people go less and less into traditionally religious places, for instance, churches or parishes, which is why monks try to reach them via the internet. Indeed, in an article about the internet and Facebook in the monastery, a German Benedictine monk explains: 'In this way we can also speak to people whom we can no longer reach by means of "classical" media (Church journal, parishes letters, . . .)' (Runge 2011: 217). The question as to whether they actually do reach these people would be a topic for another paper; it is not always easy to know exactly who the people are who consult religious websites (Jonveaux 2007).

***Monks, the internet and seclusion: where are they today?***

The role of the internet in monasticism is nevertheless a delicate topic because it poses potential dangers to the essence of the monastic life. First of all, as I have already said, the monastic life is, according to Max Weber, theoretically an out-of-the-world asceticism. This means that monks go out of the world, not because they think the world is bad, but in order to find the peace and quiet, and also the independence necessary for contemplation. Seclusion in this sense will be a protection of monastic tranquility. As Raymond Boudon says: 'Seclusion protects the utopian society against the corruption from outside and against the threat of strangers' (Boudon 1986).

But the internet abolishes categories of space and time and simply overrides the terms of the seclusion. As a consequence, in order to maintain the fundamental characteristics of monastic life, monks and nuns have to find a way to protect their seclusion as they make use of the internet. It is for this reason that almost all French monastic communities do not permit internet access in the cells. A monk of Solesmes, a strict Benedictine community in France affirms: 'It would be naturally totally paradoxical to have internet in the cell.' That does not mean that monks and nuns do not have access to the internet but usually, these communities have set up an information technology room equipped with computers. This also can involve peer control between monks who can see if one of them spends a long time surfing on the internet, or consulting the kinds of pages which would be contrary to monastic life.

Abolishing the constraints of time and space means that the internet can also be a problem in rigorous planning. Time in monastic life is theoretically strictly organized and displayed in prayer, work and community times. There is no place for internet leisure activities. In a lot of monasteries in France – for instance La Pierre-qui-Vire, Tamié or Solesmes – the abbot cuts off the connection after the last office of the day and restores it after the first office of the morning. This way, monks can observe the so-called ‘great silence of the night’, as Saint Benedict expresses it in his rule, which means that nobody can speak after the last office. In Austrian monasteries such a discipline does not exist; almost all monks have internet access in their cells, but they often say that they do not have the choice about this. For monks for instance who do not have a separate office to work in, they need the internet in their cells, especially when they are working in a parish or at a school. Nevertheless we also can observe some kinds of personal disciplines which the monks try to establish for themselves. For instance, the novice master of Kremsmünster in Austria chooses not to have a computer in his cell and aims not to go into his office after Compline. A young monk in the Cistercian Heiligenkreuz monastery in Austria also said to me he aims to use the internet for no longer than thirty minutes a day and he observes a Facebook ‘fast’ on days of meat abstinence in the community; that is to say Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. We can therefore find a lot of ascetic practices designed to control the use of the internet. This shows that monks hold the internet to be necessary in modern monastic life, as they do not totally renounce it, but at the same time they consider that it can put monastic life in danger if its use is not controlled.

### **Facebook: a chance for monastic life?**

The web 2.0, with the greater interactivity it allows, raises new sets of questions for monks about how it can and should be used in religious life. It is for this reason that we have now to investigate how monks and nuns, in community or personally, use the online social networks such as Facebook. I have to specify that I will here especially speak about Austrian monks, because I did not find French monks on Facebook. Again we can deduce that the use of Facebook is linked with the worldly activities of monks, as French monks who do not have many activities in the world also do not use Facebook.

### ***Monks and monastic communities on Facebook***

First of all we have to make the distinction between community and personal accounts. As we will see it, questions are different if we are speaking about a

page which has been set up for a community and which is often linked to the homepage of the monastery, and the personal page of an individual monk. In the first situation, it relates to the communication policy of the community in respect of the outside world and the visibility it requires, perhaps in respect of pastoral aims. On the other hand, if we are talking about the individual accounts of monks and nuns, they may have the same goals as the whole community, but also at the same time be used personally as a means of communicating with the world.

Of around 55 monasteries in Austria, 9 have a page for the community and the link to it is always put on the website. We could think first that website and Facebook accounts have the same goal and are therefore repetitive, but they may also have different functions and especially aim at different audiences, as we will see later. The use of Facebook seems also to be connected with the general use of the internet, as I did not find an actual page for a French contemplative monastery.

#### ***A form of evangelization for young people***

In fact, for a lot of monks, Facebook is an important means of establishing and staying in contact with young people. In France, 80 per cent of young people between 13 and 24 are on Facebook. At the same time, it has been shown that this social network becomes the principal means of accessing the web for teenagers. For this reason, it is beyond question for some monks to be on Facebook in order to stay in contact with these young people. But can we really speak about evangelization on Facebook? For monks, Facebook is not a place in which to carry out a long theological discourse, although for instance, a Cistercian monk of Heiligenkreuz says he writes something about the liturgical season or about current themes in the Church in order to highlight religious events and activities. For this community, to communicate on Facebook means especially to introduce a presence as religious people onto the social network. In a German study about Facebook and the Catholic Church it is also noted that 10–20 per cent of people who go to a Church event now get to know about it through Facebook (Pelzer 2012: 32). This would mean that monks have succeeded in reaching this young audience by means of the social network.

Interaction which is allowed on Facebook is exactly the kind of communication young people are looking for. When a monk posts a message on his 'wall', people can respond, show if they 'like' it and maybe also share the information with other people if they think it might be interesting to them. In this kind of communication, young people think they are also active and this

can produce other kinds of interaction between monks and young people. For instance, monks told me they often receive private messages from young people in which they are asked to explain their views about their lives, their faith and so on. This is significant as such young people would not otherwise get to communicate directly with a priest or a monk.

### ***A new visibility and incarnation of monastic communities***

To a greater extent than the homepage, Facebook can be a window on to a community which has the potential show to the world what it is and what it does. By means of pictures and short but frequent messages, monastic communities and monks can acquire a new visibility in a secularized society. When monks post pictures of themselves playing football or sitting in a cinema wearing 3D glasses on their personalised Facebook walls, it gives a novel, plausible image of monastic life, which is no longer so much different to the one that people live in the world. A lot of monks and priests also post pictures of their religious activities on these sites; for example when they are baptizing a child, or even consecrating the Eucharist. It can, in the first instance, bring God onto the internet – that is to say, render the internet a religious place – but it also interrogates the possibility of desacralisation when there is no longer a difference between religious and profane places, which difference is, according to Mircea Eliade (1965) a characteristic of religion. The internet therefore again raises questions about the territorialization and deterritorialization of religion. Can the internet become a religious place? According to Mircea Eliade, sacred places are characteristically realised by the enactment rituals which have to be observed before one can enter into them (Eliade 1965: 28–9). Yet such is not the case on the internet, where space is almost continuous, apart from locked websites for a particular group or which demand access by payment.

### **Individual monks on Facebook: which questions for monastic life?**

In order to know how individual monks use Facebook and present themselves on this social network, I investigated 50 Facebook profiles of Austrian and German monks and nuns. With an average of 733 ‘friends’, monks and nuns have very much higher than average friend count which in 2011 was generally around the 130 mark. This might initially be somewhat remarkable, if we think that religious people are theoretically out of the world. But such a high number of ‘friends’ is an illustration of the fact that monks and nuns use

Facebook for their pastoral work; sometimes they may have more than 2,000 friends.

### ***What does it mean to be a monk on Facebook?***

For the most part religious people who are on Facebook are so with a religious goal; as a means of affirming their religious identities. Ninety per cent of monks and nuns of my sample have posted a picture of themselves in a habit for their profile picture and 48 per cent indicate their religious status as well as their name, with the mention of *pater*, brother, *osb*, etc. Forty-four per cent have both of these aspects on their profile.

According to Salvatore Abbruzzese, when monks enter into a religious life, they are going through a process of ‘social desinvestment’ in order to reach a ‘religious reinvestment’ (Abbruzzese 2000: 47). When monks assume their religious identities on their Facebook accounts, it means that the ‘religious reinvestment’ worked. Some nuns and monks try also to adapt Facebook to their religious situation. For instance, I found a nun who described her relationship status as ‘married’ (we have to understand, with Jesus) while a monk says ‘it’s complicated’. We can also find a group entitled: ‘Relationship status: in a relationship with Jesus’. This attempt to adapt – with humour – Facebook to the situation of the religious life proves how monks and nuns want to show their ability to adapt to new technologies. We can also read it as an attempt at achieving plausibility.

### ***Personal use of Facebook***

Although the homepage of the monastery is a community presentation, Facebook profiles allow monks to present themselves in the world, on the web. I said that this presentation is in major part a religious one, involving pictures of individuals in their habits and with the inclusion of their religious titles. But we have to point out that monks and nuns also use it for a personal presentation of themselves, in terms which do not always connect with their religious lives. 47.7 per cent of religious people in our sample are ‘fans’ of non-religious groups, which may be groups associated with music, sport, and so

**Table 2. Self-presentation in the Facebook profile**

	Picture in habit	Religious title	Picture and title
Monks	86.2 %	41.4 %	37.9 %
Nuns	95.2 %	57.1 %	52.4 %
Total	90.0 %	48.0 %	44.0 %

forth. A German monk, for instance, is also fan of the Nivea cosmetics brand. A portion of these also show pictures of their personal lives, in non-religious situations (19% of our sample). It has nevertheless to be noted that nuns present themselves on average to a lesser extent than monks: only 25 per cent of them join non-religious groups although for monks the figure is 57.7 per cent. At the same time more than 55 per cent of monks have an almost totally free access to their profile, compared with 47 per cent of nuns. We therefore find again this disparity between nuns and monks and the implicit seclusion which nuns seem to reproduce in their use of new technologies.

### ***When monks stage themselves on Facebook***

So some monks post a lot of personal pictures on their Facebook wall. We all know that Facebook is nowadays the perfect place to put oneself 'on to the stage' and seek to increase self-esteem by means of gaining attention from others. But this can be in contradiction with the monastic life and the seclusion it requires. When some monks post large amounts of pictures and messages on their pages, does it evidence a need to gain recognition outside of the monastery? Pope Benedict, in his latest message for the day of social communications explained:

On the other hand, this is contrasted with the limits typical of digital communication: the one-sidedness of the interaction, the tendency to communicate only some parts of one's interior world, the risk of constructing a false image of oneself, which can become a form of self-indulgence (Pope Benedict XVI 2011).

Sociologists of communication show that people who are very active on Facebook also seek recognition from others, which can be viewed as a form of narcissism: 'They would be seeking an audience rather than using Facebook to engage in social interaction with an existing friend' (Carpenter 2012: 483). Does that mean that monks are searching for recognition outside their communities? In the present context of monastic lives in modern secularized society, this kind of engagement with God is not really recognized by society. Maybe could we say that monks who have a significant level of use on Facebook are searching for this social recognition by means of the exhibiting of their religious and non-religious activities on the web.

Hui-Tzu Grace Chu and Nicholas Edge have also shown in their article that people 'who are more involved with Facebook are more likely to believe that others are happier and having a better life' (Chou and Edge 2012). What

would be the consequence for monks in this case? Would they more likely to think that the life in the outside world is better than their own lives? Or, on the other hand, might people think that the lives of monks are better than their own and could they thus be attracted to the monastic life?

This personal use of Facebook by monks and nuns therefore raises some questions about what they are searching for on this social network. Theoretically the religious network could be sufficient for these virtuosi; so what does it mean when monks and nuns need to be integrated into this other virtual social network?

## **Conclusion**

The internet in general redefines some aspects of the monastic life, and its integration in monasteries requires a regulation of its use in order to protect some characteristics of monasteries such as the symbolic seclusion. As internet use in monastic world is still relatively new, monks and nuns do not have an answer to all the questions the internet raises in their religious lives today, but they try at least to point out the questions and reflect on them in order to find solutions. In September I acted as an assistant to the general chapter of a Benedictine congregation and I was able to observe that the internet was an area of debate for these monks, who came from Europe, Africa, India and USA. On the one hand, they asked themselves about what could be deemed to be reasonable usage of the internet in monastic life, but they were also concerned with the necessity to communicate through this media and especially to have a homepage for their congregations.

The social network of Facebook is an especially good place to explore the questions which the internet asks in the context of the monastic life, as well as the different ways communities or individual monks can use these new technologies. It also permits an interrogation of the new relationships which are springing up between monasteries and the world and the perceptions of monks of their own identities in a secularized society. Indeed, the internet offers a clear mirror of the problems of modern monasticism.

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