

# PASTORAL CHALLENGES IN THE CONTEXT OF INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS ON THE INTERNET

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## Анотация

**Хедвига Ткачова. Пастирските задачи в контекста на онлайн междуличностните отношения.** От Средновековието до началото на Просвещението културата и културната дейност се разбират като служба на Божията кауза. Въпреки това, обществата, произлезли от християнството, сега се описват от модел на светска и мирска култура. Днешният човек изисква автономия от Бога за себе си и за обществото, което го заобикаля. Човекът е взел ролята на собствения си спасител, но осъзнава, че самотата не му е достатъчна като "център на собственото му съществуване". Напротив, той винаги се стреми отново да се "свърже с другите около себе си" (Scruton, 2002, р. 94-101). Въпросът за релационността, тоест степента на дълбочина на междуличностните отношения, се отваря дори в интернет средата, в която всеки от нас вече "съществува". Така че, ако признаем, че нашето онлайн съществуване е съществуване по своята същност, изследването на неговия характер трябва да има решаващо значение за нас. Статията разглежда някои теоретични изходни положения на концепцията за онлайн пастирското служение. Предметът на изследването са актуалните пастирски задачи в контекста на онлайн взаимоотношенията между хората.

**Ключови думи:** Интернет, пастирско обгрижване, онлайн, религия, междуличностни отношения

## Анотація

**Хедвіга Ткачова. Душпастирські виклики в контексті міжособистісних стосунків в інтернеті.** Від Середньовіччя до початку Просвітництва культура і культурна діяльність розумілися як служіння справі Божій. Однак суспільства, які виникли з християнства, зараз описуються моделлю світської та мирської культури. Сучасна людина вимагає автономії від Бога для себе та суспільства, яке її оточує. Людина взяла на себе роль власного рятівника, але вона усвідомлює, що самотності для неї недостатньо як "центру власного буття". Навпаки, вона завжди заново прагне "зв'язатися з оточуючими" (Scruton, 2002, р. 94 – 101). Питання реляційності, тобто ступеня глибини міжособистісних стосунків, відкривається навіть в Інтернет-середовищі, в якому кожен з нас уже "існує". Отже, якщо ми визнаємо, що наше онлайн-існування є існуванням за своєю сутністю, дослідження його характеру має бути для нас вирішальним. У статті розглядаються окремі теоретичні вихідні положення, що характеризують концепцію душпастирства особи в Інтернеті. Предметом дослідження є представлення сучасних душпастирських викликів у контексті онлайн-стосунків особи з іншими людьми.

**Ключові слова:** Інтернет, душпастирство, онлайн, релігія, міжособистісні стосунки

## Abstract

**Hedviga Tkáčová. Pastoral challenges in the context of interpersonal relationships on the internet.** From the Middle Ages until the beginning of the Enlightenment, culture and cultural activity were understood as a service to God's cause. Societies that emerged from Christianity, however, are currently described by the model of secular and lay culture. Today's man demands autonomy from God for himself and for the society that surrounds him. Man has taken on the role of his own savior, and yet he realizes that being alone is not enough for him as the "center of his own being". On the contrary, he always strives anew to "connect with others around him" (Scruton, 2002, p. 94 – 101). The question of relationality, i.e., the degree of depth of interpersonal relationships opens up even in the Internet environment, in which each of us already "exists". So, if we recognize that our online existence is an existence in its essence, exploring its character must be crucial for us. The paper deals with selected theoretical starting points that characterize the concept of pastoring an individual on the Internet. The subject of the study is the presentation of current pastoral challenges in the context of the individual's online relationships with others.

**Key words:** Internet, pastoral care, online, religion, interpersonal relations

**Introduction.** Today's model of secular and lay culture represents a world that has "different opinions and perspectives" (Grenz, 1997, p. 16). The understanding of truth, morality and reality is created by a person in his own mind. A person's ideas thus acquire the same value as reality itself (Jaura, 1997, p. 18). However, these ideas differ from the "reality" of every other person, and thus everyone who strives for them has his own truth, morality and interpretation of reality. Absolute truth no longer "exists" in the common understanding of ideas and things. Instead, there is pluralism and heterogeneity of variety of opinions. At the same time, the indicated multiplicity cannot reliably determine what is good, necessary or useful for people and what is, on the contrary, bad and dangerous. Pluralism and heterogeneity not only do not provide uniform motives and justifications for human action, but are thus defeated in their religious version, i.e., the morality of obedience to God and his commandments, as well as in relation to lay morality, i.e., the morality of obedience in the fulfillment of duty (Baggio, 1996, p. 17 – 43).

Moreover, pluralism and heterogeneity of thoughts and opinions do not lead or bind a person to a goal, but to what a person experiences - here and now - alone and with others. For consumers in today's culture, a mix of media content is available for immediate consumption – all in enticing formats and appealing packages. None of this requires any great effort. In addition, media contents are "served", interesting and tempting. And they are everywhere. We are therefore witnessing a new tension, which is the "overcrowding of culture (media)" (Šverha, 2007, p. 20).

Through the media, every culture is now massively inundated not only with the products of another culture, but also with images whose unified goal is to make prestige visible and also to celebrate success (McQuail, 1999, p. 304). The media therefore decide on the value of social prestige, which in society is directly proportional to "the number of minutes spent on the media stage" (Rusnák, 2002, p. 123). The principle of the media, which emphasizes fame, success and power, becomes an important principle not only of today's culture, but also of the assessment of interpersonal relationships. Vysekalová and Komárková characterize the types of people most often presented in the media as those who "embodiment joy of life, prestige, attractiveness. People living in welfare should also be role models for others." In the media, "we don't usually meet the poor, the suffering, the physically disabled," state the authors. According to them, the consequence of such a media portrayal incites "the impression that we are doing worse than the others", which is a source not only of mutual hostility and envy, but also of "dissatisfaction of

multitudes of people" (Vysekalová, Komárková, 2002, p. 44).

With the advent of the Internet, we can also talk about the definitive emergence of more and more popular online communities in which users meet who are different (people with different characteristics), anonymous (they do not know each other), contactless (there are no personal ties between the members of the communication) and unorganized (everyone decides for himself, there is no hierarchical arrangement) (Burton, Jirák, 2003, p. 324 – 325). At the same time, these users form a significantly active audience, which is usually characterized as a set of individual users with individual behavior and individual perception (Jirák, Kooplová, 2009, p. 223 – 224). The active audience consists of users who also use media and media content to satisfy their own needs (the need to be informed, the need to be part of a community, the need for entertainment and distraction) (Burton, Jirák, 2003, p. 350 – 351). Thus, interpersonal relations face the challenge of various influences of new models and effects of online communication. Human reciprocity, which exists in this audience in front of a computer or mobile phone screen, can also be perceived ambivalently.

Media theorist Joshua Meyrowitz says that once a medium appears and begins to be used, it is more than natural that it begins to influence us by shaping the type of interactions that take place through it (Meyrowitz, 2006, p. 169-270). The Internet has undoubtedly brought new interactions. Based on this premise, Aleš Opatrný called the "world of the Internet" the term "new universe". According to the author, the Internet – a "new part of the world" – is different from the explored and conquered parts of the world from the past. The "new world" is quickly and intensively habitable; compared to the conquered parts of the world from our past, it has no native inhabitants and does not even have its own native culture. It appeared as a "terra ignota" and its population, culture and life represent new elements shaped by all those who enter it and those who settle on it. At the same time, it is a place where new "immigrants" come with different ideas and goals (commercial, political, cultural, religious, etc.) and with different intensity of action (Opatrný in Nekvapil, Vévoda, 2008, p. 79). To put it briefly, the resulting characteristics of the Internet are created by the set of what users bring to it and the style in which they communicate on it.

The indicated attributes represent a theoretical outline of the individual's current existence in the online space, where the individual's pastoral care is also currently taking place. The term *pastorate* characterizes ministry to believers and non-believers; the ministry of salvation to people who may have been baptized, but grew up in an environment where they did not hear about the gospel, or heard little about it, and were hardly touched by religious education (Vrablec, Jarab, Stanček, 1997, p. 73). The Code of Canon Law assigns pastoral care to "all the faithful, regardless of age, status or nationality"; pastoral care should be aimed at "those who, due to their living conditions, cannot sufficiently use proper pastoral care, as well as those who have ceased to lead a religious life" (Catechism of the Catholic Church, Can. 383).

As we can see, the pastoral activity of Christians can and should use different types of communication tools, which, thanks to their attractiveness, variability and breadth of reach, are used in many areas of social life. We mean, for example, the field of education (catechetical work, language courses); charitable activities (rescue and health campaigns, informing about global disasters and calls for help); cultures (artistic works of permanent value, cultural benefit events); general moral awareness (campaigns to save human life) etc. Thanks to these possibilities, the condition and effectiveness of pastoral care requires dynamic activity. In the next part, we will therefore bring closer the relationship between the Church and the media, the presentation of current pastoral challenges in the context of online relationships of an individual with others, and finally the possibilities of using the Internet in the pastoral process. In the following part, we will therefore bring closer the relationship between the Church and the media, the possibilities

of using the Internet in the process of pastoral care, the concept of individual pastoral care on the Internet and, finally, the presentation of current pastoral challenges in the context of the individual's online relationships with others.

## **1. The relationship between the Church and the media**

The Church's relationship with the mass media can be characterized as positive. This is evidenced by several church documents (for example, the pastoral instruction *Communio et progressio*, the decree *Inter mirifica*, the encyclicals of John XXIII. *Mater et magistra* and *Pacem in terris*) as well as the existence of the event "world day of social means of communication", which has been celebrated since 1967 and every year brings "papal messages and letters" that communicate church problems in their connection with the media. Last but not least, the positive relationship of the Church to the media is evidenced by the term "theological reflection of papal messages and letters" used to name mass communication – "mass media, means of communication, means of public announcement, means of social notification or means of mass communication". The *Inter mirifica* decree already proposed the adoption of the term "social means of communication" during the Second Vatican Council. According to Zasepa and Olekšák, "it was about highlighting their essence" – "they are a tool of communication and should serve people" (Zasepa, Olekšák, 2006, p. 18).

### **1.1 Cooperation and concerns of the Church in relation to the media**

The Church's positive relationship with the media is confirmed by the number of significant papal messages and letters that look up to social means of communication as good tools of their time. It is the power and influence of the mass media that predisposes the Church to efforts to fulfill its tasks also through the media. The Church seems to be aware that, in the context of the times, it must remain the bearer of basic truths, which it must be able to defend and defend at the same time. In this situation, according to Mühlen, the first evangelization is necessary - bringing the unbaptized to baptism, and also new evangelization – the newly understood proclamation of the good news inside the Church (Mühlen, 1993, p. 14 – 19). Spreading the Christian message, apologia for Christianity and greater social involvement of Christians in society represent its other important tasks. A positive approach of the Church to the media is therefore essential in the effort to fulfill its own mission. We are, of course, referring to the Church's positive approach to both Christian and secular media.

On the other hand, the Church is aware that today's media are carriers of new social pressures. They are helped by the "monopoly on information", that they are gradually creating (Musil, 2003, p. 187). The concerns of the Church are closely related, for example, to the decline of social values, especially moral and aesthetic ones, which is also related to the form of religious models and attitudes that appear in the media. The Church's concerns are also raised by the efforts of the media to achieve greater and greater "privatization" of religious beliefs, the loss of Christian testimony, or criticism of the church hierarchy by the rest of society. The Church also negatively perceives the absence of values in media analyzes of facts from social life (the media transfer them to the personal decision of individuals) (Pontifical Council for Culture, p. 28 – 29).

The different opinion of the Church and the media also concerns the media presentation of the Church in social media. The attitudes of the media towards the Church are influenced by secular values. In relation to these values, the Church is concerned about the "confusion of values", when a person can lose touch with his religious roots and needs. The media strongly opposes this view of the Church. They continue to understand secularization and its possibilities as a "welcome new world", thanks to which the Church of society can be presented as a less "burdened" and more "freer institution" (Gallagher, 2004, p. 75).

## 2 The Church and the Internet

The emergence of the Internet brought the Church to a new situation - the Internet network could become a possible means of spreading not only the religious message, but also a means of abuse. The present confirms that the Internet has become a means of both efforts, to which the Church responded by emphasizing the "necessity to protect human dignity" and at the same time "support the integral development of a person" (Conference of Bishops of Slovakia, p. 8).

It can be concluded that the implementation of the Internet in Catholic Church structures was successful. This is evidenced by the presence of Internet service in many Christian institutions and Catholic churches. At the same time, the Catholic Internet is growing with portals and blogs. In addition to the necessary official matters related to operation (i.e., service), websites also offer another, increasingly wide range of services. The latest research explains the need for a Catholic social network.

The position of the Catholic Church on the Internet is primarily determined by the following three documents (Zasepa, 2022, p. 32):

i. Message of the Holy Father John Paul II. on the 36th World Day of Social Communication: Internet: a new forum for proclaiming the Gospel – In the message of the Holy Father, the Internet is compared to great discoveries, such as the Renaissance, the invention of the printing press, the industrial revolution, or the birth of the modern world. John Paul II. described these discoveries as "breakthrough circumstances that required new forms of evangelization". The Holy Father further described the cyberspace similarly as a call to proclaim the Gospel. Although, in his opinion the Internet cannot replace the experience with God itself (it can only provide the liturgical and sacramental life of the Church). The document therefore appeals to the need to come up with practical ways that "will help to move from the virtual world of cyberspace to the real world of the Christian community" (Catholic Church in Slovakia, Internet: new forum for proclaiming the gospel, 2002).

ii. Document of the Pontifical Council for Social Media: *The Church and the Internet* – The document highlights the revolutionary contribution of the Internet in the fields of business, education, politics, journalism and the relationship between nations and cultures. It highlights the changes brought about by the Internet, which affect not only the way people communicate, but also the way they interpret their lives. The authors of the document see a dual purpose of means of communication with regard to the Church. The first objective is to encourage their proper development and use for the good of human development, justice and peace; for uplifting the community at the local, national and international level in the light of the common good and in the spirit of solidarity. The second goal of the means of communication is to stimulate the Church's interest in its communication and communication within the Church. The document gives importance to the Internet in its service as a tool of evangelization and catechesis. At the same time, like the previous document, it points out that virtual reality cannot replace direct interpersonal communication, an eucharist or real liturgy. It can only supplement them, encourage people to live their faith more fully, and thereby enrich the religious life of its users (Catholic Church in Slovakia, Church and Internet, 2002).

iii. Document of the Pontifical Council for Social Media: *Ethics and the Internet* – In its documents, the Church pointed out also on many of the negative aspects of the Internet. The document *Ethics and the Internet* appeals to the danger of pornography and violence spread through the Internet and also emphasizes the danger of the wide availability of these "products". The Church feels the obligation, stemming from its prophetic mission, to express itself as well as take a position on the serious facts of

today's life. He introduces the first part of the document with the words: "The constant availability of images and ideas and their rapid transmission (...) have positive and negative effects on the psychological, moral and social development of individuals, on the structure and functioning of communities, on exchange and communication between cultures, on the acceptance and passing on values, to world views, ideologies and religious beliefs." Despite the fact that the Church warns of the pitfalls and ethical dilemmas that the Internet brings, it nevertheless maintains optimism. This is confirmed by the words according to which the Internet can "provide a valuable contribution to human life, contribute to prosperity and peace, bring intellectual and aesthetic development and mutual understanding between people and nations on a global scale" (Catholic Church in Slovakia, Ethics and the Internet, 2002).

Each of the analyzed documents is aware of the great possibilities of the Internet, and at the same time attributes to it, on the one hand, charming, on the other, potentially harmful effects. They agree that the web network is, despite possible risks, an excellent tool of communication and blessing for the Church. According to documents above, the Internet can become and is becoming a "unique supplement and help in life with faith" (Catholic Church in Slovakia, Internet: new forum for proclaiming the gospel, 2002).

### **2.1 Possibilities of using the Internet in the pastoral process**

The media, which the Church refers to as "social means of communication", are becoming an irreplaceable tool in the life of churches. Nowadays, they are no longer just the "seventh power". Their wide scope and reach to the recipients give them the position of "pulpit" - they are bearers of messages for the whole world in the ministry of evangelization, catechesis, pastoral care or missionary activity (Stolárik in *Orbis communicationis socialis*, 2002, p. 41). Among the many researches that confirm this fact, we select the research of 12 thousand Americans, which confirmed that the presentation of their community on the Internet improved the life of the community (said by 83% of respondents); that the use of electronic mail improved mutual relations between members of the community (said by 91% of respondents) or that email contributed to the improvement of spiritual life in their community (said by 81% of respondents). Respondents on the Internet look for various invitations to Christian gatherings, published sermons and Christian topics for further study, look for online reflections, links to other Christian sites, schedules of Christian events, meeting plans and other internal information regarding their own community, photos from the life of the home community, etc. (Pew Research Center, 2022).

The position of the "pulpit" of the Internet is also confirmed by the assumption of free expression, which is the greatest on the Internet among all media. The plurality that the Internet represents is also accompanied by relatively traditional values and beliefs found in it. Therefore, the Internet can be used not only "to question and undermine traditional values and beliefs, but also to expand and strengthen traditions" (Thompson, 2004, p. 158). It is tradition that can be a strong element that, paradoxically, calls a person in the online world to return to the offline world, in which human relationships can be enriched with a human touch, a friendly hug, etc., which certainly deepen interpersonal relationships.

### **2.2 Examples of the use of the Internet in the pastoral process**

In the following section, we will present several examples where the Internet was effectively used as a pastoral tool. These are, for example, websites whose content offers Christian reflection for every day, inspiration in the form of religious literature, video or music, or tele-evangelism (lectures by pastors such as Billy Graham or Jerry Falwell). The preservation of religious content in the form of media products on the Internet is also of great importance (online

books, evangelistic and pastoral films on the web, etc.). Thus, in the online environment, there is a preservation of tradition over time, and it is amazing that there is also constant accessibility to this tradition. In this context, we can therefore also talk about expanding the reach of tradition – including, for example, in connection with the religious message of the Gospel for interpersonal relationships.

Internet possibilities are actively used by all established churches in Slovakia. The Catholic Church, which is the largest church in Slovakia, is represented on the Internet in the form of the official website of the Roman Catholic Church (<http://www.rcc.sk>) and the Press Agency of the Conference of Bishops of Slovakia (<http://www.tkkbs.sk>). The Lutheran Church presents itself in the online environment through the official website of the Lutheran Church and. in. in Slovakia (<https://www.ecav.sk/>) and is also represented by a network of regional and national magazines or YouTube channels of specific church congregations. The third biggest church in Slovakia is the Greek Catholic Church, which operates online audio and video speeches, homilies, devotional prayers (e.g., Stations of the Cross, rosary, prayer, etc.) and more.

In the online environment, we find several other concrete possibilities and examples of the use of the Internet in the pastoral process. We will mention news blogs (portal.sme.sk, webnoviny.sk - religion section, etc.) and social networks (Facebook, Instagram, TikTok etc.), where Christian dialogue potentially takes place. Nowadays, there is also an increasing number of religiously oriented websites. On the Internet there are websites of Christian organizations (kapitula.sk, upac.sk, erko.sk, zksm.sk, vatican.va, etc.) and Christian media (tkkbs.sk, lumen.sk, lux.sk, katolickenoviny.sk, radiovatican.va, etc.), Christian portals (christnet.sk, svetkrestanstva.sk, nahrane.sk, nextbig.sk, omsor.sk, postoy.sk, etc.), private pages of Catholic parishes (mojakomunika.sk, fara.sk, cirkevnezdruzenia.sk etc.) as well as pastoral and websites focused on evangelization (mladmisionar.sk, knazi.sk, pradzenja.sk, animator.sk, svatepismo.sk etc.).

Many websites with religious and pastoral content are intended for believers and implicitly for all people: <http://www.bohosluzby.sk>, <http://www.katolik.sk>, <http://www.stretnutia.sk>, <http://www.breviar.sk>, <http://www.chcemviac.sk>, <http://www.verimpane.sk>, <http://www.horiaciker.sk>, <http://www.zakrestanske.sk>, <http://www.milost.sk>, <http://www.spiritualita.sk>, <http://www.bibliaaty.sk>, <http://www.majak.sk>, <http://www.pastor.sk>, <http://www.webnoviny-nabozenstvo.sk>, <http://www.ver.sk> and others.

Finally, foreign pastoral websites are also attractive for Slovaks. Among foreign web pages we list for example: <http://www.crosswalk.com>, <http://www.jesuswho.com>, <http://www.medjugorie.hr>, <http://www.godtube.com>, <http://www.tangle.com>, <http://www.newadvent.com>, <http://www.christianitytoday.com>, <http://www.biblegateway.com>, <http://www.bibleanserver.com> and more.

### **3. The concept of person's pastoring on the Internet**

The content of the Church's pastoral activity cannot be fully defined or defined by any norm. Even the Code of Canon Law does not provide a complete definition of pastoral duties, although it mentions many of them; Code of Canon Law talks about pastoral care and pastoral activity, for example, in connection with the pastoral formation of regions or provinces (can. 242; can. 374); with the formation of clerics for pastoral service (can. 245); pastoral teaching (can. 255); the need for pastoral practice (can. 258) etc. (Code of Canon Law). Similarly, the Catechism of the Catholic Church expresses the content and meaning of pastoral activity, and yet it is not its full definition (Opatrný, 1996, p. 12 – 13). Specific periods and diversity of situations in the life of society require emphasis on various aspects and interpretations of pastoral activity in the world.

According to Carpenter, the basic pastoral criterion should be the presentation of Christian contents. This is to be done existentially, personally, dynamically and topically (Carpenter, 1994, p. 35). Therefore, existential, personal, dynamic and up-to-date communication is the basis of

suitable pastoral care. Communication is also defined as "the transfer of information from the sender to the individual recipient" (McQuail, 1999, p. 283). Thus, pastoral care also represents the transfer of information (close to Christianity) from the provider (priest, lay person in the community) to the recipient (believers and non-believers). As we can see, pastoral care implicitly contains elements of communication - communicator (mediator), channel (medium), sign and receiver. We present a mutual comparison of the elements of communication and pastoral care in the following table.

*Table 1 Elements of communication and pastoral care*

<b>Communication units</b>	<b>Pastoral units</b>
Communicator (mediator)	Creator of the message
Channel (medium)	Internet
Sign (language, word, image)	All signs found on the Internet (language, word, image, written expression, etc.)
Recipient	The recipient of the message

i. Creator of the message (spiritual administrator, religious worker, layman) – The creator of Christian websites is usually not the webmaster, but the spiritual administrator of the parish – a priest. He is the personnel agent on which the life of the church community is built. Together with him, all his co-workers from the ranks of priests and religious workers as well as lay people participate in the functioning of the community. In a certain sense, the spiritual administrator represents a "spiritus movens" – a spiritual mover who creates or regulates the content of a Christian website, or who is the initiator of creation the content of a Christian website.

ii. The Internet – The Church's pastoral environment can also be significantly influenced by social means of communication, which represent the "space of action of the Word" (Jarab in *Orbis communicationis socialis*, 2002, p. 101). The Internet is the most important medium thanks to its technical possibilities. Thanks to these possibilities, pastoring does not have to be limited only to people from the parish.

iii. The sign – The sign is the third unit of pastoral care. It represents the way a message gets from its creator to its recipient. The unit of pastoral care on the Internet is all signs found on the Internet - Internet radio (sign - word), television on the Internet (sign - image), but also any book (sign - language) or written record (sign - written expression), etc.

iv. Recipient of the message (each person) – All people, Christians as well as non-Christians are recipients of pastoral activity. This follows from the essence of pastoral care, which is "accompanying a person to salvation and transforming human society" (Jarab in *Orbis communicationis socialis*, 2002, p. 102).

### **3.1 Presentation of current pastoral challenges in the context of online interpersonal relationships**

The impact of the Internet, resulting from its accessibility (worldwide coverage), technical possibilities, financial availability and popularity, can be seen on several levels. Above all, we can see the emergence of new forms of interpersonal relations. The freedom and ease of networking on the Internet opens up enormous opportunities for networking, where contacts and "user friendships" rule. Information networks become not only a technical communication opportunity, but a communication space. The type of relationships between participants of communication on

the Internet can be classified into the category "acquaintance" (as opposed to neighbor or relative), which speaks of considerable freedom in terms of the depth and frequency of the relationship (neighbors see each other daily, relatives are mutually dependent). The mentioned development, characteristic of the first period of the development of the Internet, has been significantly threatened in recent years by crime and the presence of pseudo-identities and profiles – robots (Musil, 2003, p. 203 – 206). Today, therefore, it is increasingly difficult to talk about friendships in the forms we know from the days before the Internet.

According to experts, relationships in the Internet environment primarily bring the risk of separating an individual from his real (i.e., offline) relationships. The Internet brings a new type of interpersonal relationships - relationships with "distant" people with whom interaction no longer has the nature of interpersonal communication. Personalization, characterized by "face-to-face" interaction, is separated in the online space from the possibility of meeting in a common real space, resulting in "*distant confidentiality*" and "*confidentiality without reciprocity*" (as a result of a new personalization without elements of interpersonal communication) (Thompson, 2004, p. 159). Despite the concerns implied, it is interesting that the type of "non-reciprocal trust at a distance" is attractive to individuals. It enables them, among other things, to enjoy the benefits of social intercourse freed from the demands of a "face-to-face" relationship. "*Distant*" acquaintances can be included in our own lives exactly when we wish; they are regular and reliable companions who provide entertainment, offer advice, talk about events or offer casual conversation topics. All in a way "that does not make any reciprocal demands on a person" and does not put him in difficult situations that entail real relationships with others. A considerable "free hand" in deciding what kind of relationship we want to maintain and what degree of participation we will require from "distant" acquaintances is a certain positive (Thompson, 2004, p. 176).

In the Internet environment, a person can also face the problem of the so-called *symbolic dislocation* from real relationships with others. Due to the influence of the Internet, he may have difficulty applying the experiences, experiences and knowledge of others in the context of his own life; the problem of learning from others, since the ability to learn on the Internet is no longer associated with meeting other people. The "*expulsion of experience*" can be paralleled by another development trend in the Internet. The influence of the Internet can lead to a massive expansion of experiences that are inherently mediated (Thompson, 2004, p. 182 – 185). Thus, on the one hand, people lose their own experiences, which on the other hand they gain (for example) through the media, but in their amplified and emphasized form (violence and brutality in the media). Although our everyday, real experience will remain our basic experience by which we evaluate the world around us, it will be increasingly supplemented and influenced by the experience we take from the media.

However, the experience of others, which reaches us through the media, on the other hand, also has an essential role "in the process of forming oneself". The growing availability of experience from the Internet creates new opportunities, new possibilities, and in the case of new media, also new environment for "*experimenting with self-understanding*". We discover that we have become not only spectators observing other people, but that we have something in common with them despite the distance. Thus, we are invited to have an opinion about them, to adopt a position towards them, and even to bear a certain part of the responsibility for them. This creates a new, but currently widespread phenomenon – assuming responsibility for distant people or events as well as their moral dimension and impact on the rest of society. A sad example is the case of Graham Bamford, who in April 1993 in Parliament Square in London doused himself with gasoline and set himself on fire in protest against the Bosnian tragedy, which the British government could not prevent. Although this is an extreme example, it still demonstrates how far a sense of responsibility for distant people can go, gained within the media experience (Thompson, 2004, p. 186 – 187).

The new trend that the Internet brings to interpersonal relationships is manifested in the

increase in anonymity, which on the Internet turns into an *individual pseudo-personality*. In both cases, individualization brings the risk of losing social interactions and social coexistence at the local, regional and national level. "Strong social contacts turn into pseudocommunities of substitute masks or alternative personalities" (Musil, 2003, p. 203-204).

Finally, in the question of interpersonal relations, there is an assumption that the new type of relations, acquired in the network, will to some extent be transferred to real relations between people. In our schools, work, church communities and the like, elements of relationships can appear that are characterized by 1) "confidentiality at a distance", 2) "confidentiality without reciprocity", 3) targeted individualization or, for example, 4) characteristics of "distant" acquaintances etc. It can also be interpersonal relationships, in which we will voluntarily prefer online communication, freed from the demands of a "face-to-face" relationship, to meeting and sharing in person. Therefore, the question is whether information structures can help restore real social ties between people. Concerns about this assumption are justified. However, it is also necessary to think in positive connotations. The Internet can contribute positively, for example, to building social ties and social cohesion. The ever-increasing number of people and groups who use the Internet to become part of a wide range of services is positively perceived; for example, an online bank account. Access to new possibilities in the Internet environment will also give users great freedom in establishing contacts, etc. All this and much more can finally be a source of real enrichment.

**Conclusion.** Although the Internet represents quite a few threats that arouse concern, from the point of view of the Catholic Church, which is the dominant church in Slovakia, the Internet is and remains a "gift". A gift that we should use in the name of the good of the entire human family.

The Internet is a carrier of influential socialization and technical means that can be a welcome helper in the process of pastoral care. This is also possible because it is the bearer and spreader of value orientations, ethical principles, significantly participates in the formation of personality, is a space for the development of education and spirituality of a person, etc.

The well-known Czech Roman Catholic priest, theologian and author of spiritual literature Aleš Opatrný appreciates all online possibilities. On the other hand, it also defines the possibilities of the spiritual dimension of the Internet by stating what the Internet cannot do in this area. According to Opatrný, a person in the Internet environment cannot establish and create a relationship with "a reality that transcends him", because it is a "reality" (for religious people labeled as God) that transcends a person (Opatrný in Nekvapil, Vévoda, 2008, p. 82). Speaking about the relationships between people, which were the subject of our interest in this post, we do not want to forget the primary relationship of man, which should be his relationship with the Creator. Finally, this relationship also shows the motivation for other interpersonal relationships, regardless of the place (offline / online space) where these relationships take place and what quality they acquire here.

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