

Catholics to explore evangelization in cutting-edge online conference

WASHINGTON – More than ever, Catholics are using modern technology as an evangelization tool.

More than 500 national, diocesan and parish ministry leaders will gather online Sept. 16-18 to explore the beliefs, values and spiritual longings of active and inactive Catholics in the U.S. today.

“Proclaiming Christ 2008: Sharing the Gift of Our Catholic Faith” is the topic of the online national evangelization conference presented by the Paulist National Catholic Evangelization Association.

Sister Susan Wolf, a Sister of Notre Dame, is senior vice president and executive director of the Washington-based association.

In an Aug. 20 interview she told Catholic News Service that the conference will take place entirely over the Internet by using Web 2.0 technology, considered the newest horizon for social networking.

“We now have 500 registrants from 99 dioceses,” said Sister Wolf, adding that with more than three weeks to go “the attendance will be much higher.”

The strength of the conference will be the online community of ministry leaders from all over the country.

They will come together for three days in a learning environment for prayer, faith-sharing, presentations from experts in Catholic evangelization, live Q-and-A and a variety of discussion groups, and access to publishers and organizations that provide resources that support the church’s evangelizing mission.

The Paulist National Catholic Evangelization Association consulted evangelization leaders from more than 60 dioceses in designing the conference. The novel idea of having such a comprehensive conference online came about because travel budgets

have been cut drastically or eliminated in parishes.

“With the online conference, now a parish can send five people online. Very few could send a team to a national conference like this in the past,” said Sister Wolf.

At least 17 dioceses will have virtual breakout rooms where attendees from their local churches can connect during the conference.

“We are very excited; we are getting very positive feedback,” Sister Wolf said. “People can participate 24/7 from their own computer; they do not have to travel, don’t have to leave home or their office. Attendees will click into the conference to hear and view the presentations when it fits their schedule.”

With participants as far away as Hawaii, she said, “This is bringing East and West, North and South (together) for conversation and learning about Catholic evangelization.”

The Missionary Society of St. Paul the Apostle, known as the Paulist Fathers, was founded in 1858 by Father Isaac Thomas Hecker, a New York City native ordained as a Redemptorist priest in 1849.

The Paulist Fathers have been pioneers in using technology to raise awareness of the importance of Catholic evangelization and to train Catholics for what is considered an essential mission of the church.

Although the one-on-one personal encounter is still the most effective method of evangelization, the Internet is “one of the major players” in 21st-century Catholic evangelization, according to Paulist Father Kenneth Boyack, the evangelization association president.

“‘Proclaiming Christ 2008’ is the first-ever online conference for Catholic evangelization. It is a real pioneering effort and the way to use media to foster the Gospel proclamation,” said Father Boyack.

“For some people this is quite new,” he added. “The online conference gives people a greater sense and new understanding of the missionary character of the Catholic Church.”

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