

# Church must address role of Internet in identity, community

VATICAN CITY – The Catholic Church and particularly its social teaching must begin to grapple with the potential and the problems posed by the Internet, particularly when dealing with questions about personal identity, community involvement and solidarity, several social scientists said.

Members of the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences, meeting at the Vatican May 1-7, explored how solidarity and subsidiarity can come together to promote the common good.

As part of their discussion, they looked at the role of the market economy and the state in promoting the exchange of goods, but also at the role played by communities and groups that support people, give them identity and teach them how to contribute to society.

For an increasing number of people, computers are the way they connect to the communities where they test and forge their personal identities and where they express their creativity and contribute to the production of goods, several academy members said at a May 6 Vatican press conference.

Margaret Archer, a professor at the University of Warwick in England and co-organizer of the May meeting, said academy members were discussing the “common good” as those things which “are vital for the flourishing of the human person,” including respect for human rights and the sharing of gifts and talents.

“Many of the old methods through which people learned to take part in society – to obey, to contribute, to receive – are threatened or gone altogether,” she said.

The primary agent of socialization in the past was the family, led by a person’s biological mother and biological father; “only 50 percent of the West’s population” now grows up with both parents at home, she said.

The other significant agent was a person’s specific culture, whether it was a

nationality or a religion, she said. But increasingly people do not feel bound by those identities.

“It’s more pick and mix now,” she said.

And particularly as people live longer, she said, more and more of them are living alone, increasing their distance from traditional forms of communal life.

“Here virtual communities could help,” she said. “YouTube and Facebook may not be appropriate for people over 55, but we can develop communities for them.

“We cannot compare virtual reality to what we grew up with if we had two parents, but that reality no longer exists for most people,” Dr. Archer said. “Virtual communities cannot replace the traditional family, but can it fill some of the space?

“We may be nostalgic, but we cannot turn the clock back,” she said.

As the academy members – economists, sociologists, legal experts and theologians, many of whom are not Catholic – engage in a dialogue with church leaders on social topics, Dr. Archer said they notice “gaps in Catholic social teaching because the world is changing so rapidly.”

“If you go through the documents, you will find very little on information technology,” she said.

Michel Bauwens, a Belgian philosopher and theorist specializing in “peer-to-peer” Internet collaboration, said that “the vision of civil society in the documents is constituted by very formal organizations, which are being substituted by more flexible communities,” including those formed by people who meet, socialize, work and share primarily through the Internet.

The philosopher said that cooperative, free projects such as the Linux computer operating system and the Wikipedia Internet encyclopedia are the result of a computer culture that encourages people to participate, work together and make their products available in a form anyone can use and access.

“It runs counter to the overbearing influence of both the market and the state,” he

said.

“Peer-to-peer work is an exemplar of subsidiarity because each person participates to the degree he or she wants, but to translate that into solidarity is an issue that still needs to be developed,” he said.

Dr. Archer said, “Solidarity is the huge problem left behind by modernity. There is a huge deficit of solidarity,” but increasing connections between and among people is probably the first step toward addressing the problem.