Finding faith on the Internet starts with a reliable Web site

A Web site might tout itself as a Catholic Web site, but is it really?

Is what's written there responsible and thoughtful? Or is it the opinion of just one guy sitting in his basement? Perhaps it's a group with its own agenda. How do you tell?

"I try to delve into a Web site and see where they stand on church issues," said Wayne Hipley, coordinator of youth and young adult ministry at St. William of York, Baltimore, who gives presentations on Internet issues. "The Internet has become a way we're doing our formation, and you can't trust everything."

Carl A. Schuetz, affiliate assistant professor of communications at Loyola College in Maryland, Baltimore, suggests readers maintain a healthy skepticism.

That's hard to do when it comes to the written word. After all, since those first elementary school textbooks, many assume the written word has been carefully researched, fact-checked and edited – not the case on the Internet.

Both men offered tips to help readers discern a reputable Web site:

• A reader should first look for the "About Us" page. "I've gone to some Web pages, and they seem prayerful, but you go to About Us, and it's against church teachings," Mr. Hipley added. Reputable sites also have contact information and some have biographical information about the authors. "If there's no information like that on the Web site, that right there is a red flag," Mr. Schuetz said.

• If an article on a Web site has the author's name, do an Internet search to find out what else that person has written. Fact-check credentials; if the Web site says an author has a degree from a university, call the university's registrar's office and see if it's true.

• "Look at the writer's objectivity," Mr. Schuetz said. "Does it seem balanced and

credible like a real news outlet would write, or is it an attempt to influence my opinion – or make me buy something or vote a certain way?" Such a "sniff test" may harder if you agree with the writer.

• Find two other sources – preferably primary sources – that say the same thing. If you find secondary sources offering the same information, look for ones that identify where they found the information.

• Look for links to other reliable Web sites. Be wary if the links from one site carry you to another one that is trying to influence you.

• Articles should have dates; a Web site that only has today's date is probably recycling old information and trying to make it seem new.

• Who is the owner of the information you're reading? Readers can find out who owns the domain name, the "address" of the Web site. Is it a commercial Web site?

• Be careful if you use a search engine such as Google to find a Web site. Some sophisticated sites look just like the real Web site but are not; those sites are called "spoofing." It's especially common in political Web sites.

"There's a propensity of Web sites out there, and the big thing is being discerning," Mr. Hipley said. He suggests talking to other people, too, who may have found good Web sites.

"We're all out there searching," he said.