

Jesuit journal praises Facebook, but offers some cautions

VATICAN CITY – From smoke signals to the telegraph, from telephones to Facebook, methods for keeping in touch with others far away are helpful, but they are never a substitute for meeting in person, said an Italian Jesuit magazine.

Jesuit Father Antonio Spadaro, who belongs to the Internet social networking site Facebook, wrote about the site in *La Civiltà Cattolica*, a magazine reviewed by the Vatican before publication.

“Basically, Facebook incarnates a utopia: that of always staying close to those people we care about in one way or another and of getting to know others who are compatible with us,” he wrote in the article published in mid-January.

Even with e-mail and news groups, the Internet was basically a collection of linked pages of information, Father Spadaro said, but with Facebook and other social networking sites, it has become “a network of people.”

However, he said, there is a serious risk of people being isolated at their computers for hours on end as they “chat” with their Facebook friends, read their profiles and comment on their photographs.

The point of Facebook is to share your life, he said, but there is a temptation to construct an identity to make the user seem “more acceptable, pleasant, even desirable, including sexually.”

In addition, psychologically people could have a difficult time declining a request to become “friends” on Facebook and, with a counter on a person’s profile page keeping track of the number of his or her friends, some may be tempted simply to collect friends.

While Father Spadaro did not mention the Jesus Christ fan sites on Facebook or the fact that users can befriend Jesus – under one title or another – he did dedicate a section of his article to faith on Facebook.

“Like every Internet reality that directly involves human life, desires, tensions and relationships, Facebook is also a place where faith and religiosity are expressed and have their relevance,” he said.

Facebook members join discussion groups, form “fan clubs” for religious figures and even for saints, operate prayer boards and create virtual communities for their parishes, youth groups or religious orders, the Jesuit said.

“While there has not yet been a census, the presence of religious and priests on Facebook is not irrelevant,” he said.

In fact, he noted, when the webmaster of the Archdiocese of Naples, Italy, opened a Facebook account for his archbishop, Cardinal Crescenzo Sepe, the number of people asking to befriend the cardinal quickly reached Facebook’s maximum of 5,000 friends.

Although not mentioned in Father Spadaro’s article, Cardinal Sepe invited his Facebook friends to a special, in-person meeting just before Christmas. About 100 of them showed up.

Father Spadaro also informed readers of the existence of a Catholic Facebook application called Praybook, which allows users to access and share with others traditional Catholic prayers and texts from the Liturgy of the Hours.

The application was developed by Italian Father Paolo Padrini, a diocesan priest from Tortona, and Dimitri Giani, a computer programmer, who also developed the iBreviary application for the iPhone.