

Jesuit magazine discusses dangers, opportunities in digital worlds

ROME - Digital worlds where viewers can interact with each other and create vast social networks carry several risks, but they also might be grounds for evangelization, said an influential Jesuit magazine.

One virtual world called Second Life is gaining such widespread popularity that it is not “possible to turn a blind eye to this phenomenon, or offhandedly pass judgment glorifying it or condemning it,” said La Civiltà Cattolica (Catholic Civilization) in an August 4 article released to journalists July 26.

The Rome-based biweekly, reviewed by the Vatican Secretariat of State before publication, dedicated most of the 13-page article to discussing Second Life. That virtual world, which can be found online at secondlife.com, is entirely created and owned by its more than 8 million residents.

From shopping to chatting to studying university courses, residents also are making room for God and spirituality, said the article written by Jesuit Father Antonio Spadaro.

Cathedrals, mosques, synagogues, temples - and even convents and cloisters “with spartan rooms for virtual rent” - are peppered across the user-created world, giving residents a chance to pray alone or with others, it said.

“Virtual churches exist in which it’s possible to find a minister who is able to welcome and strike up a dialogue with whomever enters,” it said.

The popularity of virtual worlds may reflect people’s longing for “another life” and the human need for becoming better people, the article said.

With so many people looking online for meaning beyond the temporal world, the article said, “at heart, the digital world may also be in its own way considered to be mission territories.”

“The best way to understand (the Second Life phenomenon) is to enter into it, (and) live inside it to recognize its potential and dangers,” it said.

But living a second, virtual life also could carry some risks, it said.

Because one’s real identity is confidential, one’s virtual appearance can be completely open and honest, “but on the other hand one can also get caught up in a spontaneity that knows no limits or discretion,” it said.

It also said that in creating or being part of such a lifelike, imaginary world, one might become alienated from the real world and begin to identify oneself according to one's self-created myth.

"There may be a kind of diffidence and resignation in opting for the simulated" instead of real life, it said.

Another problem is that events or experiences are erased easily without consequences, it said. Simulated reality allows the user to do almost anything at a "low level of risk," it said.

"This has worrying emotional and affective consequences," noted the article. In the virtual world everything is "under control and reversible," making the real world look frightening.