Research for Potential Internet Expansion of Saint John's Parish
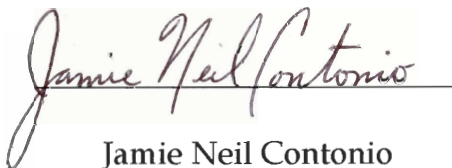
An Interactive Qualifying Project Report:

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Abstract

Saint John's Parish in Worcester, MA has noticed increases in church attendance, in the number of sacrament-receiving parishioners, and in the number of registered households in the parish, all indicating that Saint John's must address the spiritual needs of a growing population with a small staff. I researched religion in the Internet community as a possible solution to this problem. With its potential for online growth, Saint John's Parish will have the capabilities to effectively implement a successful Internet Ministry.

I.   Introduction

Saint John's Parish has had a tremendous impact on Central Massachusetts over the last 160-plus years. The church has withstood countless changes in the growth of the city as well as in the makeup of its members. Since the church was originally constructed, the population of Worcester has grown from less than 10,000 in the early 1800s with only one parish, to over 750,000 last year, with more than thirty Catholic parishes now present within the city limits. At Saint John's, there has been a recent 59 percent increase in registered households, and increasing numbers of children and young adults receiving the sacraments; the demand upon church staff has understandably risen as well. To accommodate expected, continual, future growth, the church is looking for ways to expand services to their members without increasing the workload of parish employees and volunteers, who are limited in number.

One possibility is to develop a parish website to aid in ministering to the community; however, the church has some uncertainty about whether such an allocation of resources will be beneficial. If Saint John's decides to use the Internet in its ministry, Father Coonan, the parish priest since 1994, desires an appropriate use of technology to satisfy the spiritual needs of the community. The goal of this project is to research the existence of religion on the Internet to establish the needs of the online community and to determine if Saint John's Ministry has a place in that population.

II. Background

Irish Settlers Come to Worcester

> The meadows that Daniel Gookin and his associates reported as
> sufficient to support thirty families must have lain in part along that stream
> (Blackstone) between Chandler Hill on the east and the Harvard Street Ridge on
> the west. This strip of meadow, now teeming with numberless industries,
> doubtless resulted from the dam the beavers had made across the river near
> where it now runs under Front Street by the Union Station (Cutler, 11).

Worcester's earliest settlers realized the importance of water in their lives; the
Blackstone brought many of the first Catholics to Worcester, as well. In 1820, the town
of Worcester had only 19 immigrants out of a total population of 3,000. What was meant
by the word, "immigrant," is not exactly clear, though. Immigrant could have referred
to residents who had recently entered the city or could refer to those in the city who did
not practice the common religion. However, in 1825, nearly a thousand Irishmen (most
of whom were skilled laborers, youngest sons of prosperous farmers in Eastern Ireland)
flooded into the Blackstone Valley south of Worcester to begin construction on the
Blackstone Canal. The citizens of Worcester, made up mostly of Congregationalists, had
left their homes in England to escape the Church of England and everything it
represented, as well as the Roman Catholics, whose devotional practices were
considered objectionable.

> While puffing continuously on their clay pipes to keep the insects at bay,
> the Celts continuously extended the canal north, hacking their way through the
> Blackstone Valley underbrush, wading hip-deep in swamps, and scooping out
> earth at a rate of two cubic yards for man every hour.
> Yet if the Irish were good workers, the local natives could not overlook
> their shameless customs: "jigger breaks" of whiskey or rum taken four to six
> times a day to stimulate the workers in the cold, boxing and wrestling matches at
> night in their work camps, and, of course, worst of all, their religion (Meagher,
> 13).

On July 4, 1826, the Irish Canal workers came to Worcester. Many townspeople disapproved of the "Irishies" even being allowed within the town. Others, including Edward Lincoln, reassured them, however, "the Irish have come to build the canal and not live among us" (Meagher, 14). Many of the immigrant laborers remained in Worcester, though, upon finishing the Canal in 1828.

Early Worcester Catholicism

On October 11, 1828, five days after the opening of the Blackstone Canal, Father Robert D. Woodley of Providence, RI began a two-day visit to Worcester. Since October 12, 1828 was a Sunday, Father Woodley most likely celebrated the first public Mass in Worcester on that day (Murphy, 34-35). In 1832, Robert Laverty wrote to Bishop Benedict Fenwick for the visitation of a priest for performing Baptisms and basic instruction in the Catholic Faith. In the following year, Rev. James Fitton performed the first Baptism in the town and presided at the first Marriage (Meagher, 16). In 1834, Rev. Fitton wrote to Bishop Fenwick about the prospects of building a church, asking, "How are these good people to be attended on Sundays as desired? This will be necessary to preserve the flame present kindled" (Meagher, 16).

Christ Church

At a Mass on April 6, 1834, "in an age when very few men earned as much as half a dollar a day" (Meagher, 16), the congregation pledged $500 for erecting a chapel or church. Soon after, on July 7, 1834, Father Fitton set the cornerstone for the first Massachusetts Catholic Church outside of the Boston Area (Figure 1). In turn, the cattle

walk in front of the Church, running from Green Street to the Canal, became known as

Temple Street, in honor of the new building.

Figure 1: Christ Church

Saint John's

On May 27, 1845, Bishop John Fitzpatrick of Boston presided over the laying of

the cornerstone of a new Church to replace Christ Church. On July 24, 1846, thousands

celebrated the opening of Saint John's (Figure 2), named in honor of Bishop Fitzpatrick.

Since then, many distinguished priests have presided at Saint John's over the years,

including Rev Patrick T. O'Reilly, who served as the Bishop of Springfield during its

first fifteen years.

Considered the Mother Church of both the Springfield and Worcester Dioceses, two high schools (Saint John's High School, Shrewsbury; Notre Dame Academy, Worcester), St. Vincent's Hospital and the College of the Holy Cross, Saint John's has had a tremendous impact on the life of Massachusetts Residents, Catholic and Non-Catholic alike. In addition, the Church is "listed on the National Register of Historical Landmarks and was cited for its architectural significance as well as its contributions to the community's development and its role in both social and humanitarian fields of endeavor" (http://www.stjohnsworcester.org/history2.htm).

Figure 2: Saint John's Church and Rectory

Rev. Joseph A. Coonan

In 1994, Father Coonan took over as pastor of Saint John's Parish. He earned a Bachelor's Degree in Philosophy and a Master's Degree in Psychology at Assumption

College, after which he taught at Assumption and Becker College for over 20 years. On

a trip to Ireland at the age of 38, Father Coonan

> was just sitting in this pub in Ireland. [He] had this really warm feeling and fell
> on the floor. [He] got up and went for a long walk. [He] walked for a couple of
> hours and it was beautiful—cliffs everywhere and wild, wild seas. [He] came
> back and told [his] friends that [he] had decided to apply to the seminary. They
> laughed and ordered another round of Hennesyes (Wally, 27).

Joe went on to work toward a Master's in Divinity from Pope John Seminary, after

which he served at Saint Paul's Cathedral, eventually moving to Saint John's as their

pastor.
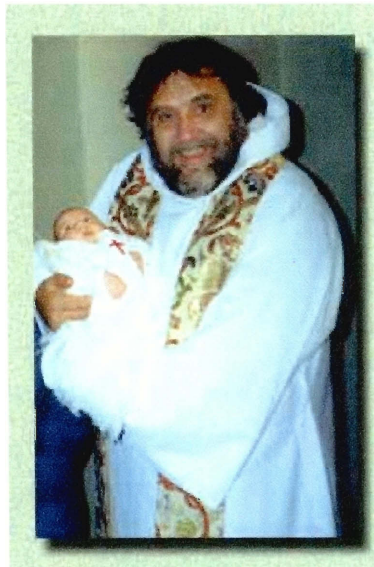
Figure 3: Rev. Joseph A. Coonan

In his sermons, Coonan combines, "poetry, pop-music and humor with the

parables of Matt, Luke and John," (Wally, 27) attracting young and old alike by his use

of secular music and poetry to support his religious messages. "If you can find a tune to

match the idea you're teaching, students will have more success remembering the

theory". That is why he chooses secular music over religious. "[He] could play a group

of nuns singing, and it would be lovely; but, it's not what you get in a bar or hear

downtown" (Wally, 28). In addition, practical in his approach, Coonan displays

somewhat of a focus on young adults, including high school and college students, "Even

though young people have walked away from traditional kinds of churches, they're still

going and they're certainly still searching" (Wally, 28).

Statistics

Judging by Saint John's statistics, the number of members (generally young ones)

receiving sacraments in the parish is increasing rapidly (Table 1). Since 1996, Baptisms

and First Communions have increased by 50%, while the number of Confirmations has

increased by 850% to 67. The current Confirmation class of 2001 shows a greater

increase, with 80 students set to celebrate the sacrament soon. Another interesting

statistic to review is the number of registered households, which reflects a certain sense

of permanence, as opposed to college students and young professionals who may or

	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	4-year Growth	% Growth
Baptisms	98	100	123	96	144	46	46.9%
First Communions*	23	27	23	30	35	12	52.2%
Confirmations*	7	20	39	29	67	60	857.1%
Marriages	26	29	30	61	47	21	80.8%
Funerals	115	116	108	106	89	-26	-22.6%
Registered Households	473	531	574	734	747	274	57.9%

* First Communion and Confirmation Statistics do not include the Vietnamese Community, which has a separate program.

Table 1: Saint John's 5-year Vital Statistics

may not stay in the area for more than a few years. In addition, an increasing trend is

the number of young parishioners versus older ones as indicated by a comparison of

Baptisms and Funerals (Table 2). In 1996, the number of Baptisms was 15% less than

	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000
Baptisms/Funerals	0.85	0.86	1.14	0.91	1.62

Table 2: Saint John's Baptism/Funeral Trends

that of deaths; while, in 2000, baptisms outnumbered funerals by more than 60%, with a

drop in the number of deaths of nearly 25%! With an increase in the total number of

registered households, more than likely, these statistics do not mean an absolute

decrease in the number of older members; but, rather, a shift in the overall makeup from

older to younger parishioners.

Increased Workload

Realizing a shift in the makeup of the parish is one thing; however, maintaining

those parishioners is another. With huge numbers in growth in the last five years, the

church administration, consisting of one pastor, one aide, several deacons and a few

volunteers, is experiencing trouble in coping with the workload. Church

responsibilities, internally divided amongst the staff, include administering sacraments,

educating members, maintaining facilities, preparing homilies, etc. According to Ruth

Delgreco, a church aide for over 5 years, making an appointment with Father Coonan

for general business is sometimes not an easy task. His schedule can, on occasion,

backup for weeks at a time and an emergency call from a hospital can sometimes bring

about an immediate and unreported cancellation. A cancellation of an appointment

made weeks in advance can be disconcerting for a parishioner, especially when it is a

troubled person who needs assistance. While the church is in discussions with the

Bishop to acquire more help in the form of another priest, expectations are that the Bishop will not be able to fulfill the request for some time.

Proposed Solution

One proposed way to deal with the influx of calls/appointments is to expand and develop the current website for the community, improving the site for both members and non-members of Saint John's Parish. A parishioner in the church choir, Monica Hatch, created the current site to provide information on church history, mass schedules, church events, contact information, and on distribution of the Sacraments; however, Father Coonan has yet to endorse the site as the "official" website of the parish, for unknown reasons.

The expanded website will be able to provide important information that does not require time with the pastor and would act as an important supplement to the weekly Mass. The proposal includes the provision of excerpts from Father Coonan's sermons and supplemental reading material/music/poetry/etc. for additional study or for devotional lessons for housebound parishioners. In addition, the site should include an intranet, devoted specifically for use by Saint John's members, in which opportunities will include chat groups, instant messaging, community calendars and discussion forums. Eventually, Father Coonan would like to create an online resource through which community service opportunities will be organized so that members of the community can access and review their options in spreading and implementing their faith.

The concern is whether the Internet could be a useful means to reach current parishioners and attract new ones, while reducing stress of the Parish Staff. Of course, it

is also important that any website be designed in a manner appropriate to the spiritual mission of Saint John's. In response to this question, I researched the potential of the Internet to support parish expansion. Eventually, I hope that my analysis will aid Father Coonan in future measures to assist with increasing demand for his ministry.

III. Methodology

Religion and Faith

For the purposes of his 1958 study, <u>The Varieties of Religious Experience,</u> William James defined religion as, "the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine" (James, 42). James was careful to define 'relation' as "moral, physical, or ritual"; but his definition displays religion as a very personal experience. Most religions, however, need a sense of community, a gathering place in which to fulfill the beliefs expressed in their respective creeds.

Catholics, specifically, need a physical church in which we relive the sacrifice of Christ through the transubstantiation of the bread and wine into the body and blood of Jesus. In addition, confession, a required part of Catholicism, necessitates the verbalizing of ones sins, to God, through a priest. In addition,

> The act of faith, like every act in a man's spiritual life, is dependent on language and therefore community....
> Only as a member of such a community (even if in isolation or expulsion) can man have content for his ultimate concern. Only in a community of language can man actualize his faith. (Tillich, 23-24)

Without a sense of community and personal interaction, no religion will succeed. In addition, Christianity maintains an attitude that promotes community service in daily life. Helping one's neighbors offers an excellent way to strengthen and spread one's faith by displaying Christianity through one's deeds and actions.

Internet and Religion

The Media Lab at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology estimates that there will be one billion users of the World Wide Web within the next few years, one-sixth of the world's population. In the United States, 150 million users log on, with hundreds of thousands new users each month. While the number of users has increased, so has their online spending. Total Internet revenues during the Christmas season jumped from nearly nothing in 1996 to $3.5 billion in 1998 (Wilson, 3-4). The trend is obvious; the Internet is becoming more important to an increasing number of people, each day.

With this rate of expansion and the lack of regulation, however, comes the opportunity for advantage-seekers to destroy the positive potential of the Internet. The lack of **real** physical contact with people has its own negative effects on society, particularly in matters of spiritual guidance and the human, emotional need. "We are removing ourselves from direct contact and...this is ruining the underpinning of communities" (Cohen, 38).

The Church's Role

> Socially, in spite of its pitfalls and dangers, religion in cyberspace offers a valuable countervailing presence to the market commodification of everything in sight. Governments cannot provide this. Religion can (Brasher, 187).

What does this mean? Catholicism not only has an *opportunity* to make a difference; the Catholic Church has a *responsibility* to act as a moral representative for Christians and Non-Christians in cyberspace. Beside the social aspects, Americans have lost touch with their past, focusing only on the future.

> In the electronic universe, history can vanish in a nanosecond. Materializing a perpetual present, cyberspace offers the ideal public space for a people without history....

...In the online world, traditional religions such as Judaism and Christianity advance a striking contradiction to this trend. These religions excel in constructing and perpetuating particular memories (Brasher, 25).

Drawbacks of Internet Worship

More and more people seem to be searching for community these days, both on the Net and in the offline world. At the same time, community--in the sense of a "place," real or virtual, where one can find fellowship and a sense of belonging—is becoming harder to find (Careaga, 127).

An Internet Community does not maintain the same relationships as more traditional communities, such as that in a parish; it is a "removed medium, like television, but the fact that it is interactive makes it a viable channel for creating community" (Cohen, 38). Regardless, many people are looking to these online communities for guidance and answers to their questions on faith.

Internet Sites with religious messages are becoming some of the most popular on the World Wide Web. Some experts predict that in a decade, 20% of the population will be using the Internet as its primary source of worship (Cohen, 37).

In addition, online churches lack a certain identity that physical churches have. Kent Delhousaye of the Arizona Republic argues that this is the main purpose of Church. He says that, in addition to identity and socialization, a physical church also provides two other essential purposes: accountability and encouragement, both of which are difficult to gain from an unknown entity on your computer. Beside these disadvantages, there are emotions that **cannot** be invoked online. A church has a particular sound, a smell, even a sight that the best online viewers cannot reproduce.

Certain people feel that the information that the Internet provides is enough to send you on a spiritual journey, but services like mass can't happen just anywhere...realistically, you can't recreate that feeling while sitting at home (Cohen, 39).

Benefits

From another perspective, faith **is** very personal and developing your faith can sometimes be a personal journey. "There's nothing like a good journey," says Father Coonan, "I love saying to people, 'I can't give you the answer, but take a long walk and see what you like when you're done'" (Wally, 29). Much of this journey does not require a physical building. "When you want to talk to a higher power, especially one that is omnipresent, then you should be able to do it anywhere and anytime" (Cohen, 39). The Internet can be an incredible means for providing information to people, as well.

> The Vatican is one of the most heavily wired religious organizations in the world, with three servers and two computers in the pope's office. The Vatican's site is in six languages and gets millions of hits a year. [The Vatican is] using the Internet as an information resource (Cohen, 40).

As a supplement to the Parish, an online community can provide an excellent source for further discussion of the Church's teachings, as well as a forum for all aspects of Church life. With a strong Parish community base, the church can make effective use of the Internet as an accompaniment to the Mass and the lives of the parishioners.

IV. Analysis

*Again, the Kingdom of Heaven is like a **net** that was cast into the sea and gathered some of every kind*   --Matthew 13:47

How can Saint John's Parish use the Internet effectively, through its current website, to reach people in a Christian manner? There are several ways. One way is by developing a strong, online community to join the members outside the weekly Mass. By developing an intranet, a website intended specifically for parishioners of Saint John's, members can have a useful portal through which they can post major events, find links to information about Catholicism, specifically Saint John's Parish, and have discussions with others about spiritual and community issues. The intranet could be as basic as a newsgroup or more expansive with a configurable calendar (Figure 4), instant messaging (Figure 5), discussion forums (Figure 6), and search capabilities.

Another way that Saint John's could provide benefits to its community is through the development of an archive of informational resources of historical and current data concerning Catholics and Christians, including online versions of several historical accounts of Catholicism in Central Massachusetts and about the history of Catholicism in general. Many young Catholics today have very little knowledge of the tremendous history of the Catholic Church and the influence it has maintained in all aspects of American culture. The current informational aspects of the website provide basic details about St. John's that could be expanded and made better known to prevent some phone calls to the Parish staff, including information on mass schedules and church organizations; however, there is much room for expansion in this regard.

May 2001

	April 2001					
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8	9	10	11	12	13	14
15	16	17	18	19	20	21
22	23	24	25	26	27	28
29	30					

	June 2001					
					1	2
3	4	5	6	7	8	9
10	11	12	13	14	15	16
17	18	19	20	21	22	23
24	25	26	27	28	29	30

May 2001

[May ▼] [2001 ▼] [Go]

Click on any date to view details for that day.

Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
		1	2	3	4	5
6 Mass	7	8 Confirmation Class	9	10	11	12 Church Fair
13 Mass	14	15	16 AA Meeting	17	18	19
20 Mass	21	22	23	24	25	26
27 Mass	28	29	30	31		

Add an Event

Date	[2] / [5] / [2001] ☐ Every Year	Heading	[　　　　　]
Description	[　　　　　　　　　　]		

[Cancel] [Save]

Calendar Program © Copyright 1999 Matt Kruse

Figure 4: One of many free web calendars available online
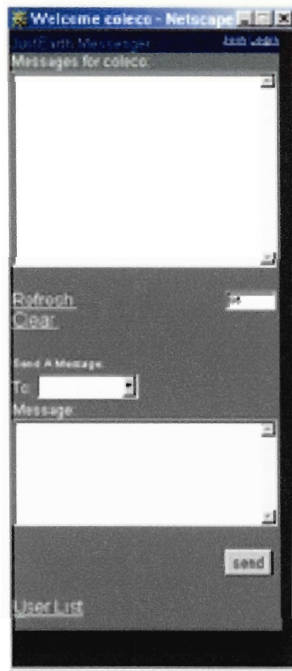
Figure 5: One of several, free, Internet-instant-message services available

Figure 6: Example of a configurable discussion forum available for use

Another Worcester Parish, Saint George's, has already begun its Internet Ministry. The parish maintains an informational website (Figure 7) where parishioners can visit to obtain varying degrees of information on church happenings and can access contact info. The site provides very little interaction, however, acting mostly as a way to access information without calling the church. Another Catholic Church in Worcester, Sacred Heart (http://www.sacredheartworcester.com), provides similar information. Other local churches (Table 3) act in the same way, as information providers, by providing information with little/no interaction or community development. One exception is St. Luke's, which has a good, audible collection of church music used in the past.

City	Parish name	Website
Boylston	St. Mary of the Hills	www.rc.net/worcester/stmary
Hopedale	Sacred Heart	http://home.mindspring.com/~shchopedale
Linwood	Good Shepherd	www.gdshphrd.com
Milford	St. Mary of the Assumption	www.geocities.com/saintmarysmilford
Northboro	St. Bernadette	www.ultranet.com/~sbcs/parish.shtml
Northboro	St. Rose of Lima	www.ultranet.com/~strose
Webster	St. Joseph Basilica	www.ultranet.com/~st-joe
Webster	St. Louis	www.ultranet.com/~stlouis
Westboro	St. Luke the Evangelist	http://world.std.com/~stlukes
Worcester	St. George	http://www.saintgeo.com
Worcester	Sacred Heart	http://www.sacredheartworcester.com

Table 3: Online parishes in Worcester County

Saint John's hopes to maintain its current capabilities as an informational site, as the other parishes in Worcester Diocese do, with some expansion. In addition, however, Saint John's could make available a great resource of supplemental material to enhance the weekly worship services, such as a readable sermon or an audio version, additional reading material, and additional music to explore. By providing study materials, Saint John's can create an effective tool to bring members to the site during the week, helping to address the issue of churchgoers who attend mass weekly like they stop at a gas station to, in a sense, "fill up for the week".

The website, as a supplement to the weekly mass, could provide a great resource as a database of Father Coonan's "tunes" that he plays during his homilies. This might draw more young people and maintain their attraction to the Church. "Diversity of musical approaches is positive; it acknowledges that there is a pluralism of musical tastes, a variety of ways in which to stir the imagination through music" (Greeley, 192). As a wise young woman put it, in an anonymous, online interview:

> One night, I was depressed I flipped radio stations, heard a song, and started listening to Christian music. (Which is totally not anything I would've ever considered doing.) I have developed into what could be considered an underground Christian....
> The Internet provided the info on my salvation that I (was/am) [too] apprehensive to get for myself in the real world. The Internet is the way to reach my generation. It is a way for cowards like me to grow in faith privately until we get the strength to say our beliefs out loud (Careaga, 30).

The music ministry can provide an excellent tool in engaging young people to explore their faith, on a personal level, through a means that interests them already.

Baptism

Second Sunday of the month at 1:30 p.m. In the sacrament of Baptism, the Church welcomes its newest and youngest members of the parish community. Please call the office to make arrangements for the Baptism.

Baptismal Training Sessions presented by the Baptismal Training Team are held monthly to enhance a family's spiritual preparation for Baptism and to heighten awareness of the shared responsibility of family and parish community to nurture the faith life of each child. Parents and godparents are required to attend this one evening session. Dates are published in the parish bulletin.

Marriage

Saturday mornings or Sunday after 2:00 pm
Arrangements must be made one year in advance with a priest.

Marriage Preparation Ministry: to assist engaged couples of our parish community to prepare for the lifelong Sacrament of Matrimony. Couple to Couple Ministers meet with engaged couples (one on one) for five to eight sessions, discussing a variety of issues encountered in marriage. PreCana teams present diocesan based one-day programs.

Penance

Saturday: 3:00-3:45 pm
Arrangements may be made at other times by contacting a priest.

Anointing of the Sick and Communion Calls

Members of the family should notify the rectory whenever one of our parishioners becomes confined to home or hospital.

Father Copper with Jacob Hersey following his Baptism

Figure 7: One informational page at http://www.saintgeo.com

V. Conclusions

The formidable tasks that will immediately confront us include determining how we can support religion in cyberspace while preserving its diversity and how we can support religion in cyberspace while avoiding the leveling effect of hegemonic globalization....

...The challenges of accepting cyberspace as a public common where religious expression is welcome are immense, but the rewards may be equally vast (Brasher, 187).

Saint John's Parish is a perfect candidate for expanding its outreach to the Internet. The church has a rich history, dating back to the 1820s, when Catholicism first began to develop in Central Massachusetts. Father Coonan already maintains a parish rich in ethnic, social, and age diversity, with a trend toward an increasing number of young parishioners who are already growing up in the Internet Age. Using its already strong community as a base, the church could develop a very visible web presence to accommodate new members and to provide a source of information for parishioners, newcomers and people developing their faith. Without a doubt, Internet expansion would be a great use of Parish resources in the future.

The parish reflects diversity among the members each week; attend one of the Vietnamese masses at 10:30 am on a Sunday morning or see the wide age range at a 7:15 pm Sunday mass. Maintaining parish diversity online will **not** be easy, for sure. The Web Site will offer a good opportunity for members who regularly attend particular masses to meet other parishioners they might never otherwise come across. In addition, the website should not fear becoming hegemonic over mass attendance, receipt of sacraments and participation in community service; as earlier stated, the focus will be on maintaining the site as a supplement, never a substitute, to the stronger, more-complete, physical church.

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