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Andrea Rota, Oliver Krüger (Eds.)

# The Dynamics of Religion, Media, and Community

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Mirjam Aeschbach

Fabian Huber

Tim Hutchings

Isabelle Jonveaux

Dorothea Lüddeckens

Anna Neumaier

Andrea Rota

Alessandra Vitullo

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# Internet in the Monastery

## Construction or Deconstruction of the Community?

Isabelle Jonveaux

### Abstract

Monasticism is characterized by community life in a specific place (*stabilitas loci*), but also by local and translocal networks that correspond to different functions of the monastery (religious, cultural, commercial, etc.). Although Max Weber describes monasteries as out-of-the-world institutions, most monastic communities (at least male ones) have Internet access and an online presence now. The use of digital media in monastic life raises a number of questions: What impact does it have on the community life of monks and nuns? Can it jeopardize the quality of community life? Regarding the external communication of the monastery, does its online presence allow the monks to extend the community beyond the cloister? This paper analyzes the role played by digital media in monastic life on the individual and community levels, and on the monastery's outside communication with various audiences.

### Keywords

Catholic monasticism; Digital media; Community life; Monastic economy; Individualism

## 1 Introduction

The lives of people consecrated in monastic orders (such as Benedictines, Cistercians, and Trappists) differ from the lives of members of apostolic orders (such as Franciscans, Dominicans, and Jesuits) in that it is characterized by the notion of *stabilitas loci* (stability of the place). This means that a monk or a nun enters a specific monastery and community and will probably stay in the same place for the rest of his or her life. A specific vow corresponds to this concept. Monasteries are therefore rooted in a particular place. However, they also develop local and translocal networks

by integrating the communities in their local environments and by constructing ties within and across congregations and orders. Since the Middle Ages, monasteries have developed national and international networks through trade, diplomacy, and culture (see Schmitz 1942). In this sense, monastic networks are not entirely new, and the monastic ‘out-of-the-worldliness’ described by Max Weber (1988, p. 259) does not mean that there is a complete lack of contact between monastic communities and the outside world or other monasteries. Today, the use of new digital media<sup>1</sup> is a common feature of monastic life. Monks the world over often have an Internet connection, a personal smartphone and, sometimes, a page on social media.

Monastic life – also called cenobitic life – is a form of consecrated life in a community where monks or nuns live together under the same roof. It also aims to build an alternative society which, according to Jean Séguy’s (2014, p. 288) definition of utopia, prefigures on Earth the Kingdom of God to come. The dimension of community is nowadays becoming more and more important in monastic life. In her research on monastic life in France, Danièle Hervieu-Léger noted:

Among the topics that the monks mentioned in the interviews, the centrality of the community and of community life to the definition of monastic life is definitely one of the most recurring and prominent ones. (Hervieu-Léger 2017, p. 245, my translation from the original French)

Similarly, in a study about monastic asceticism, I found that the monks and nuns most often cited community life as the most important aspect of asceticism (Jonveaux 2018a, p. 106). Furthermore, in an investigation I conducted into the image young Catholic people have of monastic life, community life was the most frequently mentioned positive dimension of monastic life (34.4%). Interestingly, it was also the third most frequent response (18%) to a question addressing the perceived negative dimensions of monasticism (Jonveaux 2018b, pp. 144–146). This suggests that community life in a time of individualism is sought out by young monastics when they enter monastic life, but at the same time represents a challenge for them. I will show here how the use of digital media in monastic life reflects these tensions between individualism and community life.

In this context, what role does the use of digital media play in monastic community life? At the beginning of the Internet age, Howard Rheingold, author of *The Virtual Community* (1993), and others described digital media as a possible means to construct an authentic community. Do digital media play this role in monastic contexts, or do they rather impair some dimensions of community? And how do digital networks and ‘virtual communities’ (Casilli 2010, p. 57) affect the offline monastic community?

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<sup>1</sup> Digital media refer to what Heidi Campbell defines as new media: “New media is that generation of media which emerges on the contemporary landscape and offers new opportunities for social interaction, information sharing, and mediated communication” (Campbell 2010, p. 9).

Drawing on field studies conducted in European and African Catholic monasteries, this article explores how the use of digital media impacts monastic community life and how it builds networks around the monastery. First, I will analyze the adjustments in the monastic community required by use of digital media. Then I will discuss to what extent digital media are also used to improve the quality of community life. Finally, I will investigate the diverse networks monasteries are building with their online presence.

## **2 Monastic Community and Media: Adjustments and Dislocation**

When I asked monks if they have access to the Internet, some replied that it goes without saying; otherwise, as one Austrian Cistercian monk said, “we would not be able to use a car to go to Vienna, either, but would have to go by horse instead”. In contrast, the stronger enclosure of female monasteries leads to nuns’ greater suspicion of the new media (Jonveaux 2013, p. 32). Female communities are often older on average than male communities, which means that the members are generally less interested in new technologies and had less experience with them before they entered monastic life. Furthermore, nuns perform most of their activities within the monasteries, and for this reason are less in contact with the outside world than monks, who are, for instance, involved in pastoral activities. Nevertheless, for both monks and nuns, the question is no longer whether they use the Internet or not, but how they use it and to what purpose.

### **2.1 Why do monasteries need to communicate?**

The monastery seems at first glance to cut off communication with the outside world by building an enclosure. As Raymond Boudon says, an “[e]nclosure protects the utopian society against corruption from outside and against the threat of strangers” (Boudon & Bourricaud 1986, p. 78). This physical enclosure made of walls and railings is also a symbolic barrier that allows the community to control communication with the outside world. Prior to the Second Vatican Council, it was common practice for personal letters to be read by the abbot or master of novices before they were forwarded on to the monks or nuns to whom they were addressed. But monastic communities have always had communication with the outside world for religious or economic purposes. Digital media can, potentially, provide new channels for such communication.

However, the constitution of an online community and the extension of the monastic community online are not essential aims of monasteries. Monks and nuns use digital media first for their own purposes (personal communication, information, online shopping, research, etc.). A

second use of digital media concerns the activities of the monasteries. A monastery is indeed a multipurpose institution that has religious, economic, cultural, and social functions. As I will present later, digital media are also used for these functions. Finally, some communities engage in active projects of pastoral outreach through digital media, such as the app *Hora Benedicti*, developed by the Benedictine monastery of Disentis (Switzerland), which allows people to receive a chapter of the Rule of Saint Benedict and a small commentary every day. Another example is the ‘monastic channel’ on YouTube, where the Cistercian monks of Heiligenkreuz (Austria) post videos about their monastic life. In both cases, monastic communities are producing what Christopher Helland calls “an online religion environment which allows people to live their religious beliefs and practices through the Internet medium itself” (Helland 2005, p. 12). In the case of the app *Hora Benedicti*, like the prayer slide shows of Canadian nuns studied by David Douyère (2015a), the goal is also to produce online material “to give rise to prayer”, as Douyère puts it. For Helland, “In cases where institutional religious organizations do not support online religion it may be due to their perception of the Internet as a tool for communicating rather than an extension of our social world. Most likely they do not view the Internet as an environment where people ‘do’ religion” (Helland 2005, p. 13). Monasteries, to the contrary, view the Internet as an environment where people can live their religion. Even the production and distribution of these digital contents constitute, for the monks and nuns who are responsible for them, a true pastoral activity.

## 2.2 Impacts of digital media on monastic community life

Does the use of digital media change the way of monastic community life? In contemporary society, the time spent using media has increased significantly. According to a survey by GroupM, the prominent media investment group, the average amount of time spent online in France in 2018 was 3.3 hours daily, up from 2.7 hours in 2015.<sup>2</sup> Monastic life is organized around a strict schedule that determines times of work, prayer, and rest. Such rigorous use of time is, according to Michel Foucault, a category of discipline that reflects the “principle of non-idleness: it was forbidden to waste time, which was counted by God and paid by men” (Foucault 1977, p. 154). Benedict in his Rule condemns idleness and describes it as the “enemy of the soul” (RB 48.1). In the strict monastic time schedule, it is therefore difficult to find time for online surfing and communication without taking it away from other activities. This leads some monks to dip into their sleeping time to write their emails, as I observed when I received emails from monks sent at 2 o’clock in the morning. Other monks choose not to have computers in their cells in order to avoid the temptation to surf the Internet at night.

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<sup>2</sup> See <https://www.offremedia.com/groupm-prevoit-que-le-temps-passe-digital-depassera-celui-de-la-tv-lineaire-dans-le-monde-en-2018> (viewed June 26, 2018).

Parallel to this, monastics themselves have recognized a new need for communication in and outside the community. In a book written by four French sisters and brothers reflecting on the consecrated life today, the authors observe that an increased need for communication with the outside world was felt within the religious community. They identified three common trends:

- the need to be informed was felt *more strongly* than the need to be together;
- the need to communicate was greater than the need to dialog;
- the need to be able to choose a network of relationships (family, friends, network among sisters) that is no longer exclusively in religious life (or in the community to which they belong), in order to recharge one's batteries by maintaining contact with relatives.

(Fino et al. 2008, p. 146, my translation from the original French)

Digital media are now part of monastic life. In vast monasteries that have become too large for the shrinking size of many of the communities, it is common for monks to call one another on their mobile phones to find out where they are in the monastery or to ask something. The last time I was in an Austrian Benedictine monastery (February 2018), one monk sent an email to another one to organize meeting for dinner, just as in a modern firm. It was probably easier than trying to find him in the dining hall. In the early years of my research on monastic life, monks and nuns who had important functions in the community had pagers so they could be informed when someone called on the phone or was looking for them. Digital media were therefore adopted in the monastic community to facilitate the internal communication of the community. But the increasing reliance on digital media can also damage the community link, especially when monks and nuns start communicating more by digital media than face to face. Karl Wallner, a Cistercian monk from Heiligenkreuz in Austria, relates the humorous example of his abbot, who told him that he consults the homepage of the monastery every day to know what is going on within his own community (Wallner 2011). Digital media can therefore support communication within the community, but can also be responsible for a decrease in face-to-face communication.

### 2.3 Privatization of communication in monastic life

In monastic life, communication used to be a community responsibility, which meant that individual monks and nuns did not have private communication with the outside world. Until the Second Vatican Council, the ideal of monastic life was the fusion of individuals into the single community. The current individualization of monastic life is first and foremost a direct consequence of the



overall trend in society in general (Hervieu-Léger 2017, p. 159). However, it is also reinforced by the possibility offered by new technologies and media to perform privately a number of tasks that, previously, were conducted at the community level. This issue is not really new, for the following question was already raised regarding landline telephones (Sastre Santos 1997, p. 904): should monks be allowed to have phones in their individual cells, or should there only be a single line for the whole community? A similar dilemma came to the fore when some monks wanted to have television sets in their cells.

The mobile phone, which almost every Austrian monk has,<sup>3</sup> individualizes phone communication even further, as monks are no longer dependent on the community's shared landline. The same trend can be observed with email and social media network accounts. Many female monastic communities still have a single unique email address for the entire community, but this is no longer the case for the great majority of male monasteries.

#### 2.4 Individualization of the image of the community?

Individual social network accounts inevitably raise the issue of how the community wants to portray itself to the outside world and who controls such public communication. Some monasteries have decided to have a community account on Twitter or Facebook to broadcast in the name of the community to the outside world. For instance, the abbeys of Heiligenkreuz, Admont, and Kremsmünster in Austria have community Facebook pages with, respectively, 23,000, 14,000, and 617 followers (figures June 2018). In these cases, a monk (as in Heiligenkreuz) or a lay employee (as in Kremsmünster) administers the page by posting news about the community and its members, the cultural dimensions of the monastery (library, concerts, exhibitions), and spiritual content. On the Facebook page of Admont, a picture representing the monastery or of nature with a quotation from the Rule of Benedict is posted every week by a monk from the community.

Individual monks and nuns may also have personal accounts that they use to communicate about the community. These, however, constitute personal communication and can no longer be considered the communication of the institution. Changes in the form of monastic public communication, as well as potential conflicts between the personal communication of individual monks and nuns and the monasteries' official position, prompt important questions regarding the authority structures in the community and control over the image of the community that is projected to the outside world. Are individual monks or nuns becoming religious leaders when they have many online followers? In this respect, it is important to underline that abbots and abbesses rarely

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<sup>3</sup> We have not observed this in France or in communities of nuns, where generally only monks or nuns who have important functions within the community have personal mobile phones.

have personal accounts on online social media networks. Although religious authorities are generally middle-aged men, online social media allows other profiles to acquire a certain religious legitimacy (see Millet-Mouity & Madore 2018, p. 14). Those who are active on online social networks are often younger monks (or, more rarely, nuns) who were already acquainted with these media before they entered monastic life. Some of them reach large audiences of up to 5,000 friends on Facebook. One Austrian Cistercian monk, for instance, has 4,979 friends, and a Benedictine monk from the Netherlands has 4,884. In these cases, it seems that the individual monks are promoting themselves (their personal activities, pictures, etc.) more than the community. Indeed, “many religious and spiritual leaders use social media like Instagram in order to position and promote themselves and their causes” (Zijderveld 2017, p. 127). When a monk posts many ‘selfies’ (or other pictures of himself) and when people reply to or comment about the monk on a personal level, then it begins to look like a case of personal ‘branding’. One Cistercian monk even got 231 ‘likes’ simply for posting that he would be ‘offline’ for a few days. The personal communication of a religious leader nowadays reaches a larger audience than the institution’s online communication: “The position of religious leaders has become more significant as [a result of] the personification of religious organizations, traditions, or movements on media such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. In the case of Pope Francis, it is clear that his personal Instagram account (4.9 million followers) is much more popular than the official Vatican news account @newsva (1.24 K followers)” (Zijderveld 2017, p. 128).

Cenobitic monastic life, unlike the individual asceticism of anchorites,<sup>4</sup> aims to develop a community charisma and not an individual one. In this sense, the charisma of an individual monk can jeopardize the community (Jonveaux 2018a, p. 247). For this reason the monastic discipline seeks to merge personal virtuosity with the community. “The force of monastic Rules was to moderate such individualism and to warn of the temptations lurking even in competitions between athletes of Christ” (Harpham 1987, p. 29). In the fourth century, for instance, Simeon Stylites had such extreme ascetic practice that he was expelled twice from his monastic community. The regulation of communication between the personal and community levels is, therefore, an important point in monastic life.

Intensive communication with the outside world can also, according to some monks and nuns, lead to a distancing from the community life. As one German sister writes, “Talking on the phone or on the Internet can hinder the practice of silence, and can be a form of separating oneself from God and the other sisters” (Jansing 2009, p. 430, my translation from the original German). When some monks or nuns are very active on social media and post large amounts of personal pictures and messages on their pages, it seems that they want to gain social recognition outside the

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<sup>4</sup> Anchorites, or hermits, are ascetics who have withdrawn completely from society and live alone, not in a community.

monastic community (Jonveaux 2013, p. 107). For instance, Scissors, Burke, and Wengrovitz showed that “the lower someone’s self-esteem, the more people think getting enough Likes is important” (2016, p. 1507). But according to Abbruzzese’s idea of social disinvestment (*desinvestimento sociale*), monks and nuns should renounce all kinds of social recognition (Abbruzzese 2000, p. 47). This is the aspect of monastic asceticism concerning the use of the Internet to which I shall now turn my attention.

## 2.5 Internet asceticism of monks and nuns

Monks are, according to Max Weber, “virtuosi of asceticism” (Weber 1976, p. 345), which implies a distance from the world and a methodical way of life. The Internet brings into the monastery the possibility of having access to the whole world from the cloister and, sometimes, even from the individual cell. As a consequence, in order to maintain the fundamental characteristics of monastic life, monks and nuns have to find a way to protect their enclosure while they are using the Internet. It is for this reason that almost all French monastic communities have decided to set up computer rooms with access to the Internet. This can also involve peer control between monks, who keep an eye out for other monks who spend too much time surfing on the Internet or consulting the kinds of pages that would be contrary to monastic life. Some communities also have a filter for pornographic content. A French Benedictine of the Abbey of Solesmes told me in 2010: “It would naturally be totally contradictory to have Internet in the cell.” In a lot of monasteries in France the abbot cuts off the connection after the last prayers of the day and restores it after the first prayers in the morning. This way, monks can observe the “great silence of the night”, as Saint Benedict expresses it in his Rule. In Austrian monasteries, however, where monks are active in parishes and at schools, such a discipline does not exist: almost all monks have Internet access in their cells, but often say that it is out of necessity, especially when their work entails contact with the outside world. Nevertheless, we can also observe monks trying to impose various kinds of personal ascetic discipline on themselves. For instance, the novice master of Kremsmünster, in Austria, chooses not to have a computer in his cell and aims not to go into his office after Compline (the last of the canonical hours, marking the end of the working day). A young monk in the Cistercian Heiligenkreuz monastery also told me that he aims to use the Internet for no longer than thirty minutes a day, and he observes a Facebook ‘fast’ on days of meat abstinence in the community, that is, on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. In some communities, monks can also voluntarily install a control on the pages they are consulting.

Control over the use of digital media is therefore becoming an important aspect of ascetic discipline that allows these media to be integrated into monastic life without impairing it. But it can result in tensions: monks and nuns in both Austria and France admit that it is more difficult for them to ‘fast’ from the Internet and digital social media than from meat, especially for the new

generation, which grew up with the Internet. Nevertheless, the Internet is generally accepted in monasteries because it provides advantages that serve the goals of the monastic communities.

### **3 When Digital Media Contributes to the Quality of Monastic Life**

#### **3.1 Communicate without going out of the monastery**

Monasteries are theoretically apart from the outside world, and their distance from it is expressed in their rules of seclusion. Even when they perform social activities in society, they are symbolically apart from the world. As Max Weber explains:

Concentration upon the actual pursuit of salvation may entail a formal withdrawal from the ‘world’: from social and psychological ties with the family, from the possession of worldly goods, and from political, economic, artistic, and erotic activities – in short from all creaturely interests. (Weber 1978, p. 542).

The Internet can present a great opportunity for monastics, because it means they can be present in the world without leaving the monastery. For a variety of communication aims (pastoral, economic, cultural), they can communicate with the world and be in the same ‘places’ as other actors within society.

Monasteries are not really visible in a secularized society, especially where they do not have an associated school and where monks do not work in the parishes, as is the case, for instance, in France (Jonveaux 2011). Being present on the Internet allows monastic communities to be visible at the same level as other religious groups or suppliers of monastic products. Christopher Helland observed this phenomenon for minority religious groups in Canada:

Diverse religious groups and religious minorities may have received the greatest benefit from the creation of the World Wide Web. Due to the relatively inexpensive cost of building and maintaining a Website, these groups gained a unique opportunity to present information about themselves to the community in which they lived and also the world at large (Helland 2008, p. 132).

The dissemination by monastic communities of information about themselves and their activities is not new, as monasteries often had – or still have – a newsletter or a small review for friends of the community. However, with the Internet, the visibility of the community has, theoretically speaking, no frontier anymore and can potentially reach people who do not have a preexisting link with the

community. As Katrien Pype observes, online social media are always localized because individuals are present in a definite physical space when they are interacting with online content (Pype 2018, p. 136). In this sense, the visibility of the community has frontiers imposed by, for instance, language, but the religious boundaries are less relevant. Digital media therefore increase the visibility of monasteries in secularized society.

### 3.2 Media as an answer to new challenges of monastic life

It is well known that one of the greatest challenges for monasteries in Western Europe nowadays is recruitment. The present evolution in the demography of monastic communities brings about various changes in the way monastic life is lived. One new question is the training and the place of novices in communities, as these days they often enter in cohorts of one and are, therefore, alone, not only in the community but also sometimes in the entire congregation. Two years ago, the Austrian Benedictine congregation counted only one novice. On other continents such as Africa, postulants and novices constitute a cohesive group in itself, or sometimes, as in the female monastery of Karen (Nairobi, Kenya), two separate groups. This is how it used to be in Western Europe as well, but no longer. Digital media can compensate for the lack of contact with young monks or nuns within the community, as Bernhard Eckerstorfer, an Austrian Benedictine monk, maintains:

As an illustration of the significance of having contacts within the order, I can imagine the example of a Redemptorist who uses Skype to stay in touch with an Irish brother he met in Rome at a meeting for young Redemptorists. [...] Is there not the danger, without these possibilities, that such people will look for the ‘kick’ [of social contact] outside the order? (Eckerstorfer 2012, p. 35, my translation from the original German).

In the same way, the training of young monastics is constrained by the fact that communities are reluctant to send them to study in other cities or countries for periods of two or three years because they need these young forces in the community. It is for this reason that the possibility of developing online distance courses for a variety of masterclasses is being discussed, for instance, at the Benedictine University of Sant’Anselmo in Rome. The idea of building translocal communities within the orders with the help of online media to overcome some of the difficulties of contemporary monastic life offline is therefore emerging in monastic communities.

### 3.3 Support for the liquid community

Monastic use of digital media also constitutes support for ‘liquid’ communities that arise during meetings and events. Modern religiosity indeed is characterized by the highlights, such as major events, which build, for a short time, a new community based on enthusiasm and collective exaltation (Hervieu-Léger 2001, p. 83). These are ‘liquid’ communities in Bauman’s terms (2005) because they come to life as physical communities only for the time of the event, then dissipate, but can be reconstituted in the framework of another event. As Bauman (2005, p. 1) explains, “‘Liquid life’ is a kind of life that tends to be lived in a liquid modern society. ‘Liquid modern’ is a society in which the conditions under which its members act change faster than it takes the ways of acting to consolidate into habits and routines.” The cement of this community is the emotion that was lived and shared during the event.

With the goal of youth ministry in mind, some monasteries organize events for young people. They also hope that the link created with the monastery and socialization in the monastic framework can attract young people to the monastic life. For instance, the abbey of Kremsmünster in Upper Austria organizes a monthly meeting for young people called *Treffpunkt Benedikt* (Meeting Point Benedict). A Facebook page especially created for these meetings helps to maintain the link between events. In an interview, a French Dominican told me about an online retreat for Lent in 2007 for which they were using the Internet because they wanted to speak the same language that the people are speaking nowadays (Jonveaux 2007, p. 159). But this ‘language’ of digital media is changing quickly, and religious institutions have to adapt their media profiles if they want to stay in touch with young people. The survey *Jugend-Internet-Monitor 2017* in Austria showed that the online social networks young people between the ages of 11 and 17 prefer are, first, WhatsApp (93%), then YouTube (90%); Facebook comes in at a distant fifth place.<sup>5</sup> This suggests that Facebook is no longer the best means of communication to reach young people, which is why the communications manager of *Treffpunkt Benedikt* also opened a WhatsApp group in August 2017.

Does monastic presence online seek to activate the local community around the monastery – that is, people who are already in contact with the monastery – or the translocal community of people who have never been to the monastery or who perhaps had contact only once? A survey I conducted in 2017 on the digital offers of the Austrian Franciscans, an apostolic order, for the youth ministry showed that most of the young people surveyed (79%) already knew or had met both Franciscans friars who are engaged in these activities. On the other hand, however, monastic presence on online social networks also allows people who otherwise would not directly speak with

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<sup>5</sup> See [https://www.ots.at/presseaussendung/OTS\\_20170315\\_OTS0025/jugend-internet-monitor-2017-das-sind-die-beliebtesten-sozialen-netzwerke-von-jugendlichen-bild](https://www.ots.at/presseaussendung/OTS_20170315_OTS0025/jugend-internet-monitor-2017-das-sind-die-beliebtesten-sozialen-netzwerke-von-jugendlichen-bild) (viewed on August 10, 2018).

a priest or go to a church to ask questions or chat with monks and nuns. For instance, a Cistercian monk from Heiligenkreuz told me in an interview that he receives four or five personal questions a day from young people who would never go to a church to ask such questions.

#### 4 Digital Liaisons of Monastic Communities<sup>6</sup>

Monastic communities develop digital links with different audiences in the outside world according to the aim of the communication. We can identify five main aims of such communication:

- to link with the local community and provide information (e.g., regarding Mass, etc.);
- to provide touristic and cultural information regarding the monastery (visits, history, opening hours of the shop, etc.);
- for economic purposes (online sales, presentation of products and economic activities, etc.);
- to provide religious content for evangelization and pastoral purposes;
- to establish contact with young people who are interested in the monastic life (“How to become a monk”).

Since online monastic communication has different goals and tries to reach different kinds of audiences, it is necessary for monastic communities to define their target group in order to improve their communication strategy. Let us explore the characteristics of each profile.

##### 4.1 Friends and oblates: the spiritual community

There have always been, around the monasteries, lay people who are close to the monastic community without belonging to it. These people develop a spiritual link with the community and want to stay in contact with it between their visits. It also happens that people visit the monastery only once, but want to maintain a connection. The homepages of monastic communities seek to maintain this contact with close friends of the community. For instance, in Keur Moussa, a Benedictine abbey in Senegal,<sup>7</sup> one monk produces numerous videos about the community, its events, and the village in order to keep close friends of the community informed and to give them the sense that they are in close touch with the community. These messages are especially important for those oblates who have institutionalized links with the community.<sup>8</sup> Churchgoers who attend

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<sup>6</sup> I refer here to Antonio Casilli’s book, *Les Liaisons numériques* (2010).

<sup>7</sup> I conducted two field inquiries in this monastery in July 2016 and March 2017.

Mass in the monastery may also be people who are disappointed because their parishes have become too ‘modern’. Monastic liturgy, in contrast, remains traditional and ‘authentic’.

#### 4.2 Clients, visitors, and guests: the commercial community

Monastic presence on the Internet plays an important role for the economic and hospitality functions of the monastery. Hospitality is recommended by Saint Benedict in his Rule (chapter 53), and all monasteries living according to this Rule have a guesthouse. The guesthouse is often a non-profit activity, which means that monastic communities are not allowed to promote it through advertising. The website of the monastery can therefore help the community attract more guests, especially new guests who are not part of the community’s traditional network. In 2005, just after they had launched their homepage, a French monk told me his monastery was attracting more individual guests because the guesthouse was mentioned on the Internet. Previously, they had had more groups, for instance, from parishes.

The extension of the monastic network can also be observed in the economic field. Specialized homepages allow monastic communities to sell their products online. Most of the early monastic homepages had economic or touristic aims. For instance, the Austrian Cistercian Abbey of Heiligenkreuz opened its first website in 1999 to respond to the touristic demand. Nevertheless, monastic communities do not have as a goal attracting ever more people to come and visit, because too many visitors could endanger the silence required for monastic contemplation.

Monastic products are rarely sold via the usual commercial networks, for instance in supermarkets. Online sales give the communities the opportunity to distribute their products more broadly. The main activity of the monastery of Keur Moussa in Senegal is to produce a traditional musical instrument, the *kora*, which they use for the liturgy. This community undertook the special work of adapting the Gregorian liturgy to African culture (Sarr 2016), and the introduction of the *kora* in the monastic liturgy was a part of this process. Thanks to their online presence, the monks sell more *koras* to other African countries and even outside Africa than they do within Senegal. As of October 2014, the monks had sold 340 *koras* in Senegal and 740 in France, which is the largest client. In total, 899 *koras* were sold in Africa, 942 in Europe, and 80 in North America. Online sales of their CD through the websites of general retailers (e.g., Amazon, Fnac) helped to spread their liturgy, which has now been adopted in a large number of monasteries in West Africa. The monks are now thinking about selling their products on their own homepage, but they are experiencing difficulties with the online payment system.

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<sup>8</sup> Oblates are lay people who live in the outside world but conduct their lives according to the Rule of Benedict (see Frank 2013, p. 228).



For the monastery of Keur Moussa, online sales of their CD are important because the local population is highly impoverished and therefore does not represent a potential market. The monastery's online presence supports its economy, which otherwise has difficulties finding new outlets.

### 4.3 Potential recruits

As mentioned earlier, one of the greatest challenges of monastic life in Western Europe at the beginning of the twenty-first century is recruitment. For instance, for 2017–2018 there are a total of six novices in the Austrian Benedictine congregation across a total of 14 communities. According to David Douyère, recruitment for a community is one of the main goals of religious homepages (Douyère 2015b, p. 9). But does the online presence of monastic communities help them attract more young people to the monastic life?

Interviews with young monks and nuns show that it is increasingly likely for young people to search on the Internet for a community when they are thinking about entering monastic life. The Benedictine sister Hildegard Jansing also notes that the first contact with the community often occurs through the Internet (Jansing 2009, p. 430). This is not to suggest that the Internet instills the religious vocation in young people. Nevertheless, a community that is not present on the Web has a lesser chance of attracting young people because they will not find it. As early as 2000, Jean-François Mayer noted:

We are reaching the point where a monastery that does not have a website will 'lack' potential candidates, as young people interested in religious questions probably will – more and more – resort to the Internet as the first step in their quest. (Mayer 2000, p. 73, my translation from the original French).

Indeed, the profile of novices has radically changed in the last 50 years. Not only has the age of entry increased, but the sources of recruitment have also changed. The principal source of recruitment for monasteries that have an associated high school was the high school itself. For instance, in the abbey of Kremsmünster in Austria, only two of the 23 monks older than 65 had not studied at the monastery's school, whereas only one of the ten youngest monks had been at this school (Jonveaux 2018, p. 31). Younger monks also come from more remote geographic areas and sometimes from foreign countries. This can be understood as part of the quest for 'prophetic rupture' (Hervieu-Léger 1986, p. 95), which means that individuals have to show on the personal and social level a "personal charisma that regenerates the charisma of the function" (ibid.). In this context, young people who are interested in monastic life are more inclined to look for a community

because they do not necessarily have previous contacts with a community, and the Internet can play a role in this search.

## 5 Conclusion

Digital media are now part of Catholic monastic life in almost all monasteries, although monks are still more likely to use them than nuns. But this use of digital media on the individual or community level prompts us to rethink some dimensions of the community, especially in a moment when monastic life has to meet major challenges. Digital communication can in some cases compensate for some of the structural deficiencies of present monastic life – for instance, those related to the changing demography and lack of new entrants – but also answer a new need for communication with the outside world, especially at a time when individualism increasingly challenges community life. Digital media, therefore, are changing the way communication is lived in the monastic community, especially because of the possibility of exchanging views with the outside world on an individual and private level. But intensive communication of individual monks or nuns with the outside world can also impair a monastery's community life.

At the community level, digital media make the communication of the monastery with the outside world for religious, cultural, and economic purposes easier, as monastics no longer need to go out of the monastery for such purposes. In this sense, digital media can reinforce the stability of the community, allowing monasteries to be more present in the world and in the same place as other social actors even while remaining at home. This online presence can be especially important in monasteries' efforts to find new clients. Nevertheless, too big an online presence could lead to too many visitors, thereby threatening the quietude of the monastic community. With this in mind, monasteries must strive to find a balance between these new online approaches and their ages-old goals of contemplation and silence.

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**Biography**

Dr. ISABELLE JONVEAUX is a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Graz and an affiliated member of the Centre d'Etudes en Sciences Sociales du Religieux (EHESS Paris). In 2013 she published a monograph on the use of new media in Catholic monastic life (*Dieu en ligne*). She wrote her habilitation thesis (University of Fribourg) on new forms of fasting in modern society, including voluntary abstinence from the Internet. Her interests include contemporary monastic life in Europe, Africa, and South America, monastic economy, religious practices on the Internet, and new forms of asceticism.

Contact: [isabellejonveaux@yahoo.fr](mailto:isabellejonveaux@yahoo.fr)