Traveling Companion: Meet me in Cyberspace

Fr. Michael Tracey

When I started writing a column called "Rambling Rhetoric" for "Mississippi Today back in 1977, I wrote the column on an IBM Selectric II electric typewriter with its separate, white correcting ribbon. I didn't have a self-contained dictionary to proof my copy, just a well-worn dictionary within arm's reach.

Today, I type this column on my Dell laptop as I sit in my recliner. Of course, my word processing program has its own built in spell checker and word count to make sure that I don't go too far over the daily, minimum required amount of words.

Many years ago, my Commodore 64 computer led to an IBM PC XT computer and then to my own personally built PC's.

I discovered the Internet several years ago and began to explore its potential. I also discovered email and its potential to keep in touch with people, to broaden the horizon of friendships and its instant messaging appeal.

As the Internet grew, so did my knowledge of it and my awareness of its potential. I started building and uploading Web pages for Churches, organizations and communities. My volume of emails continued to grow and I found out even more their potential. I discovered that many who emailed me had many questions of faith, some personal struggles, much suffering, some curiosity and most were in need of some kind of healing. A network of relationships began and continues to unfold. As the emails mount, so does the trust that they generate.

Now, I have taken my cyberspace journey further. I just started my own personal Web site. Some may see this as an ego-trip. Some may see it as an effort to peddle another commodity in cyberspace. Some may see it as a waste of time but my approach is different.

Yes, I have become a Web Minister. I have joined the ever-increasing number of priests, ministers and rabbis who have their own Internet site. I created an online presence in order to respond to those one would not otherwise reach. I found out that a recent survey indicated that 80% of the respondents indicated that they used the Internet to strengthen their spiritual lives.

I have discovered that there is a spiritual hunger that is not being fed by our church; that there is a large percentage of soul-searching taking place on the Internet; that, through the Internet, persons can, in the privacy of their own home, seek out places where they can find answers to their deepest needs and questions. I marvel at the number of self-help books on bestseller lists as well as the growth of so many self-professed gurus passing out soul-nourishing information and guidance to spiritually starved people who have given up completely on organized religion.

A recent survey by the Barna Research Group in California asked the unchurched why they didn't go to church, 74% said that they don't go because they don't see any value in it and can connect with God elsewhere. 61% said churches have too many problems.

Jesus said, "the harvest is ready but the laborers are few. Beg the harvest master to send laborers into his vineyard." (Matthew 9:37-38). He didn't say we had to do the planting. He has done that already in the hearts of his people. He just invites us to do the reaping and gathering of the harvest. We have to realize that the harvest doesn't always present itself for gathering at our church doors or gatherings. We have to realize and accept that cyberspace is also God's space where he continues to invite us to gather his harvest.

So what will you find at www.mtracey.net, my Internet site? You may find this article. What else? Well, you will have to pay me a visit in cyberspace to find out.