

# Comment

## *The Computer Revolution*

One of the many technological spin-offs of the American space programme was the accelerated development of communication satellites. The most remarkable advance, in ordinary everyday life, was the spread of the computer - now so ubiquitous in offices, shops, schools and homes, that we forget how recent the technology is. Even in 1976, the year Apple Computer was founded, there were no more than 50,000 computers in the whole world. Ten years later, that many were being built every day. Now it would take a fairly sophisticated computer to calculate how many computers there are in existence. While older people are often cyberphobic, seven-year-olds are entirely at ease with databases, spreadsheets and all the other paraphernalia. The language is also changing. According to some estimates, it is expanding (American English anyway) by 20,000 words a year. Most remain as technical jargon though dozens have filtered into ordinary conversation (software, user-friendly, hands-on, hi-tech, and suchlike). Robots were first named in the 1920s in the wake of Karel Capek's play (robotnik is the Czech word for a serf). Ever since, waves of enthusiasm for an automated utopia and fears of our being enslaved by technology have ebbed and flowed. Nor have moralists and theologians shied away from raising issues supposedly inscribed in the new technology. Indeed, at Vatican II, in *Inter mirifica*, the feeblest of the sixteen conciliar texts, the Catholic Church was committed to a 'programme of precepts and guidelines' about the 'right use' of the 'instruments of social communication' which, as was generally recognized at the time, was already outdated. We have had to wait until the present pontificate to hear much about the computer revolution. In a statement for World Communications Day, 27 May 1989, Pope John Paul II wrote as follows:

'With the advent of computer telecommunications and what are known as computer participation systems, the Church is offered further means for fulfilling her mission. Methods of facilitating communication and dialogue among her own members can strengthen the bonds of unity between them. Immediate access to information makes it possible for her to deepen her dialogue with the contemporary world. In the new "computer culture" the Church can more readily inform the world of her beliefs and explain the reasons for her stance on any given issue or event'.

In practice, the dialogue within the Church means that every parish has a computer to hold people's addresses, to update the Sunday bulletin, and the like. In the more imaginatively run parishes, computer games are available for catechism lessons. As regards informing the wider world of her beliefs and explaining the reasons for her stance on moral issues of great importance, the Vatican delegation at the Beijing conference on women, seems to have learned something about dealing with the media from all the hostile publicity at the conference in Cairo on population. But it is far from sure that the beguiling world of the Internet is any more likely than radio and television to bring people to the faith. Surfing offers the viewer such opportunities to select what he or she is already interested in, or immediately to exclude what seems boring, that the kind of surprise that might provoke reflection or even conversion seems even less likely to occur. Far from being provoked and educated by hooking up to the Internet, the user may well only surf into the ever-evolving world of fantasy play.

But that is only saying that the 'computer culture' is no different from any other kind of culture, whether primitive or highly civilized, in the ambivalences of its openness to good and evil uses. The most exciting thing for those who are interested in theology is that Scripture, the writings of the Church Fathers, all Vatican II documents, and much else besides, are all now available in electronic form. The convenience of this is obvious. *Evangelium Vitae* was the first papal encyclical ever to be on Internet, within a couple of days. Many Catholic institutions, dioceses and religious orders included, are moving into the new technology. The Order of Preachers is not being left behind. Contacts are already being made by electronic mail. Since July 1994 The Dominican Family Global Electronic Magazine has been distributed twice a month by e-mail from West Springfield (Minnesota). OP-L entered cyberspace, this time from Berkeley (California), listing Dominican preachers and providing a forum for discussion, and has been supplemented since May 1995 by PREACH-L, a private network open to Dominican preachers only. The Dominican presence on the Internet is being managed by a member of the Lay Dominican fraternity in Oslo. As readers of the inside cover will have noticed, the Editor as well as the Production Manager of *NEW BLACKFRIARS* are now accessible by e-mail. The information superhighway is beginning to attract Dominican travellers.

F.K.