

# Networks for Communion

## The Computer Network of the Church in Latin America

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### The Challenge of a new Culture

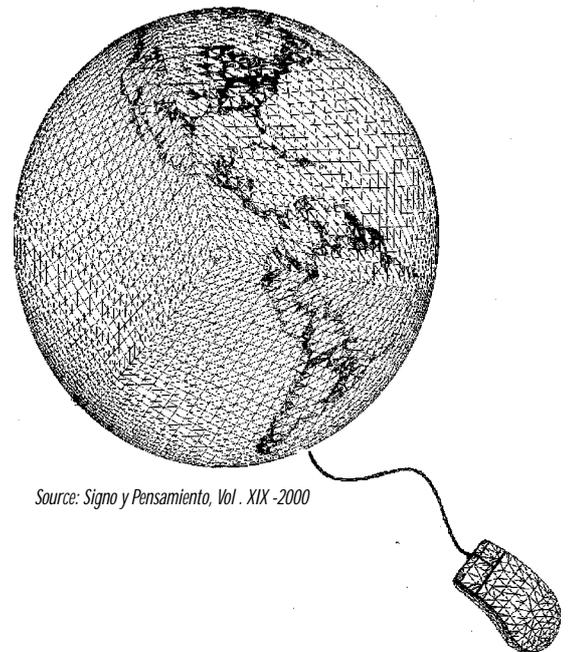
The famous «digital culture» is strongly connected to technology, however, it is much more than just technology. We all know that those who remain outside this cultural wave will be excluded from the great patrimony of culture - and surely of economy - in the third millennium. The technological innovation race doesn't know where it is going yet. Thousands of people seek to improve programmes and machines, but... what do they mean with improve? Where is their horizon? Technological development ends in nonsense if it lacks a correct anthropology and the light of the Gospel.

That is why living in the "digital culture", means not only surrendering the fear of computers and learning how to manage some programmes. It is also necessary to understand the way it transforms peoples' lives and their ways of understanding the world. We need to discover the key to this culture, to synthesise them and give a rich feed-back. So that Christians may at the same time be "beneficiaries and promoters" of that culture in many different places.

Our experiences in Latin America consist of using technological innovations, putting them at the service of communication and communion; we have tried to generate - at least in the Church context - a culture of solidarity, enhancing the same technological development (communion and progress!). In other words, the Church has been present in this culture in such a way that it could emerge with a particular impression in many communities of Latin America. At the same time the rising culture made its mark on the pastoral work of the Church. That is why she is, in many places, both the promoter and the result of the digital era.

### Red Informática de la Iglesia en América Latina (RIIAL): A short History

Ten years ago in Latin America computers were used in big companies, universities and research centres. Just a few Church offices had one, and some people thought that the world would continue communicating through ordinary mail or through the - at the time - revolutionary fax. Before long it became clear that computers would multiply there as much as they would in other areas of the world, and furthermore they could be used as «tools for communication», through a new technology called "telematics". The Pontifical Council for Social Communications and the Latin American Bishops' Council (CELAM) saw that the Church in Latin America would have enormous advantages from those technical achievements which appeared on the horizon. It made great sense in such a vast continent. As long as the societies there were starting the «natural» process of introducing computers in their everyday work, the Church should not be



Source: *Signo y Pensamiento*, Vol. XIX -2000

excluded from that process. It was important, then, to favour the development of growth - at least in the Church - with a combination of compatibility and solidarity.

So, with the «Communio et progressio» in hand, a lot of faith and a great deal of patience, RIIAL took its first steps. Those did not consist of supplying hardware, but in searching for bishops interested in using computers and ready to begin a "pilot phase". The next step was training: a high-level course left the Church with some reliable and highly qualified people. There was no lack of perplexed voices calling it an inadequate project for a poor continent. Time has shown that a poor continent has in fact particularly benefited from this process.

### «Made to Measure» technical Solutions

The only way RIIAL could achieve its objective (to be an instrument for communication and communion) was by ensuring that services were within reach not only of the urban centres endowed with other means, but also and mainly of communities in need. A lot of enthusiasm and creativity was necessary to find solutions which allowed contents and services to reach remote priests, and the most distant pastoral agents and parishes.

In 1994, in Argentina, the first "Diocesan communication model" was developed. It functioned even before the Internet. Through a phone line and with a simple computer programmed as a mail server, the bishop's office and parishes - one of them as far away as 200 km. - could send and receive documents, letters and messages. Peru began introducing computers in a diocese in the Amazon jungle, with no telephone lines or electric power. Computers were linked, battery powered, through a "radio-bridge" and they began exchanging messages.

Three social and religious aspects were being harmonised: faith, culture and technology. The initial intuition of RIIAL has not been modified, although during the past five years the fast technological changes have brought about a quick adaptation. In many aspects - but not in all of them - innovations have made work easier. But in our days technology means choice. That is why starting RIIAL in a diocese means considering concrete needs and pastoral objectives over fascination for «the latest» - analysing technological resources available in each place, making a connection with human, social, economic and cultural aspects. It is possible, then, to choose the most appropriate solution: a "*made to measure*" one. It requires a discernment and a work of synthesis, and also intensive training and educational support for technicians.

### On-line, off-line

The use of Internet is now widely extended in Latin America particularly in big cities but also in many small towns. It is an invaluable tool for international communication and the number of Church web-sites is growing every day. To keep in touch with this huge phenomenon, RIIAL has created a useful and performing Observation Service over the Internet. Nevertheless, ***on-line technology*** cannot be considered as the only broadcasting means for documents and messages. An unequal infrastructure of telecommunications along the continent, high phone charges in many countries and frequently modest and old hardware mean that the Internet cannot be used as the only solution by the Church in Latin America. We need to search for concrete solutions in each case, in particular for those who need it the most. That is why RIIAL uses ***off-line technology***. That means using e-mail and putting messages in simple formats

and programmes, which guarantee arrival with every kind of computer. We also use diskettes and CDs to distribute content and for off-line work. In a certain way, this means «going at the speed of the one at the end of the line» without neglecting those richer in technology resources.

During the past years the number of members has increased. Most of the Bishops' Conferences of Latin America and also dioceses, Church institutions, press agencies, seminaries and others belong. Bishops' Conferences from Spain, Italy and Portugal are involved in this project and they contribute with their own reflections, resources and people. The United States have always been represented at RIIAL's continental meetings.

A growing quantity and quality of documents and contents are available through the Net. Church teaching documents in Spanish are available immediately after publication; Pastoral letters and news from the different local Churches are distributed and radio programmes in audio files (Vatican Radio and others), publications, data, mailing, messages and spiritual advice.

Responding to an increasingly complex reality, RIIAL now organises its work and meetings in three groups: *technicians* (monitoring all aspects of systems, solutions, software, etc.), *content* (news agencies, document banks, specialised bulletins, radio and TV files) and *analysis* (study and research on the Latin American reality, digital age and evangelisation).

### Church in Action

A Church Computer Network is not only a group of computers in ecclesiastical offices or the Church web-sites on the Internet. An ecclesial net is, let us say, *the Church in action* in this new culture, including the multiple faces of the Church and her many diverse ways of expressing the one and same message for the world. To help do so, the computer network of the Church in Latin America offers the following services meanwhile:

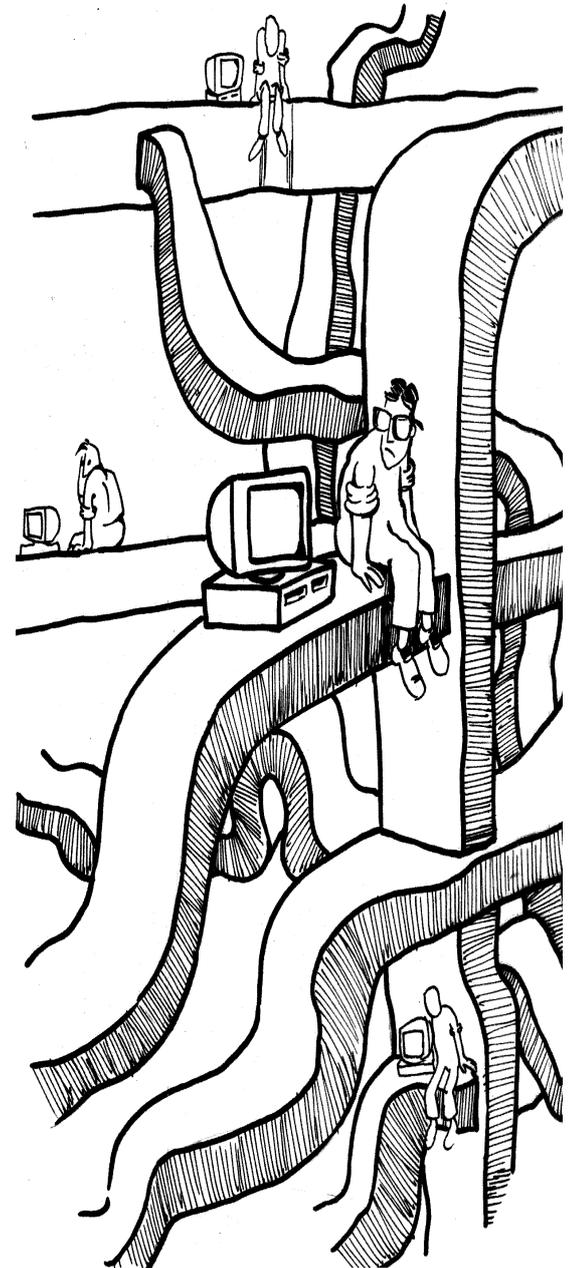
**Communication:** Encouraging communication at every level, RIIAL has motivated a great movement of *"multiplying e-Mail addresses throughout the Church in the continent"*. This is a task to be done by each diocese, to make communication easier between the bishops and the parishes, religious congregations, lay peoples' associations, schools, universities, etc.

**Document Banks:** RIIAL has encouraged local Churches to make their documents available in digital format, allowing their diffusion and study through the Internet as well as publishing them in diskettes or by e-Mail. So that these documents reach many different people.

**Information:** There are many different news agencies which offer their Church information in the RIIAL context, some of them particularly accepted by bishops, as Zenit is. As well as the mentioned Observation Service over the Internet and other specialised digital publications.

**Databases:** Databases of entities and persons in digital formats allow constant updating and easier access. Many programmes (software) made in particular for the Church have been created by RIIAL's technicians for a free continental distribution.

**Web-sites:** A presence on the Internet enhances a dialogue between faith and culture in the so-called «cyberspace». Creativity, beauty and interactivity must be increasingly present in our web-sites. RIIAL has studied this matter and has offered some practical guidelines for the creation of Church web-sites.



Source: Chasqui No. 68, Dic. 1999

*Meetings:* Even in the "digital age" there is no substitute for personal dialogue. Reunions allow people to share their own achievements, to meet other pastoral agents of the same field, to learn the real needs of the users, to plan common services. It can also encourage an exchange of reflections on the impact of these changes in the people and culture they are serving.

*Training:* One of the keys of RIAL are the technicians, whose spirit goes far beyond technical items. They feel that they are apostles in a new field. All through the years, RIAL has promoted a complete training and formation not only in technical areas but also in humanity and spirituality.

We all agree on the necessity of deep reflection on the new situation of the world, from the point of view of communication and enlightened by the Gospel. One of the biggest challenges to face now seems to be the new languages in which this culture expresses itself. The Church has a large corpus of thought and doctrine. As the Church has, in other historical moments, expressed those contents in religious images, buildings, songs, theatre, radio, etc., we now have to learn the multimedia languages of the digital culture.

Recently the Holy Father wrote a letter to the artists encouraging them to be creative in expressing beauty and Good News. The question is: Will the Church be able to make a synthesis between Gospel, art and technology? It is our task to help the Church to do so.

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## RED LATINOAMERICANA DE GERONTOLOGIA

<http://www.gerontologia.org>

La Red Latinoamericana de Gerontología (RLG) fue establecida en junio del año pasado con el fin de crear un foro de discusión y una fuente de información e inspiración para la labor en pro de la mejora de la calidad de vida de los adultos mayores de América Latina, utilizando los más modernos medios de comunicación. Surge en el marco del Programa de Promoción Pro Bienestar del Adulto Mayor de la Cáritas Alemana en su cooperación con los diferentes miembros de la Red Cáritas en América Latina y en el Caribe para facilitar el intercambio entre las Cáritas hermanas, instituciones amigas, profesionales y voluntarios interesados en la materia.

El primer paso fue la creación del Site <http://www.gerontologia.org>. En su estructura, hasta el momento, tiene: Editorial, Capacitación, Documentos, Eventos, Experiencias, Noticias y Foro de Discusión. Cuenta con aprox. 2400 visitantes hasta agosto del 2000. Está diseñado para que sea un Site dinámico, permanentemente actualizado, favoreciendo de esta manera la divulgación de información relativa al tema, permitiendo el intercambio directo de información y la discusión de temas afines, fomentando la colaboración por parte de los visitantes.

La RLG se encuentra todavía en etapa inicial con la perspectiva de consolidar e incrementar la participación y los esfuerzos para alcanzar los objetivos propuestos. Invita a todos los interesados a participar y a expresarse por este medio con las experiencias, documentos, trabajos científicos, publicaciones, debate, etc. que tienen en sus manos. Para contactar la red, puede dirigirse a su coordinadora Lila Bezrukov (Cáritas Uruguay), [lilabezrukov@gerontologia.org](mailto:lilabezrukov@gerontologia.org)