

Parishes form new communities online

Jennifer Burke/Catholic Courier

Members of several diocesan parishes have found a place where they can discuss their faith, the Catholic Church, Scripture, and even books and movies 24 hours a day: cyberspace.

Church of the Good Shepherd in Henrietta, St. Margaret Mary Parish in Irondequoit and the six-parish Our Lady of the Lakes Catholic Community in the Finger Lakes have each added Internet forums or discussion boards to their Web sites within the past year. Parishioners can log on to the forums to post comments or

questions, read the posts of others and respond to them.

Since adding an online forum to the Our Lady of the Lakes Web site (www.ourladyofthelakescc.org/board) in October 2003, almost 40 people have become registered members, according to Wren Keber, one of the site's Webmasters and a member of St. Januarius Parish in Naples. A person does not have to be a registered member to view, post and reply to messages, but only registered members have access to some of the forum's special features.

As of Aug. 23, 278 messages or replies on 98 different topics had

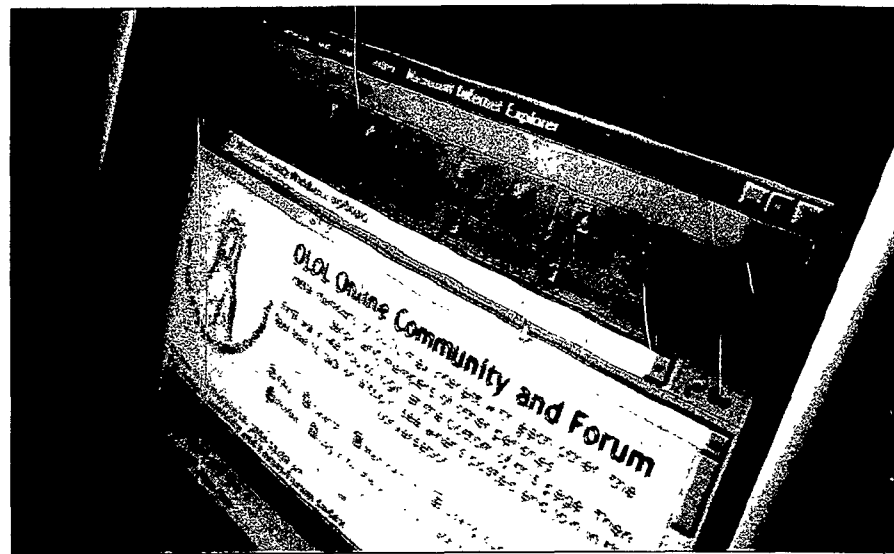


Photo illustration by Mike Crupi/Catholic Courier

The Our Lady of the Lakes Online Community and Forum, which began in October 2003, now has nearly 40 registered members.

been posted in the forum, which is divided into four different categories. The first category contains reviews and discussions of books that deal with Catholicism, as well as questions and answers about liturgy, Mass and the Catholic faith. The second category is home to questions and answers dealing with the Bible. Posts in the third category deal with spiritual life, prayer and small Christian communities, while the fourth category addresses pastoral planning, local ministries and parish life.

"We wanted something interactive, as opposed to just a Web site where people could find a Mass schedule," explained Father Robert Ring, Our Lady of the Lakes' pastor. Father Ring said he frequents the forum, often posting comments or answering questions. "I've enjoyed some of the questions people have raised in terms of scriptural questions and faith questions."

Father Ring said the online forum has also strengthened existing bonds between some parishioners. Members of a Bible-study group, for example, frequently log on to the forum for further discussion after their sessions, he said. Rob Chapin, the other Webmaster for the parish's site, said these strengthened connections were one of the goals he had for the site when he began working on it more than two years ago.

"My personal vision of the Our Lady of the Lakes Web site was to use communication and technology as an aid in bringing a cluster of parishes and its parishioners together as a family while growing in Christ," said Chapin, who belongs to St. Mary's Parish in Rushville.

Fellow St. Mary's parishioner Diane Harris said she likes the forum's potential to greatly increase the Catholic community's vitality. She also likes the flexibility it offers those with questions, and the way she can go back and review comments or answers whenever she wants.

"I really like being able to pose questions as they occur to me, any hour of the day or night, instead of waiting until I see a priest when he's not busy ... and hoping that I will remember his answer well enough to share with others. Even people who are shy can post a question anonymously," Harris said. "The forum is a microcosm of so many aspects of our parish life — Bible study, liturgy, faith, parish activities, prayer — that everyone has an opportunity to use it, regardless of their particular areas of interest. I like the sense of building a base of information that others can use in the future."

The online forums of Church of the Good Shepherd (<http://bb.goodshepherdhenrietta.org>) and St. Margaret Mary (www.saintmargaret-mary.net/forum) follow a format similar to Our Lady of the Lakes' online forums. Topics deal with community and parish life, Mel Gibson's movie "The Passion of the Christ" and suggested improvements to the parish Web sites. There are also topics devoted to thanking others for their good deeds and answering questions about Mass and Catholicism.

Steve Trapani, a member of Guardian Angels Parish in Henrietta, joined Good Shepherd's online forum Aug. 7. Online forums provide a form of fellowship and communication with other Catholics, he said.

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