

# Cultural factors of special relevance in spiritual formation

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### 1. Conscience and culture

The attainment of Christian maturity in all its human, moral and specifically religious aspects depends on many factors. In first place, it depends on the interest and effort the person concerned puts into his or her own formation, along with generous correspondence to the Holy Spirit's action in one's soul. Then comes the effort of those who actually carry out the work of educating, especially parents (or perhaps grandparents), teachers, and priests (through preaching, confession and spiritual direction). In third place come those who, without being educators properly speaking, do in fact exercise a greater or lesser influence on the formative process: friends, schoolmates, colleagues and, in general, people with whom one has frequent contact because of one's line of work, recreational interests, etc. And finally, a very important factor is the prevailing culture in society and in the mass media. Everyone is the child of their times, since to a greater or lesser degree each person has ways of evaluating situations, expressing themselves, etc., which are received from the cultural environment, largely through the mass media (the press, television, movies, books, the Internet, etc.)

The cultural and social dimension of personal formation is undeniable and derives from the social nature of the person. In a discourse to participants in a seminar for communicators organized by the Italian Episcopal Conference in November 2002, John Paul II pointed out that “the rapid technological transformations, above all in the field of social communication, are creating a new environment for the transmission of knowledge, the interaction among groups of people, and the formation of lifestyles and mentalities. Communication generates culture, and culture is transmitted by means of communication.”<sup>1</sup> Here we are going to consider this question in the framework of the work of spiritual direction.

Speaking in general terms, human beings at the outset possess moral principles only in a germinal state. The person’s full development requires a balance between impulse and affectivity. From an abstract point of view, practical reason and balanced emotions are related in a circular way, each presupposing the other: prudence presupposes the virtuous order of the impulses, and this order in turn presupposes prudence.<sup>2</sup> From the practical point of view, however, the circle is opened up through the education received within the communities to which the person belongs: family, civic and economic groups, the Church, state, etc.

Language, customs and laws not only shape how we live together in society, but also express and forge in new generations particular ways of perceiving and appraising the world around them. People tend to view themselves within the legal and institutional environment in which they have been born and live, and which provides them with categories for interpreting their experience and reaffirming their identity. Of course, it is possible to swim against the tide, but this is not the tendency of the majority of people in democratic societies today. In any case, it is clear that the formation of a person’s moral and religious standards has social, economic and

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<sup>1</sup> John Paul II, *Discourse to participants in a seminar for people working in the field of communications organized by the Italian Episcopal Conference*, November 9, 2002, no. 2.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I-II, q. 58, aa. 4-5. See also St. Thomas’ commentary on book VI of the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

political presuppositions, and that without an adequate family and social background, the moral maturation of the person becomes extraordinarily slow and difficult.

Certainly, the moral conscience always retains the capacity to judge and freely decide. But in order to do so, one's conscience first needs to be formed, and this always takes place in a specific cultural and social context. The natural moral law is present in everyone, but it is just as natural as the ability to talk. Thus its development and the quality of the result achieved depend in good part on the context in which education takes place. The *ethos* of the society to which someone belongs has some influence on their acquisition of moral knowledge. And this *ethos* arises from shared aims and means of reaching those aims, from models and how they are imitated; and it is expressed in terms of laws and customs, in history and in the events celebrated as also in the persons revered as best exemplifying the moral identity of the group<sup>3</sup>.

None of this places in question personal freedom and responsibility. Rather, the goal is to clarify the cultural dimension of the moral and religious formation of those who receive spiritual direction. The spiritual director should keep in mind that the interaction between a person's conscience and the reigning culture occurs in two ways. The first way is *from the person to the environment*. Here is where moral questions such as example and scandal arise, and the specific positive or negative influence on the environment that some persons exert because of their professional work or for other reasons (journalists, writers, persons who influence public opinion because of their fame as sportsmen, entertainers, etc.). The second way is *from the environment to the person*. Here we will consider the good or bad influence of reading material, television, the Internet, etc. In referring to these two ways, we will use the expression "active influence" for the first, and "passive influence" for the second.

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. ABBÀ, G., *Quale impostazione per la filosofia morale? Ricerche di filosofia morale* — 1, LAS, Roma 1996, pp. 10-17.

It is up to the spiritual director, certainly, to help the person concerned attain a correct and balanced awareness of this interaction, and to be able to interpret it in the light of the Gospel. Regarding the active influence, it is a matter, on the one hand, of enabling the person to avoid whatever can give rise to scandal,<sup>4</sup> cooperation in evil,<sup>5</sup> and, more generally what is commonly understood by bad example. Sometimes this involves helping the person discover an influence being exerted on others that up to now he or she had not been aware of. It may also involve trying to find ways of contributing by one's example, words, and professional work to providing an upright orientation to the environment,<sup>6</sup> doing so in a discrete manner (without any unnecessary show), and always being respectful towards others.<sup>7</sup>

Regarding the passive influence, the mission of the spiritual director, in general, depends on the type of person being dealt with. There are persons who fail to realize they are uncritically receiving from the environment standards of conduct that are contrary to Christian morals and that restrict, or even block, their spiritual growth. This is due at times to simple ignorance or superficiality. At other times (especially among young people and adults with scant intellectual formation), there is a deeper problem involving the psychological process of imitation. This is the case of a fragile personality seeking to reinforce its own identity by adapting to the behavior of the group with which it identifies. In both these cases, it is advisable to provide the person with the elements necessary to evaluate the prevailing lifestyles using the principles of Christian morality.

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<sup>4</sup> Regarding scandal, see *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 2284-2287.

<sup>5</sup> Cooperation in evil can take various forms: "Sin is a personal act. Moreover, we have a responsibility for the sins committed by others when we cooperate in them: by participating directly and voluntarily in them; by ordering, advising, praising, or approving them; by not disclosing or not hindering them when we have an obligation to do so; by protecting evil-doers" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1868).

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Vatican II, Decr. *Apostolicam actuositatem*, no. 7; Dogm. const. *Lumen gentium* no. 36; Past. const. *Gaudium et spes*, nos. 31, 36 and 43. With reference to the political realm, see Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Doctrinal Note on Some Questions Regarding the Participation of Catholics in Political Life*, November 24, 2002.

<sup>7</sup> As St. Josemaria said: "Your task as a Christian citizen is to help see Christ's love and freedom preside over all aspects of modern life: culture and the economy, work and rest, family life and social relations" (*Furrow*, no. 302).

In the case of a personality shaped mainly by its identification with a group, one needs to act with particular discernment, since it is not sufficient to explain the moral value of certain behaviors. Rather, one needs to help the person form deep, solid, well-thought-out convictions, so as to be able to form his or her own criteria for making judgments and for autonomously upholding his behavior, rather than simply doing things because he has been told to. The person involved needs to acquire the critical capacity to form his own moral standards, based on criteria he understands and has been actively involved in formulating. Generally speaking, principles of conduct are solidly held by a person when he or she is able to transmit them to others.

There are other persons who see clearly (although maybe giving way at times to generalisations that are not completely true) that lifestyles contrary to the ethical demands written in the human heart are being accepted as normal in the cultural environment. At times, this can lead to critical attitudes which go to far and are overly prone to aggressiveness, or lead to isolation and pessimism.<sup>8</sup> Often one must admit that, for the most part, they are right. But they need to be helped to be more balanced in their attitude towards the environment and avoid exaggerations and over-generalizations. The truth has to harmonize with charity and understanding, and firmness in matters of substance has to be accompanied by cordiality and refined manners. It is not healthy to live one's faith in a purely reactionary way. One needs to evaluate things realistically and accurately, using one's energy in a positive way, trying to build up and help rather than demolish and criticize.<sup>9</sup> A positive, even if modest, achievement is always preferable to sterile criticism.

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<sup>8</sup> It's true that confronting negative situations, above all in the social and political realm, requires a certain aggressiveness. It's also true that there are many different ways to achieve the good, and a spiritual director should not impose the one that seems best to him. But it is also undeniable that when aggressiveness exceeds a certain limit it undermines charity and is ineffective and even counter-productive in the end.

<sup>9</sup> Some ideas which could be useful in this matter are given in RODRÍGUEZ LUÑO, A., *Comunicar las propias convicciones*, «Nuestro Tiempo» 652 (2008) 103-109.

Sometimes the task of the spiritual director with elderly people who find it hard to accept rapid social changes and the lifestyles of the new generations becomes difficult, and one has to be content with solutions which are less than satisfactory, but which at least give a minimum of serenity and constructive spirit (for example, teaching the person to pray for others instead of criticizing them, even though one is not altogether successful in overcoming a negative and pessimistic reaction). Little by little it's good to encourage these people to have more trust in God, who is Lord of history and its changes, and who can draw good even out of the evil we men do, and that he has neither promised us that everything will turn out as we might think it should, and nor has he, of course, proclaimed to us a kingdom for this world.

## 2. Reading

We all know the importance of reading for our intellectual, cultural and professional formation. Here we will consider it only in reference to doctrinal and spiritual formation. Reading of good books on spiritual, religious and theological topics (Holy Scripture in the first place) is a very effective means of Christian formation. As St. Josemaria succinctly said, "reading has made many saints."<sup>10</sup> St Paul exhorts us not to neglect it,<sup>11</sup> and the saints have done the same,<sup>12</sup> as have many Popes.<sup>13</sup> The spiritual director can help people, first of all, by encouraging them to read regularly, even though they can devote to it only a few minutes a day, and then by advising or suggesting books suited to their intellectual level, capacity of assimilation, and interior dispositions. Books that can be very useful for people who have spent years doing mental prayer can be incomprehensible, or even harmful, to persons who are only starting out on this path. Adolescents and mature people each need different nourishment.

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<sup>10</sup> St. Josemaria, *The Way*, no. 116.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. *1 Tim* 4:13.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. for example, St. Francis de Sales, *Introduction to the Devout Life*, II, 17; St. Josemaria., *The Way*, nos. 116 and 117.

It is especially important to get advice on the doctrinal soundness of reading material, since books that have a wrong focus or defend errors in matters of faith or morals could do harm to their readers, disorienting them or even drawing them away from the faith. The influence of reading can be very deep: just as good reading has made many saints, so bad reading has destroyed the spiritual life of many souls. The qualification of “good” or “bad” in reference to reading can be absolute or relative. Reading material that attacks the Catholic faith or is full of falsehoods and lacks intellectual consistency is bad, or at least useless, for everyone. Theological works that defend questionable hypotheses needing further investigation can be very harmful to persons without much theological formation, while they can be useful to specialists who can draw on doctrinal and theological resources for a critical assessment and prudently assimilate whatever is of value in them.

The same applies, analogously, to books that are read for the purpose of study, work or relaxation, whether these are philosophical, historical, biological, psychological or medical works, novels, essays, etc. These books can be a great help, but they can also be very harmful, either because of their poor intellectual content or their grave moral defects (pornography, eroticism, etc.). They can also be simply a big waste of time. Should any doubt arise, the person should act prudently by seeking advice. A good spiritual director will notice when a person is being harmed by what is being read and, if necessary, stress the serious moral obligation of avoiding reading anything that, *hic et nunc*, constitutes for a particular person a proximate occasion of committing sins against faith, charity, chastity, or against any other virtue. And if the reading material is needed for one’s work, examinations, etc. (and cannot be substituted by some sounder reading in the same area), there is the moral obligation to do whatever is necessary to make the proximate occasion remote. This can be achieved in different ways: preparing oneself to read the confused material by reading beforehand some good material that will clarify the question and enable the person to critically evaluate what is read; consulting experts in the matter about doubts or difficulties that may arise, etc.

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. for example, St. Pius X, *Haerent animo*, August 4, 1908.

The spiritual director knows that this obligation is a real and objective *moral obligation*, based on the harm that can be done to the virtue of faith, even to the point of losing one's faith and being deprived of the incomparable value of this theological virtue that is the foundation and source of the whole Christian life. Therefore, when this obligation really exists, i.e. whenever the danger is real and proximate, then it is not an obligation deriving from the counsels of any human authority: the spiritual director neither creates it with his advice nor is he able to dispense from it.. His advice should help the person to acknowledge this obligation—if possible, beforehand—and understand its full value.

The moral obligation we are speaking of concerns when one is intending to read something directly or indirectly related to doctrinal matters, and is unsure of its orientation. In this situation the prudent thing is to remove one's doubt before proceeding. This can be done by reading reviews in trustworthy magazines or books. Nowadays there are also free *online* services for the assessment of books, which are easy to consult and quite useful (for example, [www.almudi.org](http://www.almudi.org)).

The reading of newspapers and magazines merits special consideration. Generally speaking, these are a good source of up-to-date information, and an instrument of freedom in society. Thus freedom of the press is a precious good. Leaving aside for now publications that are clearly immoral (pornographic magazines, for example), one often finds in the press a mistaken views on moral and religious matters, whether because of the ideology of the editors of the publication, or simply because journalists have to meet a deadline writing on sensitive issues they know little little about, or that require more space and calm. People with some cultural formation generally have sufficient intellectual and moral resources to read these publications critically and recognize exaggerations, generalizations, and viewpoints that stem from a particular ideology, or simply from the need to publish something novel, etc., just as they can make a realistic judgment about the value of commercial products that are advertised realising that the product is often not as cheap or durable as claimed in the advertisements. Hence the reading of newspapers and magazines by a person of fairly sound Christian formation does not often have a directly



negative effect– also because these publications usually don't use a highly elaborated intellectual argumentation.

Nevertheless, there are exceptions to what we have said, above all in the case of people with little critical sense who habitually read a publication that has a pronounced ideological bias or that, without being pornographic, has a frivolous or pagan tone. This situation may have a negative influence on the person's spiritual life. With books the harm tends to be concentrated in some specific area of the Christian life. However, the negative influence of periodicals may arise from their overall general tone, and this, though less specific, can be just as harmful in the long run. Besides, confusion over particular points of doctrine often arises from inaccurate information about them. For example, from reading certain newspapers, one can get the idea that the Christian disapproval of research in which human embryos are destroyed arises solely from the Church being the enemy of science and progress; or that the Christian position on euthanasia stems from the "principle" that one may never reject medical treatment, even if it is futile or disproportionate, or from radical opposition to the idea that a person can decide his own fate, etc. The manipulative way these topics are treated in the press can often confuse people who are not well informed about these questions. Alongside the clear obligation not to buy or read publications that are clearly immoral or sectarian, if this sort of problem arises with the publications that decent people in some place normally read, then this should be seen as an opportunity for encouraging people to read and study serious and sound books so as to be better informed on the topics that are causing confusion. If in some particular case (although this is not very common), reading the normal newspapers and magazines is a proximate occasion of grave sin for that person, then the moral criteria on occasions of sin explained above should be applied.

To conclude this section, we want to emphasize that the fact of having mentioned several times the moral principles related to occasions of sin should not lead anyone to think that reading is something negative. Rather, reading is an effective instrument for a Christian's intellectual, cultural, moral and religious formation, both for one's own and other's good. For every harmful

effect that reading may cause, a thousand greater harmful effects can be traced to a lack of reading and to the consequent lack of critical reflection. The task of the spiritual director in this matter should faithfully reflect this reality. Generalized attitudes of fear and distrust are not helpful.

### **3. Use of the Internet<sup>14</sup>**

#### **a) *Lights and shadows of the Internet***

The use of the Internet today is widespread, and is likely to increase. Its usefulness for study, work, information, communication (email, etc.), is well-known. Being a relatively new phenomenon, we will consider the Internet at greater length here. Most of the persons coming for spiritual direction use it at home or at work, or their children or those who work under them do.

The Internet is meant to be an open and free network of information, with no restriction on content. Only grave crimes (terrorism, pederasty, credit card fraud, etc.) are subject to control and prosecution. The Internet provides the opportunity for people to get to know positive material; and it goes some way to preventing the monopoly of large media groups inspired by negative ideological agenda (television networks, newspaper chains, etc.). The Internet can also offer material of little scientific worth (false or unreliable information), as well as pornography (whether “soft” or “hard core”), and material that fosters violence, racism and terrorism. It can also facilitate links with unsavory persons (pederasts, prostitutes and others who want obscene conversations [“chats”], etc.), and makes it possible to copy music, films, etc., illegally, which certainly goes against justice. Even without going to these extremes, the very possibility of “surfing” freely all over the world can excite the user’s curiosity and be a great waste of time,

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<sup>14</sup> Here we give a modified and abbreviated version of what we say in RODRÍGUEZ LUÑO, A., *El recto uso de Internet. Aspectos éticos*, 3rd ed., Palabra, Madrid 2009, and in [www.eticaepolitica.net](http://www.eticaepolitica.net).

especially if the person in question lacks expertise and self-discipline.<sup>15</sup> Recent developments in social networking (Facebook, etc.) offer opportunities for social interaction, but are also fraught with dangers, at times grave .

The Internet is neither intrinsically good nor evil It is not the only means for doing good, nor the only means for doing evil. Almost all the pernicious effects of the Internet nowadays can be found in the other areas of the media. The real novelty of the Internet is enabling people to get good material to reach many people without the need for great financial resources or the involvement of many personnel. It is also possible, of course, to do good with films, the press, or television, but this is much more difficult since it means having a media outlet (a television channel or production company, for example), or at least the possibility of acting freely in one – which for several reasons is not always easy; and it also needs thorough professional preparation.<sup>16</sup>

#### b) *Upright use of the Internet*

The Internet, then, has its lights and shadows. Fundamentally, it is an advance over what existed before. But as happens with many other technological means (for example, the advances made in the life sciences that are causing so many bioethical problems today), it is open to being used well or badly, knowlegibly or not. Except the case of children, which merits special consideration, the only one to “get burned” on the Internet is ordinarily the one who wants to, or at least who likes to play with fire. The problem then is that of the user’s moral education and firm convictions. In this regard, it is unfortunate that those responsible for forming young people (the family, schools, catechists, etc.) are not always adequately prepared to give sound and

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<sup>15</sup> For an overview of the positive and negative aspects of the Internet, cf. Pontifical Council for Social Communications, *Ethics in the Internet*, February 22, 2002.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Pontifical Council for Social Communications, *The Church and the Internet*, February 22, 2002, no. 5. Also see *Ethics in the Internet*, op. cit., no. 1.

incisive guidelines on the proper use of this relatively new device. Teaching people and creating a sound culture about the proper use of the Internet and the other modern means of communication is an important part of the moral and Christian formation required in today's world. No technical means can replace this formation. As with other media, it is very difficult to restrain the adult who is intent on acting immorally, and the greater the obstacles placed the greater the price that is paid in terms of loss of freedom and trust (often with counterproductive results), or in slowing down people's work.

A study of the ethical aspects of the Internet must first of all consider the general criteria for its correct use. This means distinguishing the different contexts of use (work, school, family, recreation, etc.) and the kinds of person involved. In general terms one could speak about temperance, justice, common sense, prudence, and concern for the integral good of the person, and each of his faculties and their dimensions. Except in certain types of professional work, the Internet, or more broadly the computer, should be considered as one of many tools available. Excessive concentration on it is humanly and ethically harmful. Its use should never isolate one from others (friends, social relations), nor impede outdoor activities, reading books and magazines related to one's specialization or general culture, consulting other sources, taking part in games and sports in the case of children, or from learning to write well, going to good movies and the theater, concerts, etc.

Making good use of the Internet means always using it for something quite specific. It means looking for something specific, knowing where to search or using a search engine that one is very familiar with, or trying to buy a particular product, etc. It would make little sense to go on the Internet without first knowing what one wants to accomplish, simply because one has some free time, or just to check if there's anything new, or because one is tired and wants to relax by "surfing" the web. A well-formed person would be intransigent on this point, just as one only uses a car to go to some particular place and not just wandering aimlessly through a city, wasting time and gasoline. A person with time to spare, would do better to pick up a good book.

In regard to material that leads, or could lead, to committing sins against faith, charity, justice or chastity, one should behave in the same way as when this material appears in other media (books, the press, conversations, etc.). As was explained above, the moral principles regarding the occasions of sin should be applied.<sup>17</sup> The proximity or remoteness of sin, as well the seriousness of the occasion, can be taken in an absolute or relative sense: some situations may be a serious and proximate occasion for people in general, while another may be a proximate occasion for only one person, or for a number of particular people, while it is not for others.

Not wishing to minimize the complexity of the moral problem, it would be simplistic to consider the Internet in general as an occasion of sin. The majority of those who have moral problems with the Internet are people who perhaps would have had the same problems with other media. It is also true that some people who usually behave morally have fallen into certain moral errors for the sole reason of having accidentally visited a morally objectionable web page. But this is not usually the case. Especially to stop this from ever happening, and also to safeguard children, the protection provided by filters that we will discuss below can be of great value.

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<sup>17</sup> A grave moral duty exists to avoid proximate serious occasions that are free, and the necessary means must be employed to render necessary occasions remote.

### c) *Some general measures of prudence*

Since the Internet is a vehicle for receiving negative as well as positive material, filters have become available to block the negative content, just as contaminated water is passed through a filter to remove harmful elements. These filters are installed on the computer, or on the *proxy* either of a local network (Optenet, Cyber-Patrol, ICRA, etc.) or of the *Provider* that applies the filtering system (for example, [www.Davide.it](http://www.Davide.it) ).

These protective systems are a great help. Experience teaches that whoever habitually works without any protection (without a *proxy* or filter) will sometimes encounter very objectionable material. This is inevitable, since those who promote immoral web pages use a number of clever methods to entice people to enter, even without realizing it. One of these ploys is to register the most frequent errors users commit when typing in the name of a commonly used page, for example, a newspaper, a search engine, etc. Thus with a typing error such as omitting or repeating a letter in the intended address, a pornographic site opens. Another trick is to include advertisements on other sites that link to immoral content. Yet another is to introduce into the operating system hidden programs (*adware, spyware*) that continually copy themselves and link to immoral sites. Besides these, there are many other schemes which it would be complicate and unnecessary to discuss here.

Given the fact of human weakness, even a morally sound person who is sometimes or often confronted with gravely inappropriate material will sooner or later fall. And if an effective remedy is not applied, the person could fall again and even become addicted. Therefore, there are serious reasons for affirming *in general*, and without prejudging the user's moral attitude, that whoever habitually works on the Internet without any protection, especially if one does so for many hours, will sometimes or often be in a proximate occasion of serious sin – which one has

the moral obligation of avoiding.<sup>18</sup> Thus *in general terms* one can conclude that there is a moral duty of using a filter.

We can't exclude the possibility that a very morally upright person who works without a filter may not run this risk, whether because he is very careful or because he doesn't spend much time on the Internet. The experience of several months or years may confirm that in fact he is not taking risks. In this case, it isn't clear that there is a moral obligation of using a filter. Nevertheless, the use of a filter is a prudential measure that is highly recommendable: it prevents unnecessary worry and any morally upright person should not spurn it, since no one can be certain of not yielding to temptations that appear unexpectedly.

From the moral point of view it would be good to consider one other case. If a person who needs to work on the Internet has committed a number of serious sins through doing so, then repentance for these sins, and the consequent purpose of amendment, requires employing specific means to ensure at least that the proximate occasion is rendered remote. One of these means is to use a suitable filter. Another is to move the computer into a passageway or other public area, or reduce to a minimum the time spent on the Internet.<sup>19</sup> If in spite of taking these measures of prudence the situation does not improve, the overriding duty of avoiding grave harm to one's Christian life should lead the person, depending on his situation, to do without the Internet at least for a few months (when the difficulty seems to be only temporary), or else to get a filter such as ICRAplus which only allows access to web pages essential for one's work.<sup>20</sup> If the difficulty arises not only from the Internet but also from television, magazines, etc., then one is faced with a wider problem, and the remedies that need to be applied are also wider.

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<sup>18</sup> Cf. St. Alphonsus de Ligouri, *Theologia Moralis*, bk. V, tr. IV, ch. 1, no. 452.

<sup>19</sup> Although here we are not considering the problem from the point of view of the confessor, it would be good to mention that whoever administers the sacrament of penance will have to apply, with due prudence and distinguishing sins of weakness from those of malice, what moral theology teaches about the confession of "recurrent" occasions of sin and falls.

d) *Use of the Internet by children and adolescents in the family environment*

The use of the Internet by children and adolescents requires special care. Since they have not yet attained human maturity and stable moral virtues, children are particularly vulnerable to all sorts of negative influences. A recent study from the *International Crime Analysis Association* entitled “Child Internet Risk Perception,” pointed to a wide variety of risks that children are exposed to by using the Internet, often without their parents’ realising. Also of interest is the document from the U.S. Episcopal Conference entitled *Your Family and Cyberspace*, dated June 22, 2000.<sup>21</sup>

Parents have to educate their children also in this area, giving them time and making an effort, if necessary, to familiarise themselves with the Internet, since their children use it. In the case of children who are still minors, there is a moral obligation to protect them by one of the filtering systems we have already considered. It is also very advisable that the computer with Internet access be placed where people pass by with some frequency (e.g. the living room, the kitchen, etc.) if suitable space is available. Children should also be told never to give out personal information (for example, filling out questionnaires), nor to enter into contact with any strangers. They should also be taught to mention to their parents anything they find strange, to be prudent whenever schoolmates pass on disks to them, etc.<sup>22</sup> If this is explained to them in the right way, children will see these precautions as a help to using computers correctly, which they *freely want to do*

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<sup>20</sup> In this case, the password for changing the filter will need to be kept by another person.

<sup>21</sup> The document can be found at [www.nccabuscc.org/comm/archives/2000/00-151.htm](http://www.nccabuscc.org/comm/archives/2000/00-151.htm).

<sup>22</sup> A more detailed discussion of the role of parents here can be found in the document *Your Family and Cyberspace*.



In families with several children, the parents may notice that one of them tends to use the Internet badly. It's difficult to give general rules on what should be done in this case. But in general, it's not good pedagogy that the other children should have to suffer for the guilty one or submit to unnecessary restrictions. The offending child certainly needs to be confronted, with strong words if necessary, but in a way that avoids creating a general atmosphere of distrust or lack of freedom in the family. To prohibit *all* the children from using the Internet does not normally seem the best thing to do. It would imply a clear failure in the parents' responsibility of teaching their children the correct use of computing tools that, whether they like it or not, are part of today's world and that the children will have to use at school, in the university, in their future work, and later on in the home they will establish when they marry and where, in turn, they will have to guide the children God sends them. The argument that there was no Internet until quite recently and no one died through lack of it is not a good one. Neither were there cars, planes, telephones, etc. until recent times, but that is no reason to forego these means. What is needed is to learn how to use them correctly.

*e) Use of the Internet in businesses, residences, educational establishments, etc.*

Those who work in businesses, offices, etc. should be reminded that they have an obligation in justice to devote to their work the number of hours stipulated in their work contract. Using email or the Internet for other purposes is like using the telephone or reading newspaper or books that have nothing to do with one's work responsibilities. Those in charge, if they see a real need to do so, have a right to use adequate means to avoid abuses: for example, by installing a filter that permits access only to work-related sites. They should also make a prudent judgment regarding the possibility that these measures could turn out to be counter-productive by undermining trust and a spirit of cooperation. But it is clear that employees are morally obliged to use the computers and Internet access available to them in a way that accords with their terms of employment. The fact that a business refuses to provide means for entertainment or for evading work is not an undue restriction on employees' freedom.

A more sensitive problem arises in residences for students, or for seminarians or priests. The directors of these institutions have the duty to provide residents with suitable living conditions and services. Part of this involves an environment of freedom and trust, a good place for working, respect for people's rightful autonomy and privacy, and Internet access for study needs. On the other hand, they also clearly have the right to require respect for certain norms regarding *external* moral behavior.

If Internet access is provided in each person's room, residents could easily waste time "surfing" the Internet, "chatting" with friends, etc. Experience has shown that, even in the case of people with good moral formation, they will often use the Internet in immoral ways, doing themselves considerable harm. Those in charge of these residences sometimes think that, since we are talking about adults, each person is responsible for their own private moral behaviour; or they are afraid of being branded as "puritanical" or accused of not respecting people's freedom. They could even argue that God himself, who loves us more than anyone, doesn't prevent us using our freedom badly. Or they may be worried about creating an atmosphere of mistrust that could end up counter-productive.

Clearly, it is not the spiritual director's role to tell those in charge of these residences how they should do their job. It cannot be denied that there is also some truth in the arguments just given. Nevertheless, a spiritual director can give advice that helps focus the question correctly whilst respecting the freedom of those in charge. The question is not the use that adults can make of their freedom, but the services that a residence should offer—services that should always be in accord with the aims of the institution. Those in charge of a residence are obliged to provide nourishing food, a suitable work place, facilities for using computers for work, for getting information, for rest, etc., but not access to immoral sources. Therefore, without unnecessarily disrupting everyone's work, they can use certain means, such as a *proxy* or filters, or restricting Internet access to a specific computer room, etc., so as to ensure the Internet service they provide is consonant with the aims of these centers of learning.

#### **4. Television**

Television is a means of communication that shares certain characteristics with the press (it offers news, opinion and advertising), with film (it broadcasts movies, soap operas, etc.), with the Internet (it enables people to search for items on different channels, although in a more limited way), with the theater, etc. So a good part of what has already been said regarding other media applies also to television. However, it also has its own characteristics that merit further study.

Television is present in almost every home (and many families have more than one television), and tends to become part of the family when left on all day. It fosters dependence, when children, adults or elderly persons spend many hours each day in front of it. – for many, it is the only, or almost the only, means of information (and of “formation”) that they have – and it can even get to the point of drastically reducing conversation between husband and wife and between parents and children. Therefore, over time, it can have a profound effect on the formation of conscience and not simply give news. Television presents and proposes lifestyles, exercises a great power of persuasion, and can even alter people’s perception of reality, and therefore their attitudes toward persons and events. Television tends to form a culture, and culture plays an important role in shaping people’s consciences, as we have seen in the first section above, “Conscience and culture.”

The influence of television has positive aspects. It gives up-to-the-minute news about what is happening in one’s own country and all over the world. Thus it fosters the knowledge needed for sound judgment and contributes to human freedom (provided a minimum of pluralism exists among the television channels). It helps people rest, often provides good cultural programs, and enables people to follow sports and cultural events of interest. But television also has its negative aspects. While presenting itself as a window to the world, what it really offers frequently is a false and partial reality, reconstructed through a complicated process of selecting and interpreting images. This process may well be inspired by very doubtful ideological standpoints, by commercial or political interests, and almost always by the need not to lose viewers. All of

these factors tend to prevail over the demands of truth, justice and respect. Along with some of the technical characteristics of television language, this can lead to a message that is more focused on arousing feelings than encouraging calm reasoning, which can lead to a culture centered on the unbridled unfolding of the emotions. And since uncontrolled emotion and personal maturity are bitter enemies, continual exposure to the influence of television is not conducive to the formation of a balanced personality, above all in young people.

Furthermore, although not exclusive to television, there is the presence of morally objectionable material: pornography, camouflaged eroticism, advertising that encourages consumerism, opinions that generate attitudes of discrimination or even of hatred toward certain groups of people, violence, the constant repetition of negative or morbid events that leads to insensitivity or pessimism, etc. There is one typical genre of television, the “soap opera”, which very often is full of false images and sentiments, highly questionable models of successful men and women, unreal situations, negative interpersonal relationships—in short, a distorted image of reality that appears on the screen week after week, carrying out a sort of anti-education. Equally destructive of education is the genre of “reality show”. While it could be debated that the mission of television is not to educate the viewer, but simply to inform, give facts to judge from and offer healthy entertainment, its mission is certainly not to educate badly, nor to sow moral corruption, just as its mission cannot be social breakdown or the erosion of basic social institutions, such as the family for example.

However, these facts, which are well known and amply studied in specialized bibliography, should not lead to a completely negative view of television. But they do make it clear that television, like the Internet, exerts a powerful influence which we have to learn to use properly. Besides avoiding whatever is an occasion of sin, the right use of television means setting a limit on viewing time, as well as selecting programs carefully; it requires an active and critical use (since television tends to generate passivity), and ensuring that its use does not interrupt family dialogue (as happens when each member of the family shuts himself in his room to watch his own television). Nor should its use lead to neglect of other means of communication and

formation (study, reading, etc.) and other forms of rest that are necessary for one's physical and psychological health, such as outdoor activities, sports, hobbies, or socializing.

As was said in regard to books, when someone wants to see a film of unknown moral position, whether on television or in a theater, a required norm of prudence is to consult one of the film guide services that exist everywhere, whether in family magazines, in books containing reviews of the movies produced each year, or on reliable web pages (for example, [www.almudi.org](http://www.almudi.org)).

For persons working professionally in television (journalists, program producers and directors, script writers, etc.), the above considerations should help them appreciate the social repercussion of their work and the importance of carrying it out with moral integrity, responsibility and a positive spirit.

Although not a matter specifically related to television, it is advisable to ask parents who have young children if they know well the video games their children use. Educationalists are very aware that there are video games with extremely violent content, or which are otherwise very harmful for young people. Parents have a serious duty to pay attention to this aspect of their children's education.

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