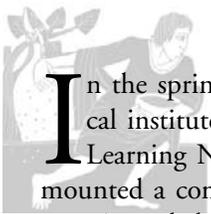


# The Nuptial Meaning of the Institutional Body: The Catholic Distance Learning Network Enters its Second Year

Sebastian Mahfood, Ph.D.



In the spring of 2008, seven seminaries and theological institutes participating in the Catholic Distance Learning Network ([www.catholicdistance.org](http://www.catholicdistance.org)) each mounted a completely online course. These courses were intended to be offered for transfer credit to any of the fulltime students enrolled within the participating membership at no cost to them or to their schools. Of these seven courses, four were launched without outside enrollment; one was deferred until the fall of 2008 due to lack of enrollment, and two successfully received cross-registering students. The courses in which cross-registration took place were “Hebrews: Theology of the Priesthood of Jesus Christ” (taught by Rev. Randy Soto of Kenrick-Glennon Seminary, St. Louis, MO) and “Early Christian Methods and Models of Spiritual Direction” (taught by Rev. Luke Dysinger, OSB, of St. John’s Seminary in Camarillo, CA). Into these courses, six students (four representing St. John’s Seminary, one representing Kenrick-Glennon Seminary, and one representing St. Meinrad Seminary) cross registered. The four St. John’s students, Marc Dauphine, Kiet Ta, Christopher Fagan, and Richard Sunwoo, entered the Hebrews course and two, Scott Hastings of Kenrick-Glennon and Zachary Peterson of St. Meinrad, entered Early Christian Methods.

As students grow more used to learning in this way, faculty grow more used to teaching in this way, and institutions grow more used to cooperating with one another in this way, the expectation is that the Catholic Distance Learning Network (CDLN) will have provided a framework within which participat-

ing schools can realize, to paraphrase John Paul II, the nuptial meaning of the *institutional* body in seeking relationships with one another and participating in those relationships.

## Expectations for the Faculty

Most faculty in higher education have an excellent knowledge of their individual disciplines with an ability not only to engage in meaningful research within the discipline but also to contribute to the discipline with original thought. When confronted by students in a classroom, though, our content knowledge is insufficient in and of itself to create a viable teaching and learning environment—for that, we need a number of metaprofessional skills (professional skills on top of one’s profession). Dr. Ralph Arreola and Dr. Lawrence Aleamoni, who lead the Center for Educational Development and Assessment (online at [www.cedanet.com](http://www.cedanet.com)), explain that for the teacher, such “metaprofessional skills include instructional design, instructional delivery, instructional assessment, instructional research, psychometrics/statistics, epistemology, learning theory, human development, information technology, technical writing, graphic design, public speaking, communication styles, conflict management, group process/team building, resource management, personnel management, financial/budget development, and policy analysis and development.” These kinds of skills require, if they are not able to be picked up on their own, some form of direct training.

Because metaprofessional skills within any vocation are in a dynamic state with the advances being

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made in the various areas of communicative media and because the vocation of teaching is heavily dependent on such metaprofessional skill sets, we faculty may tend to understand our professional competencies in terms of our metaprofessional incompetencies, but we do so only when we confuse the two kinds of skill sets. Our disciplinary growth is independent from our vocational growth even if what we want to do as teachers is work toward a functional interdependence of both areas. Recognizing this distinction between the scholar's skill sets related to content knowledge and the capacity to engage in research and the teacher's skill sets related to imparting that knowledge—especially when done solely through the new communicative media of cyberspace—the CDLN hopes to develop not only viable online instructors but also faculty who engage their teaching vocations with the same kind of critical reflection they demonstrate when engaging their primary fields of interest.

To accomplish its purpose, the CDLN has formed its training course on the principle of graduated complexity in that we provide our faculty with a foundation for understanding a given range of necessary elements along with the tools they need to explore any given element beyond the scope of what we can reasonably expect in only eight weeks. The areas to which the CDLN online course on online teaching and learning introduces faculty include virtual teaching and learning environments, distributive learning platforms, transactive pedagogies, adult learning theory, synchronous and asynchronous engagements, direct and indirect measurement tools, and portfolio development. Participating faculty members are expected to fulfill the requirements of the focus areas, but if a greater capacity is desired in any given area, then the instructor's needs in that area are

facilitated within the course.

Any one of these areas could constitute an eight-week course in and of itself, and we expect that faculty sufficiently interested in a given area (or areas) will continue its pursuit until mastery is achieved. What is frequently perceived is that the ongoing efforts of an educational technologist are needed to continue advancing the metaprofessional skills of committed faculty members, but such is not the case. If we faculty members have a foundation in educational technologies, then we also will have a foundation in how to research answers to our long-standing problems, how to be, in fact, our own technologists. This requires nothing more than simply learning how to make our disciplinary skills (e.g., the capacity to recognize and pursue a research need) work in the pursuit of our vocational skills (e.g., an understanding of the diversity of learning styles and how best to draw from the human resources within the room).

### **Entering the Summer Training of 2008**

At the close of the summer of 2008, the Catholic Distance Learning Network certified another 10 faculty members from eight different institutions following their successful completion of an 8-week online course in online teaching and learning and 24 face-to-face contact hours with a course instructor and an instructional designer who provided them with assistance in both the pedagogical and the technical areas on which the online course focused. The expectations for the faculty trained within the CDLN simply involve their developing the capacity to be producers of their own online teaching and learning environments without constant recourse to the services of an educational technologist.

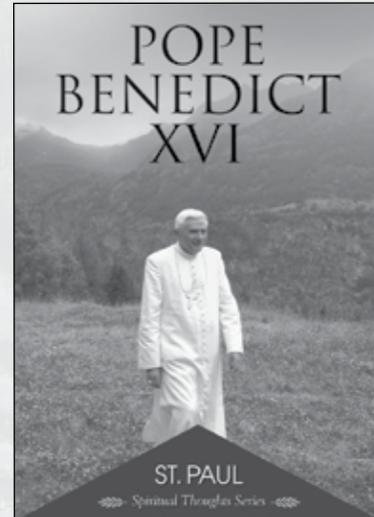
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The success of the approach is being demonstrated in the continuity and growth the CDLN has experi-

enced since the pilot summer training program launched in the summer of 2007. At the end of that summer, the Network had certified nine faculty participants in eight seminaries and theological institutes. During the following fall and spring semesters, six faculty from Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, IL (including Rev. Gilberto Cavazos-González, OFM; Dr. John Kaserow; Dr. Richard E. McCarron; Rev. James Okoye, CSSp; Dr. Amanda Quantz; and Dr. C. Vanessa White) and two faculty from Holy Apostles College and Seminary in Cromwell, CT (including Dr. Angelyn Arden and Rev. Timothy Lowe), received certification through special offerings of the online course. Honorary certificates for course equivalency were given to Rev. Richard Benson, CM, and Rev. Luke Dysinger, OSB, of St. John's Seminary in Camarillo, CA; Dr. Sebastian Mahfood and Dr. John Gresham of Kenrick-Glennon Seminary in St. Louis, MO; and Dr. Jan Viktora of St. Paul Seminary in St. Paul, MN. Ten new faculty participants enrolled in the summer 2008 online course increased the number of faculty eligible to participate within the Network to 32 and the number of seminaries and theological institutes eligible to participate within the Network to 12, adding Mount St. Mary's in Emmitsburg, MD; The Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C.; Sacred Heart School of Theology in Hales Corner, WI; and Sacred Heart Major Seminary in Detroit, MI.

These 10 new participants—which include Dr. Mark F. Fischer, Rev. Patrick Mullen, and Dr. Alan Vincelette of St. John's Seminary in Camarillo, CA; Rev. Sergius Halvorsen of Holy Apostles College and Seminary; Rev. Daniel Jones of Sacred Heart Major Seminary in Detroit, MI; Rev. Thomas Lane of Mount St. Mary's Seminary in Emmitsburg, MD; Rev. Mark Morozowich of Catholic University; Dr. Patrick Russell of Sacred Heart School of Theology in Hales Corner, WI; Dr. Frances Panchok of the University of St. Thomas in Houston, TX; and Rev. Michael Witt of Kenrick-Glennon Seminary in St. Louis—will have the opportunity to deliver their online courses within the Network during the spring and fall semesters of 2009 and beyond. In my own work as an instructional designer for four of these summer participants, I have discovered on their part a zeal for grasping the metaprofessional skills requisite to asynchronous teaching and learning, that is, to the offering of courses in what will be an exclusively distance learning format. The zeal with which the current group has approached its own learning goals is fairly general throughout an elective network, and it is this zeal that will help the CDLN to continue reach-

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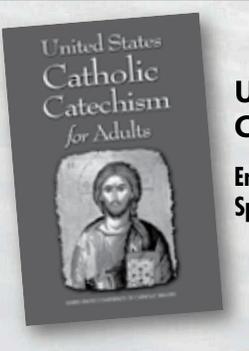
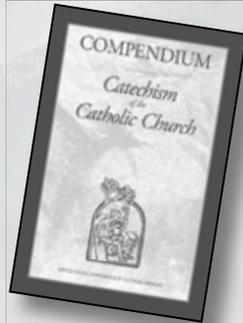
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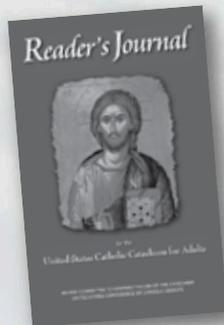
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ing toward its mission, which is the sharing of human and material resources for the purpose of “advancing the education of future priests within a distributed learning framework shared by all member schools.”

## The Fall 2008 Semester

In further pursuit of its mission, the CDLN has entered its second teaching semester with four courses offered for free through the participating seminaries. The first is the course carried over from the spring titled “Theology and Science” taught by Dr. Michael Hoonhout of the Seminary of the Immaculate Conception in Huntington, NY, which, according to the course description, “offers students the opportunity to understand the history and relationship between the two disciplines, and to probe the underlying philosophical issues in knowing nature in itself and as a work of God.” The second is a course developed during the summer 2007 training program titled “The Psalms as Christian Prayer” taught by Dr. Daniel Van Slyke of Kenrick-Glennon Seminary in St. Louis, MO, which, according to the course description, “focuses on the Psalter specifically as the prayer book of the Church.” The third is a course titled “The Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Institutions” taught by Rev. Richard Benson, CM, of St. John’s Seminary in Camarillo, CA, which, according to the course description, “provide[s] the student with a thorough overview of the *Ethical and Theological Directives for Catholic Health Care Institutions*.” The fourth is a course titled “The Church in the Patristic Era” taught by Rev. Luke Dysinger, OSB, of St. John’s Seminary in Camarillo, CA, which, according to the course description, “introduce[s] the history, theology, and spirituality of the patristic period from the death of the apostles to the pontificate of Pope Saint Gregory the Great (600 AD).”

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## Beyond Faculty Training and the Teaching of a First Online Course

Once beyond the CDLN's short training process, and even beyond the teaching of a first online course, it is expected that faculty will continue to develop their own skills, sometimes needing ongoing facilitation for their work but pursuing their vocational skills with greater confidence. Many venues exist for this kind of support beginning with the educational technologists in residence at the seminary or theological institute and culminating in the pursuit of independent technology grants like those provided by the Wabash Center. Faculty who possess the ability to continue to engage meaningful tools in appropriate ways will be more valuable to their teaching and learning communities, especially as they endeavor to prepare people for ordained ministry in a society that increasingly engages communicative media in their social interactions with one another. One possible direction for trained faculty, then, lies in facilitating the continuing formation of priests using the seminaries and theological institutes as content management hubs for (arch)diocesan offices of continuing formation in all the (arch)dioceses in which they have alumni active in parish ministry. Priests from outside the host (arch)diocese, for instance, are seldom able to take advantage of its continuing formation activities. Were these activities also hosted online, seminaries and theological institutes could continue to provide human and material resources in very practical ways to all of their alumni.

Faculty training programs like the one offered by the CDLN ought to be heading in a similar direction—preparing us in the mastery of our own tools and using the resources that we create to prepare theology students within transactive (student-oriented) teaching and learning environments. This student-oriented approach involves the teacher's development of a framework within which a negotiated reality can exist between the teachers, the students, and the course materials. The teacher maintains an authoritative rather than authoritarian presence through the hegemony established by the framework. The students encounter the course as co-producers of the way in which the content is expressed within the teaching and learning environment. In this way, student development can occur not only in seminary but also beyond seminary education and long into active ministry.

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lives of their parishioners than priests and lay ministers who have no such understanding. It is this reality that prompted Pope John Paul II in *The Rapid Development* (2005), his last apostolic letter on the subject, to remind his readers of what he wrote 15 years earlier in *Redemptoris Missio*, in which he “considered it inopportune to leave [the use of communicative media] completely up to the initiatives of individuals or small groups, and suggested that [training in such media] be decisively inserted into pastoral programs.” This challenge is not simply for the students to be trained but to be trained by faculty competent in the use of mediated communication technologies for the purpose of engaging those in theological studies to the greater end of knowing how to do likewise with their parishioners. For this reason, the CDLN hopes that other initiatives will follow its example and position themselves to provide ongoing support to the efforts of faculty continuing to find their feet in this new terrain of teaching and learning. Our institutions, seeking relationships with one another and participating within those relationships, are stronger than they would be each pursuing its own ends on its own. This is the value of the Network and the nuptial meaning of an *institutional* body comprised of many institutions working together for a common purpose.



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