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Indulgences and the Virtual Age

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The following is an opinion piece by Jana Bennett, associate professor of religious studies at the University of Dayton and associate editor of the blog Catholic Moral Theology. She writes on moral theology in relation to marriage, feminism, disability, the Internet and social media. The views expressed are those of the author and do not reflect the policies or opinions of the trustees, faculty or administration of the University of Dayton.

The Internet is having a lot of fun with the news that the Vatican's sacred apostolic penitentiary is allowing indulgences for people who follow Pope Francis on Twitter and other Internet outlets during his visit to Brazil next week. Despite the light-hearted wit and jokes about entrance to Heaven in exchange for boosting the pope's Klout score, I see wisdom in the offer -- and precedent.

The Church is rightly attempting to bring tradition together while acknowledging that the means of living out that tradition change. This isn't a fast-track to heaven; it's more like a way serious Christians can participate in the wide-ranging practices that Christian tradition offers, even when they don't have the means to do so fully and in person. In fact, the use of social media in relation to indulgences for World Youth Day is just the sort of virtual participation the Church has encouraged long before the Internet ever arrived on the scene.

The pope's adoption of social media here is more like the ways in which Christians have changed the ways they go on pilgrimage, for example. Pilgrimages have been a Christian practice since the early centuries of the Church, when Christians might journey to Jerusalem as a way of prayer and learning about and experiencing faith more deeply. Pilgrimage to the Holy Land was revered in many times and places, but Christians couldn't always afford to go there nor was it necessarily always a safe place. So people developed alternatives that I suggest might be taken as a kind of "virtual participation." The labyrinth pattern on the floor of the Chartres Cathedral for example — developed in the late middle ages — offered a kind of "virtual" pilgrimage for people who wanted to have that deeper experience of prayer and encountering God, when the actual pilgrimage was unattainable. The indulgence offered for World Youth Day is in a similar vein in that it enables people from many different places to participate in this part of Catholic life, even when they are not physically present.

When it comes to the Internet in particular, it's important to remember that online participation very much affects our offline world, and vice versa. Words I say online can hurt people in all kinds of ways (remember Manti T'eo's invented girlfriend and its aftermath?) The reverse is also true: what we do online can foster peace and goodwill (there are several instances where gamers solved complex problems or aided in hunger programs). This indulgence should be seen in that vein.

Finally, one of the very important parts about the indulgence offered for World Youth Day is that this is not simply any gathering; indulgences are not offered for just any old time that Christians come together. World Youth Day is a chance to foster peace, love and unity, and develop spiritual life, and the associated indulgence needs to be taken in that context. In other words, indulgences are part of the whole, complex way of life Catholics live. Indulgences are meant to help Christians love God more fully by being most fully aware of the times when they have not been the best lovers of God and their neighbors. So, at World Youth Day, many Catholics would see that there is no better time to pray for their own sins than at a gathering meant to highlight good relationships.

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