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Faith Formation in Cyberspace

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The pope's YouTube channel may mark a new era for the Vatican in spreading the faith, but Catholics around the world who have turned to the University of Dayton's Institute for Pastoral Initiatives for nearly 15 years, now can learn how to take on greater ministry roles through cyberspace.

With many parishes — urban, suburban and rural — facing challenges ranging from financial constraints to a shortage of priests, the institute is launching new certificate programs for 2009 that will help lay people take on greater ministerial roles, according to institute director Sister Angela Ann Zukowski, M.H.S.M.

"A number of dioceses, particularly from rural areas, had requested we develop a program for an online certificate in catechesis (faith formation)," she said. "They see a need for more advanced training for lay people who will be leading diocese or parish programs for faith formation and religious education."

The first program, Certificate in Catechesis, started in January, she said. Later in the year, certificate programs for adult faith formation, media literacy education, foundations in ministry formation and Certificate in Hispanic Catechesis (in Spanish) will be available. The institute's program may serve as the foundation for the certification that allows lay people to serve in ministry activities.

Only a diocese can certify an individual for ministry, she said. Dioceses can use the certificate program, which was based on common certification requirements and utilizes the institute's already robust curriculum, to build their own ministry-formation programs.

A pioneer in the use of new media for religious education, Zukowski said dioceses and parishes increasingly must rely on lay members for leadership. But many barriers hinder formation efforts.

"Ministry formation offered at a church or diocese location might be at an inconvenient time or too far away for many people," she said. "Interest in a particular topic might be limited to one or two people, or a qualified instructor might not be available."

In partnership with more than 40 dioceses worldwide, the institute already provides outreach to hundreds of Catholic communities through the Virtual Learning Community for Faith Formation (VLCFF), she said. It has been particularly successful in rural or developing areas such as the Caribbean, where distances are great and resources are limited, she said.

"We offer more than 60 courses in English and Spanish in topics that include basic Catholic beliefs, liturgy, ecclesiology, Scripture and media education," Zukowski said. "Courses are geared for beginners, for intermediates and for the more advanced learners who are playing greater and greater roles in lay ministry."

The courses were designed by catechetical experts working closely with the institute's team and utilizing the resources of the University of Dayton, one of the top 10 Catholic universities in the U.S.

With more than 400 sections of the online courses offered each year, Zukowski said

popularity and demand are clearly growing. The Archdiocese of Cincinnati recently reached 1,000 participants in online adult faith formation courses, joining the Archdiocese of Cleveland as the first two areas to reach this number.

"This is a dynamic initiative of the University of Dayton's service to the Catholic Church. We believe in a 'new way of collaborating' within the Church," Zukowski said. "We read in Church catechetical and communications documents that it is time for the Church to become a lead agent in creatively engaging in the new media culture."

Bishop Anthony Bosco, retired bishop of the Diocese of Greensburg in Pennsylvania, once was skeptical about creating community online, but he is now a regular course facilitator. He said, "The impact that it has on the students is not just subtle, it's vibrant and it's alive. The Holy Spirit is obviously at work in doing this."

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